On Compassion: Sustaining the *E Pluribus Unum*

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Doctor  
of Philosophy in the Department of  
Political Science in the Graduate School  
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

Contemporary political events reveal a serious partisanship divide in which serious, non-bombastic political conversation appears limited. The theatrical effect is to make Americans appear as enemies of each other. And, while compassion might be bandied about as an ideological tool, it seemingly has little to offer the body politic. Yet I believe that not only is compassion possible but it is necessary at a critical time like now. After reviewing compassion’s definitions and the broad literature around it in Chapter One, I take seriously Hannah Arendt’s concerns – that compassion is not only apolitical but anti-political in its encouragement of violence or apathy, its sentimentality, and its eradication of political capacities like thinking. To address Arendt I turn to Jean-Jacques Rousseau and retrieve a neglected form of pity, one not only sociable but tied to action in the polity at large. I then consider how Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception opens compassion’s inter-corporeal dimensions, creating distance and depth between people while aligning their gestures and mannerisms. The ability of compassion to enter politics and create or strengthen solidarity via Robert F. Kennedy’s politics is discussed in the conclusion. Compassion is a discursive and varied phenomenon that appears according to context while also remaining a psycho-physical and emotional capacity to see, acknowledge, and respond to another person. It also acts as a necessary but not sufficient condition for politics, enriching and enlivening other “political” virtues like justice, equality, and freedom by focusing political sight on “the pulse of hearts beating with red blood” (DuBois, Souls of Black Folks).
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to those whose own love and compassion sustains me: my parents, in whose care I grew; my husband, in whose sight I bloom; and my daughter, in whose presence I find the startling brightness of hope.
Contents

Abstract .......................................................................................................................... iv

Acknowledgements ....................................................................................................... viii

1. Introduction ................................................................................................................. 1
   1.1. Defining Compassion ......................................................................................... 10
   1.2. The Debate about Compassion ........................................................................... 21
   1.3. Alternatives to Compassion ............................................................................... 32

2. The Arendtian Hurdle ............................................................................................... 49
   2.1. Revolutions ........................................................................................................... 50
   2.2. Pariahs ................................................................................................................ 82
   2.3. Arendt’s Alternatives .......................................................................................... 92
   2.4. Responding to Arendt ....................................................................................... 99

3. In Defense of Rousseau’s Pity .................................................................................... 119
   3.1. Sensation and Pity .............................................................................................. 124
   3.2. Pity’s Forms: Natural, Sterile, and Sociable ......................................................... 132
      3.2.1. Natural Pity ..................................................................................................... 133
      3.2.2. Sterile Pity ...................................................................................................... 139
      3.2.3 Sociable Pity .................................................................................................... 141
         3.2.3.1. Emile ......................................................................................................... 151
         3.2.3.2. Julie: Dispositional Compassion ............................................................... 160
         3.2.3.3. Wolmar: Rational Compassion ............................................................... 166
         3.2.3.4. St. Preux: Restraining Passions .............................................................. 172
         3.2.3.5. Concerns with Sensual Ethics ................................................................. 176
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.3. Pity and Politics</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Merleau-Ponty and a Phenomenological Compass</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1. Corporeity and Intercorporeity</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2. Compass</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3. Violence and Compass</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4. Conclusion</td>
<td>241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. A Compassionate Political Ethos and the United States’ E Pluribus Unum</td>
<td>246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1. The Man and the Myth</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3. “The Mindless Menace of Violence”</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4. Political Style: Re-conceiving Solidarity</td>
<td>273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5. The Dangers Involved and Implications for Politics</td>
<td>292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>308</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biography</td>
<td>323</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgements

The cliché is that writing a dissertation is a lonely affair. I certainly had my share of solitary days, particularly after I spirited away to California with my (now) husband and our dogs and sought to finish my dissertation relatively isolated from my advisors and colleagues at Duke University. Yet this move resulted in a sharper image of and, correspondingly, amplified gratitude for the support and love that not only travelled across the country but also germinated in California. My community changed and doubled, and it is to these twin communities, each replete with friends who challenge and inspire me, that I acknowledge my debts and humbly offer my thanks.

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1. Introduction

These are differing evils; but they are the common works of man. They reflect the imperfections of human justice, the inadequacy of human compassion, the defectiveness of our sensibility toward the sufferings of our fellows; they mark the limit of our ability to use knowledge for the well-being of our fellow human beings throughout the world. And therefore they call upon common qualities of conscience and indignation, a shared determination to wipe away the unnecessary sufferings of our fellow human beings at home and around the world. ~ Robert Kennedy (1993, 241).

Robert Kennedy’s remarks pose a serious question: What happens when compassion is inadequate? When politics and public life is devoid of compassion, so often equated with sensitivity to suffering and the impulse to alleviate it? Compassion’s presence in the polity might appear questionable (as, in fact, some do question) but its absences are conspicuous and notable.

Consider the most recent presidential election. Mitt Romney, Republican presidential candidate, fumbled into public relations notoriety with several remarks that suggested a strong insensitivity to and ignorance of suffering in the United States, especially among the middle and lower classes. His largest error concerned the “forty-seven percent” of people who did not pay income tax in the past year. Romney characterized them as self-created victims who expect government to care for them and terms the desire for greater or easier access to health care, housing, and food as an “entitlement.” He ignored that people in the forty-seven percent had no income, no tax responsibility because their incomes were too low, or qualified for specific tax credits; that those with jobs contributed payroll taxes; and that most still paid in state taxes (Hobson 2012). Rather, he asserted that his job is “not to worry about them.” Despite the comments’ resulting public fervor and his admission that he was wrong (Rucker 2012), Romney seems not to have learned any important lessons. He fumbled again in a post-election conference call with campaign donors. This time he blamed losing the elections...
due to Obama’s “extraordinary financial gifts” to special groups, specifically students, women, low-income citizens, and Latinos who benefited from the expansion in health care (Dreier 2012). Romney framed access to health care as extraordinary, a “gift” to specific constituents who are segregated by virtue of age, gender, class, race, or ethnicity, and implied that, again, certain groups see it as an “entitlement.”

Peter Dreier compiled Romney’s verbal missteps under the sardonic category, “wit, wisdom, and compassion” (2012). The comments point to a rather blunt insensitivity to the “least of us” who make difficult questions around household economics, education and occupational opportunities, and health. Suffering, Romney implies, is a problem of personal character and choice rather than structural or historical inequalities, it is a problem contained in the private sphere, and its “victims” are neither important nor valuable in and of themselves. Politics – and political “rightness” – are the privileged’s perogative.

Now worried about their public image, especially among minorities, Republicans are denouncing Romney’s trail of comments and urging for a more sensitive party. Among the reformatory ideas are calls to bring back George W. Bush’s compassionate conservatism (Lewis 2012). While this “solution” introduces its own set of problems about compassion – whether it is a façade, whether policies match intentions, or whether it further relegates “victims” to a powerless “victimhood” in which they are always recipients at the hands of a merciful benefactor1 – it does point to an interesting dilemma in politics generally. Compassion might be scorned, belittled, or questioned but it seems a necessary component of rhetoric, policies, and actions.

1 These concerns will be addressed later.
Kennedy draws a stronger line: without compassion in our politics and publics, we lack the capacity by which we can combat “great evils,” fight injustices, or configure our knowledge and our imagination so that we can not only envision a “better” future but work towards it. His tact is optimistic. Moments later in the same speech, he comments, “Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance” (Kennedy 1993, 243-44). Yet optimism is not futile in itself – it follows a particular understanding of the individual who, as Rousseau believes, has compassionate capacities and is willing to value cooperation over competition, particularly as it augments stronger communities and initiates individual opportunities. It can offer a valuable critique of current events, politics, and policies. And it can fuel innovative thinking and action. Compassion, if critical and optimistic, is capable of engendering notable actions and events that, when strung together, can stimulate change. A few movements in the recent years gesture towards this possibility.

A Charter for Compassion was unveiled on November 12, 2009. Initiated by Karen Armstrong and supported by Nobel Peace Laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the Charter voices what it believes to be compassion’s heart: “that we use empathy – moral imagination – to put ourselves in others’ shoes. We should act toward them as we would want them to act toward us.” Over 150,000 people from 100 nations contributed

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² I occasionally employ the pronoun “we” throughout this dissertation. I recognize that, in so doing, I risk presuming a false unity between the reader and myself and I risk presuming that different people share equally or similarly the experiences and thoughts I detail. However, this is a dissertation on compassion, on the consonances that can be found between people. As such the pronoun “we” conveys the spirit that I hope compassion conveys: that there are some basic human qualities that, while not total(izing) likenesses, resonate.

prose and ideas for the Charter’s content during the span of six weeks. Partners supporting its release run the gamut from academic organizations and think tanks to specific religious sects to interfaith networks to non-profit organizations. Numerous events and activities focused on building compassion in communities have sprung up across the globe. Seattle, Washington and Louisville, Kentucky competed in the “Compassion Games” as individuals, organizations, and the municipalities engaged in compassionate acts for a determined set of time. They and other cities are part of the Charter as designated “Compassionate Cities.”

Despite the fact that the Charter has and continues to inspire broad action across a multitude of people, polities, and perspectives and that it encourages a fairly decentralized and democratic approach to manifesting compassion, it is unclear that the Charter or any of its resulting activities are “political.” The Compassionate Cities are engaged in compassionate work beyond mere proclamations, but it remains unclear how city policies and structures reflect compassion as a practice or guiding policy. Seattle appears to be the most active, working with The Compassion Action Network and organizing activities that attempt to reflect and respect its citizens’ diversity. How compassion infiltrates social justice concerns around homelessness, race, and economic opportunity – especially in a city that faces increasing gentrification – is as of yet to be determined. Is compassion suited more for “charitable” endeavors, where volunteering and privilege interact in tenuous relationship? Compassion’s detractors often cite the problem of power as a reason for limiting it in the political or public spheres, which I will address shortly.

There is a large literature on compassion as it relates to Christian virtues of charity and generosity. We see a reference to this literature in George Bush’s “compassion conservativism” as well as Hannah Arendt’s use of Jesus Christ in her explorations of goodness, compassion, and forgiveness. While I recognize the great work being done in this vein, I am not considering religion’s role. Instead I join Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s project of trying to salvage ethical and political phenomena in secular humanist terms.
Compassion often provides the backbone of altruistic, charitable endeavors but it can also focus political energy and increase awareness of the structural and historical inequalities and power dynamics that infect daily interactions between community members and governmental agencies. In Fall 2012 two activist groups, Occupy Sandy and Strike Debt, were engaged in political work that incorporates and relies on compassion. Terming their largely volunteer efforts, “mutual aid,” both groups are providing relief to households affected by larger economic and natural disaster forces. Both are affiliates of Occupy Wall Street, whose September 2011 “occupation” of Zuccotti Park in protest of financial institutions, corruption, and greed launched a several concurrent occupations in cities nationwide.

Occupy Sandy5 has demonstrated effectiveness in harnessing individual and collective energy around natural disaster relief in areas affected by Hurricane Sandy. Its grassroots and local activism networks helped establish distribution hubs, which serve as centers where information, resources, and assistance are gathered and distributed by community members. It employed online technologies, including FaceBook, Twitter, and “wedding registries” at Amazon, to facilitate “real-time” information for volunteers and community members about shifts in needs, options, and locations. Finally it is gathering information regarding individual rights and structural problems in paying rent and utility bills, applying for federal aid, and regaining access to unoccupied and severely damaged homes, creating reports that can be shared among affected community members. Occupy Sandy has been lauded by most journalists and media outlets for providing immediate, effective relief and assistance, largely through

5 See the following for reference: Kilkenny 2012; http://interoccupy.net/occupysandy; Lawrence and Moreno-Cabullad 2012; Moynihan and Maag 2012; StrikeDebt 2012.
voluntary efforts and donations, on a scale and with a proficiency that highlights weaknesses in the Red Cross and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

Part of Occupy Sandy’s success is in its ability to energize its pre-established community networks that empowered and informed individuals. Yet its relief efforts go beyond organizing volunteer labor and distributing necessary supplies – it reports how discrepancies in relief are created and exacerbated by preexisting structural racial and class inequalities.6 Compassion for Hurricane Sandy’s victims has been combined with an extreme attention to power dynamics and the need for clear and effective communication. As volunteers move through Occupy Sandy’s “trainings” and distribution hubs and as the public monitor its reports of the work being done by governmental agencies and their contractors, they are being educated in the municipal, federal, and financial politics of damage relief. Compassion takes on a critical edge: it serves as an impetus for both providing support and critiquing political and economic structures that neglect or exploit community members already at risk.

In this same vein, Strike Debt has commenced the “Rolling Jubilee”7 to both acquit households being hampered by medical debt and draw attention to the problem of debt, the often-predatory routes to overwhelming debt, and the flaws in the tax and financial systems that encourage individual gain at another’s expense. “Together,” its mission states, “we can liberate debtors at random through a campaign of mutual support, good will, and collective refusal.” Individuals contribute money to the Rolling Jubilee for the purpose of buying medical debt and forgiving it. Banks sell outstanding debt to third-party collectors for pennies on the dollar (which banks subsequently write off); debt collectors then demand repayment of the full debt from the individuals

6 StrikeDebt 2012.
7 See the following for reference: http://rollingjubilee.org/; Johnston 2012; Zandt 2012;
included. Individuals are unable to buy their own debt from the same market and debts are aggregated prior to selling so there is no way of knowing in advance whose debt will be purchased. The Rolling Jubilee focuses on medical debt because, as it reports, sixty-two percent of all bankruptcies are the result of medical bills. They received $450,000 in individual donations at their launch party in November 2011, well above the stated goal of $50,000.

Rolling Jubilee has already stimulated a media conversation, one more oriented around whether it is a “good” project than on the causes of debt and the factors that keep a person in debt. Yet the impressive number of donations made in its initial appearance and the media entrancement with its weaknesses and strengths are suggestive. First compassion for others is widespread in the United States, even expressed in monetary forms. Second this sense of compassion lingers despite the social myths around debt, which stigmatize the individual. Debtors, guilty of having debt, are seen as morally weak and economically unsound – as if each individual in debt had a weak will power, a credit card, and an insatiable hunger for shoes – rather than being caught in predatory lending schemes, a flopped housing market, or unemployed in a long recession. As a result, they are seen as political parasites living off of the hard work of others (faint echoes of Romney’s tale about the forty-seven percent linger here). That compassion for others is often expressed through monetary relief is unsurprising and well documented; that it occurs for others who are responsible for their plight is surprising and undocumented. As will be discussed later, Martha Nussbaum effectively refutes this latter aspect and determines that it is not legitimate “compassion.”

The examples provided by the Charter for Compassion, Occupy Sandy, and Strike Debt range in political scope, individual involvement, and public awareness but compassion lies in the heart of their activities and goals. The explicit attention to
suffering by Occupy Sandy and Strike Debt as well as the jubilatory spirit of acts inspired by the Charter also suggest that compassion itself has a broader view, one oriented around “fellow feeling” in its widest sense. These efforts also support Kennedy’s own intuition: that discrete, individual acts can gain momentum – can become more sustainable – once constellated across space and time and harnessed to creative thinking that sees individuals as inherently valuable. And, finally, these organizations have inspired movements that operate between strangers, sometimes with limited contact and sheer anonymity. Compassion can generate shared spaces of acting and relating to distinctly (in)different people and modify our outlooks so that the nature and vitality of a struggle or interaction shifts towards “what is humanly valuable,” even if this itself is a contested end. Compassion has the potential to shape and become political acts of resistance, criticism, healing, and change. Compassion, especially once cultivated, can serve as a key civic virtue in fragmented polities where diversity and dynamism (or oppression) threaten to tear asunder common political binds or spaces.

The following inquiry into compassion’s potential is conducted as a series of studies. As the above conversation suggests, compassion is plastic – it has been discussed as a political sentiment or tactic unemployed by politicians; an inspirational principle organizing a diversity of responses; and a sentiment embedded in larger political, economic, and altruistic activities that critique current situations while also offering innovative solutions. Compassion’s manifestations will continue to multiply as will its definition, limitations, and potentials. This plasticity is, in part, because

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8 I prefer the term civic to either political or social because it straddles those two spheres. MacIntyre provides a useful definition of virtue, which he understands as “those dispositions which will not only sustain practices ad enable us to achieve the goods internal to practices, but which will also sustain us in the relevant kind of quest for the good, by enabling us to overcome the harms, dangers, temptations, and distractions which we encounter, and which will furnish us with increasing self-knowledge and increasing knowledge of the good...We have then arrived at a provisional conclusion about the good life for man: the good life for man is the life spent in seeking for the good life of man, and the virtues necessary for the seeking are those which will enable us to understand what more and what else the good life for man is” (2007, 219).
individuals and theorists take compassion as they see it. A conversation about compassion cannot avoid these contestations and elaborations. It can, however, attempt to clarify the differences in perspective, the reasons for them, and offer a definition that is broad.

As will be seen in this chapter and the chapter on Merleau-Ponty, I frequently refer to compassion in its most extensive understanding, fellow-feeling, even as I offer refinements based on our experience of it. This breadth engenders its own difficulty, specifically, how compassion is distinct from empathy (the desire for attaching compassion to undeserved suffering is strong). I am sympathetic to this concern. Compassion’s relationship to empathy is complex (just as is its relationship to sympathy and pity) and the decision to use one term over the other partly depends upon whose parlance in which one wishes to speak, neuroscience and psychology’s language or political theory’s. As will be seen, I often attempt to bridge these disciplines, perhaps poorly at times, as the particular context merits it.

The challenge in writing and thinking about compassion is its adaptability: it is a discursive and contextual phenomenon. It can act as a sentiment untied to action, as a principle for action or embedded in action, as a practice that involves substantial work to be compassionate, as a disposition one is born with or that one cultivates, or as a spontaneous and immediate reaction. It joins affect and reason. It moves through the sinews of the body, the channels of the heart, and the intricacies of the mind. Throughout I attempt to balance its multidimensionality at the same time that I flag when one of its dimensions is being pulled into the fore. I believe that its multiplicity is part of its unexpected power and how it comes to nourish a political ethos around “e

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9 Reason, itself, is a multiheaded beast that has been defined variously by theorists. Because this project is concerned with compassion itself, I have left reason relatively unexplored, taking for granted that it is often posed as the contrary or complement of affect.
“Pluribus Unum.” Compassion may not be sufficient for politics but it is certainly necessary for it. It complements and strengthens political principles like equality and liberty; it eases the pains of dissensions; and it encourages social and political relations in its vision of solidarity. It does not eradicate violence single-handedly; it is not advanced as the sole principle or criteria for determining action.

In the following pages I frame the subsequent conversation on compassion. Here I look at compassion’s confusing relationship to terms like empathy, sympathy, and pity in order to discern the appropriate boundaries and offer an initial definition of compassion. From there I move into the blustery conversation in political theory about whether compassion is “good” for politics, concentrating especially on Martha Nussbaum’s defense and Lauren Berlant’s critique. I then consider compassion’s relevancy, looking at a strong alternative that is already advanced within the academy – the ethic of care – and why compassion is applicable to and necessary for contemporary politics.

1.1. Defining Compassion

Defining compassion appears easy since it regularly circulates in everyday language. But its vernacular ease belies the wide-range of definitions, implications, and uses among individuals and researchers. Adjudicating the distinctions within the individual fields of philosophy, political theory, psychology, legal studies, and neuroscience is challenging, let alone discerning a singular cross-disciplinary definition. Compassion also hangs among a family of terms like pity, sympathy, and empathy. Academics disagree about their distinctions and, when pulled together, the terms display antithetical connotations and contrary consequences. While distinctions are important and instructive, too strong a stratification obscures clarity because it fails to
see the experience as a dynamic, organic whole. I offer a definition of compassion that straddles some of the terminological divide. Compassion contains and over-spills a strict division between affect and reason. Considering one’s “effective involvement”\(^{10}\) in complex human relations that contain tension, depth, and discovery involves recognizing that compassion is embodied. I then discuss its relationship to empathy, sympathy, and pity.

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) simply defines compassion as “fellow-feeling.” Milan Kundera’s etymological excavation of it suggests likewise:

> The secret strength of its etymology floods the word with another light and give is a broader meaning: to have compassion (co-feeling) means not only to be able to live with another’s misfortune but also to feel with him any emotion – joy, anxiety, happiness, pain. This kind of compassion…therefore signifies the maximal capacity of affective imagination, the art of emotional telepathy. In the hierarchy of sentiments, then, it is supreme. (Clark 1997, 28-29)

Compassion is broader than contemporaries define it. More than a spontaneous or rational reaction to suffering, compassion can be a cultivated perspective built out of a kind of consideration of how we interact in the world and with others.

I prefer the term compassion for its etymological breadth and I recommend a combination of OED’s and Clark’s definition. Clark’s (1997) definition of sympathy is straightforward – it is the physical, emotional, or cognitive “reaching out” to another, a “fellow-feeling” – but her perception of its experience is illuminating. Clark delineates a three-stage process in which a person experiences compassion: first, she empathizes, or imagines the other person’s situation; second, she experiences sympathy sentiment, or recognizes compassion has emerged; and, finally, she displays those sentiments (1997, 27). Empathy is a pre-requisite for compassion but a person is not required to move either beyond empathy or through the stages sequentially. “Covert” compassion

consists of empathy and sentiment without any display and “surface” empathy entails empathy and display without the sensation of sentiment (Clark 1997, 34).

Second, empathy is a reaction that can occur variously. It can operate individually, focusing on one’s self and one’s experiences as separate from others in a given situation, or jointly, where self-awareness fades in recognition of intersubjectivity (Clark 1997, 35). It is also expressed cognitively, emotionally, physically, or in some combination of these three. Nussbaum’s depiction of compassion is cognitive: a person rationally assesses another person’s suffering and judges how best to proceed personally. Emotional empathy occurs when a person perceives another’s situation through her own emotions, as expressed when a person says, “I felt horrified by x.” If witnessing a person’s physical reactions produces physical reactions in one’s self, then a person experiences physical empathy. Horror movies or tense dramas that play with the spectator’s visceral reactions – a rapidly beating heart or jumping when startled by movement on the screen – illustrate just how we can get physically tied to another person’s situation. Often analysts focus on one of these dimensions at the expense of the other two, creating debates about which dimension was left out and with what consequences, and most analysts fail to acknowledge physical empathy altogether. The literature is predominantly cognitive as a result, with the occasional theorist raising the emotional flag, and entirely forgetful of how empathy and compassion are embodied phenomenon that work as much through sensation as through affect and reason. Finally, personal aspects like motivation, ability, characteristics, or experiences affect when and how empathy functions.

Clark’s more-inclusive definition eases some of the pains of disagreement between compassion, sympathy, and empathy. Empathy can support either sympathy or compassion – a person can even remain here without feeling either sentiment or acting
upon that response – but it is not divorced from either two. This eases those scientifically minded while also enabling the experience of compassion to be more complex and intuitive. The better our conceptions of compassion align with our embodied experience of it, the more transparency and possibility can be revealed. Compassion displays more tension, more depth, and more sensitivity. And in doing so, it demonstrates more potential for radical re-workings of how we understand politics, ethics, and interpersonal relationships than merely “suffering with,” “suffering for,” or “suffering in.”

This definition differs from Martha Nussbaum (2001) who provides the most in-depth contemporary defense of compassion, a crucial element of which is providing criteria for “right” judgment and educating the populace on compassion’s appropriateness. “Compassion is our species’ way of hooking the good of others to the fundamentally eudaimonistic (though not egoistic) structure of our imaginations and our most intense cares,” she affirms (2001, 388). Compassion extends the imagination’s boundaries so that a person sees that another person’s sense of flourishing is somehow similar to or bound up with her own. Compassion is “capable of reaching sympathetically into multiple directions simultaneously” (Nussbaum 2003, 18) but it is bound by judgments of non-desert, size, or eudaimonism. A person’s suffering is understood as unintentional or inconsequent to his actions (e.g. he does not “deserve” this misfortune), as having some significance in his life (e.g. the loss of a loved one as opposed to a misplaced toothbrush), and as being similar to the witness’ own hopes, expectations, standards, or resources. For Nussbaum compassion provides a way of interpreting and responding to the material concerns of human capacity or animal rights.
Nussbaum’s account is not without its critics, who dispute her criteria for “right”
judgment and her privileging of compassion’s cognitive aspects. Counter-examples to
Nussbaum’s criteria suggest that her definition unnecessarily circumscribes action and
sympathetic imagination more capably displays whether a situation is unfair and the
resulting sense of unfairness is broader than making a eudaimonistic judgment. Cannon
(2005) argues that none of Nussbaum’s criteria are necessary to determine whether
compassion is appropriate since compassion is “governed by social and moral rather
than rational norms” and that morality is set in practices (Cannon 2005, 97-98).
Compassion might be misplaced or disproportionately expressed but it remains a sound
reaction to human suffering (Cannon 2005, 106). Nussbaum neglects compassion’s
socialized aspects, its affective and volatile dimensions, and its emotional and physical
forms in attempting to make it “appropriate” (Cannon 2005, Carr 1998). Marrying
compassion, a psycho-emotional and visceral reaction, to reason hinders her broad and
insightful defense of compassion. Compassion’s etymology and experience suggest that
while judgment may occur prior to action, it is not compassion’s dominant or necessary
element. The question then becomes one of definition: How do we acknowledge its
dimensions and depth while maintaining some element of human agency and reason?

myself, desire to separate the emotional reaction from the rational judgment. The benefit
in doing so is that it encourages self-awareness of one’s responses as well as one’s
display of a sentiment with an eye to the possible consequences of (in)action. This
separation also allows compassion’s advocates to better respond to critiques that
compassion is sentimental at reason’s detriment or that it encourages a passivity ill-
desired in a democratic polity. The difficulty in splitting the intention, or the associated
judgment, of an emotion from its embodied response is that it creates an artificial split between the emotion and the thought process that often privileges judgment at the expense of affect (Jaggar 1989, 149-50). While Jaggar highlights the role of social construction and personal experiences in developing emotions,11 she does not reconcile the tension between affect and judgment that she pinpoints.

A compromise between the positivist and cognitivist account might better serve our purposes. More time and space will be dedicated to this dilemma elsewhere but, for now, let me gesture to Rousseau and phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, each of whom resist dichotomy in favor of tension. Rousseau offers an “experiential account” of pity, connecting it to sensation, judgment, and socialization. He believes that some emotions like compassion and self-preservation are “natural” and biologically innate but that they are shaped over time in concert with cultural and social developments. This tension provides a middle ground and a way for reconciling affect and judgment: it opens an avenue in which person’s responses and actions might enhance or diminish her integrity. The struggle itself defines us as individuals and demonstrates how we consider our relationship to our community as a whole. Do we define ourselves as separate from the whole, with interests that directly compete with the community’s interests? Do we define ourselves in relationship to the whole such that self-interests are, in part, developed in line with community interests? Our answers to these questions are determined not only by our mediation of affect and judgment, or our use of compassion

11 Jaggar also writes that the “private” and “involuntary” character of emotions make us think of them as natural or biological responses. Emotions are “ways in which we actively engage and even construct the world. They have both mental and physical aspects, each of which conditions the others. In some respects they are chosen, but in others they are involuntary; they presuppose language and a social order” (Jaggar 1989, 153). Mature emotions are not instinctive or biological but socially constructed, developing out of “the range, variety, and subtlety of their emotional responses in accordance with their life experience and their reflection on these” (Jaggar 1989, 149-50). Jaggar’s account of the emotions provides little explanation for the spontaneous, involuntary, and surprising emotions that occur, e.g. the kinds of “breakthroughs” documented by war veterans.
and reason, but also by things *sensed*, in that full sense of the word in which humans are constantly communicating with and in the world via the five senses.

Merleau-Ponty facilitates the exploration of sensation, elaborating where Rousseau does not. His investigations reveal the paradoxes interlaced in the world. Perception and emotion may precede conscious life but they do not explicitly compile personal meaning without reflection. The difficulty involved with the aforementioned “artificial split” between reason and affect is that it is artificial – it is created with the express purpose of disentangling the structure of a complex neurological, psychological, emotional, and sociological phenomenon. In the process of defending the method and analyzing its results, we forget that we are breaking apart a lived experience. Certainly, in the midst of a given situation, any aspect of this structure might be consciously or emotionally isolated and emphasized. And my final argument about compassion relies on the capacity to recognize and acknowledge such opportunities for momentary breaks. The question about how to ethically engage another person potentially breaks into the foreground in these moments. The tension between spontaneous and deliberate interactions, between cognition and affect, or between self and other comprises a situation’s vibrancy and potential, and it reveals the facility of humans to respond to others in varied ways. With Merleau-Ponty we get a psycho-visceral imagining of how it is be to embodied as someone radically different from one’s self, a person whose radical difference actively shapes and configures their abilities to be valuable contributors to political and public discourse, events, and actions.

My sense of compassion incorporates empathy, which, despite its being a relatively “young” term, dominates psychology and philosophy. Empathy deploys

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12 Friedrich Vischer and, later, Robert Vischer and Theodor Lipps first used it in German aesthetics (1873). Edward Titchener then coined “empathy” in order to translate the German term, *einfühlung* (Verducci 2000, Wispe 1986). From here, empathy multiplied and divided in a myriad ways. It entered psychology through
imagination and mimicry to take on another person’s perspective while simultaneously securing one’s self-identity (Wispé 1986, Deigh 1994). This form of empathy is broad, incorporating the full scope of human activities and emotions – positive and negative – in order to comprehend that person and his situation. For some, a person is empathically mature when she finds value in another person without also identifying with him. She realizes that “worthwhile” purposes may conflict and that it is necessary to have “a criterion for resolving whatever conflict among them may arise before it can result in judgments of what one ought to do or what it is right to do” (Deigh 1994, 179). Empathy faces challenges in being accurate because emotions and reactions are often opaque to both parties (Wispé 1986). Despite this limitation, advocates believe that empathy provides beneficial knowledge about others that enables stronger communications, understanding, and actions.

Freud, Robert Fliess, and Theodor Reik. Philosophers and behavioral scientists applied it as a contrast or substitution for Hume and Smith’s sympathy. Verducci notes that empathy is used in aesthetics, psychological therapy, epistemology, and Humean sympathy (2000). See Verducci (2000) and Wispé’s (1986) exemplary work in analyzing empathy’s history and categorizing its use in contemporary discussions. Both note the inconsistencies in defining and measuring empathy – there is no common construct uniformly used, creating large discrepancies in the research. “As a result,” remarks Wispé, “it is hard to know whether we have one concept treated differently, or two more different concepts” (1986, 317).

Hume’s theory of moral sentiment has resurged recently with three books and numerous articles by two separate theorists, Michael Slote (2003, 2004, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c) and Sharon Krause (2008). Slote translates Hume’s sympathy into empathy while Krause retains Hume’s language. Other contributors include Darwall (1998, 2010) and Schertz (2007). Schertz defines and deploys empathy through Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, asserting that it is the “mediation of emotional information between body-consciousness that involves systemic communicative processes between relational subjects. The other’s behaviors, attitudes, and expressions are not transferred as separate bits of cognitive and affective information, but as a qualitative experience” (173).

Defining empathy as a form of feeling relies on weaker, even blurred, boundaries between self and other. Empathy is a form of emotional contagion whereby one person feels another person’s pain (Slote 2004; Darwall 2010, 1998). Compassion, benevolence, and sympathy fail to speak of “identifying with others or feeling what they feel or forming one body with them or seeing them as parts of oneself. These latter locutions in their different ways all touch on or bring in the specific idea of empathy because they suggest a certain metaphysical oneness with others” (Slote 2010a, 204). Empathy’s contagion creates this “oneness” and introduces an element of transparency or similarity between individuals. Slote’s (2004, 2010c) conception of Hume’s empathy also incorporates the sensation of pleasure or pain in perceiving another person, his situation, or his actions. Social notions of right and wrong as well as a sense of obligation are empathic emotions delivered through pain and pleasure (Slote 2004, 2010c). In this way empathy establishes a person’s sense of moral goodness: already embedded in a moral world whereby points of references establish the moral location of an act or agent, a person utters either approval or disapproval.
Critics of empathy worry that it lends itself to fallacious observations, it asserts a masculine perspective over and against feminine experiences, or it is value-neutral. Noddings (2010) critiques empathy’s “projection,” whereby one comprehends another person or object by projecting oneself into him. Using oneself as the basis of understanding another person can cause misinterpretations or an easy dismissal of the other’s situation and feelings. A significant contributor to feminist ethics of care, Noddings believes that theorists find empathy a more comfortable term because it is an intellectual and masculine concept that developed out of aesthetics rather than moral theory. It enables analysts to evade the traditional feminine experience in which compassion, sympathy, and receptiveness play major roles in understanding complex, affective situations and adjudicating a proper response to them. The shift in language – from compassion to empathy – mirrors empathy’s shift from other to self (Darwall 1998) and creates a greater possibility for error.

Critics also fear that empathy is value-neutral. An empathetic person can feel a range of emotions, including pain or misery, without also feeling inspired to mitigate or ease that pain, and the most commonly cited example is sadism (Noddings 2010, Perry and Szalavitz 2011). A sadist is strangely empathic because it is his pleasure relies on perceiving another person’s pain. However, he is not inclined ethically to respect or care about the sufferer and his well-being, in part because empathy does not impart that compulsion (Noddings 2010, Darwall 2010, Perry and Szalavitz 2011). Darwall points out that reacting mimetically to another person is a means by which the other person is

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15 Slote (2010b) asserts that his vision of Humean emotional contagion includes an element of receptiveness that exceeds intellectually understanding human suffering. If sadists and psychopaths appropriately engage their Humean empathy, then they will develop an “altruistic caring” that incorporate both empathy, or feeling another’s pain, and sympathy, or feeling “sorry for” another’s pain. Unfortunately Slote’s rejoinder avoids the crux of Noddings’ concern. Psychopathy is defined as an emotional and ethical failure to respond to suffering. Psychopaths are a notable exception to Humean contagion. Slote also combines empathy with sympathy in order to get around the concern that empathy in itself does not contain an altruistic insistence. This partnership suggests that empathy itself is not enough for compassionate responses to flourish.
better understood. But empathy steps towards sympathy both because empathy requires the imaginative perspective-taking that sympathy provides and because empathy in itself does not lead to respect or concern for another person (Darwall 1998, 2010).

Sympathy is posed as an alternative to empathy but it operates similarly to compassion. As a result, while I recognize that theorists have particular reasons for preferring it, I see it as fairly synonymous to compassion. Krause (2008, 2011) turns to Hume,16 arguing that sympathy is a means of knowing others’ sentiments as well as grounding judgment. Noddings (2010), looking at the historic and traditional role of women in social, public, and private spheres, advocates a care ethic in which sympathy operates as a receptive means of “feeling with” another person, regardless of whether one shares that person’s perspectives, beliefs, or situation. This kind of “feeling with” is an unthinking, immediate response to suffering and a “basic feature of human life” (Taylor 1999, 75). Because these responses are fundamental – more reactive than intellectually proactive – Taylor disputes that they can have an empirical understanding or be assigned to a certain motivation.17 “What I claim,” he explains, “however, is that such beliefs, beliefs, that is, about the thoughts and feelings of others, are themselves partially constituted by our primitive responses to other human beings” (Taylor 1999, 84). Discerning whether a sympathetic response is “genuine” or “appropriate” is less a feat of measuring it against already-set standards than seeing how that response is situated in a “larger pattern of responses” (Taylor 1999, 86). This way of defining and contextualizing sympathy within a person’s patterns and practices renders sympathy an

16 Krause refers to two different forms of sympathy in Hume. The first communicates a person’s passions and stimulates kindred ones within the witness who reacts mimetically or reflectively. Sympathy is not dispositional but a mental capacity like imagination and, as such, it works with judgment in order to articulate a “generalized standpoint of moral sentiment” (Krause 2008, 12). The other form of sympathy is an affective state concerned for others’ welfare; it may produce the first form but it is unnecessary for communication and insufficient for judgment.

17 Taylor (1999) differs from Noddings by arguing that sympathy collapses the difference between one person and another.
ally of virtue ethics (MacIntyre 2007, Sander-Studt 2006). Sympathetic feelings engender social bonds through emotional networks and behaviors. Relating to others through sympathy hinges on understanding that people share vulnerabilities.

Of the family of terms, pity is the oldest and most scorned. Etymologically synonymous with compassion and sympathy (Oxford English Dictionary) it is now laced with feelings of superiority and condescension. Jean-Jacques Rousseau employs the French term “pitier” without hesitation in his treatises. Not until Nietzsche’s resounding critique of pity did it receive pejorative dimensions. The witness expresses his pity through contempt, believes that the sufferer deserves her misfortune, or finds suffering itself degrading (Snow 1991). Pity acts as a means of feeling better about oneself at the expense of another, thereby denying “that those who feel it could experience another’s misfortune or could experience it in the same degrading or humiliating way” (Snow 1991, 196). Likewise Clark’s (1997) respondents often claimed that they did not wish to receive sympathy because sympathy suggested that they were inferior to another, requiring assistance, or somehow limited in their actions and own personal agency. This sense of degradation is dangerous in a polity that privileges equality or liberty because it either creates new social disparities in power or highlights existing discrepancies.

These terms will resurface throughout the dissertation because individual theorists prefer certain terms. Hannah Arendt and Rousseau both use pity, for instance,

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18 Seeing suffering intensifies a witness’ sensitivity to that person’s feelings and generates altruistic behavior (Wispé 1986) but theorists have opposing viewpoints on how such openness is achieved and what its consequences are. Wispé defines sympathy as a form of communion with another person that dissipates individual self-awareness. This emotional identification limits objective or accurate assessments of that person. It also creates a difficulty in explaining how one person is open to another’s experience (ibid, 318). In contrast, Snow (1991) characterizes sympathy as a composite of beliefs and feelings dominated by the idea that the other person is in a difficult situation. Comprehending that one is similarly vulnerable to such suffering triggers emotional sensitivity and altruistic responses (Snow 1991, Nussbaum 2001). This connection is rational and self-aware – a strong divergence from Taylor’s primitive response – that is relies on a self-regarding concern.

19 Nussbaum (2001) does not seem to note the possibility of this consequence when she insists that we feel compassion when we believe that the sufferer did not deserve his misfortune.
despite very large differences in their conception. I refer to empathy in the chapter on
Merleau-Ponty, admittedly bleeding it into compassion like Clark does, as I endeavor to
describe an embodied experience that has a meaningful incarnation in the world.

1.2. The Debate about Compassion

Critics of compassion see it as incompatible with a polity that prizes equality,
liberty, and individual autonomy and agency.\textsuperscript{20} Other moral virtues or relationships like
moral purpose, solidarity, care, or friendship that bridge differences among unlike
persons are preferred.\textsuperscript{21} I wish to distinguish compassion as a separately useful and
necessary virtue in both personal and political relationships. A more detailed response
to these charges will develop over the course of this chapter and project. For now, let me
note that many of these disputes rely on the assumption that compassion will operate as
the sole or primary political virtue. A diverse and democratic polity like the United
States would do poorly if it were united through a single emotion or virtue if only
because singular virtues often lack the flexibility and strength to adapt themselves to all
possible political or personal encounters, challenges, and movements. My purpose in
retrieving compassion is not to establish it as the democratic or political virtue but a
substantially ameliorative and useful phenomenon that complements and augments
other virtues. Justice, equality, liberty, agency, or care stand to gain more substance that
befits how complicated ethics and relationships are and, more often than not, these

\textsuperscript{20} See Arendt, Boyd, Orwin, and Berlant.
\textsuperscript{21} These virtues are often cited as being superior to compassion. They share the characteristics of linking
together relative strangers around shared interests or a shared belief in democratic values like equality or
liberty (Berlant 1998, 2004; Boyd 2004; Orwin 1997a, 1997b, 2010). The Stoics prefer “moral purpose” because
they believe that compassion is neither equal nor cosmopolitan and that it has a “false cognitive structure”
(Nussbaum 2001). Arendt (1986) elaborates on compassion’s poor structure and offers either solidarity or
friendship as means for securing moral relationships during times of intense political fragmentation or
duress. Compassion, she believes, is a weak and specious form of humanism that lacks the durability or
courage of something like friendship. Finally, while feminist ethics may regard compassion as a central
moral virtue (Porter 2006), these advocates often either blur any distinctions between sympathy, care,
nurture, and compassion, using the terms interchangeably, or they elevate care over and above the other
moral traits, including compassion.
virtues already presume an operating, if subterranean, baseline of compassion that greases political ties and smoothes political operations.

Critics claim that compassion is problematic either because of its performance in relationships between persons or because it is structurally unsound. Compassion’s advocates have responded to some portions of the concerns yet, as Nussbaum notes, the responses are scattered (2001, 368). More problematically, they predominantly fail to address compassion’s structural difficulties. I track these complaints as well as the responses to them, using Berlant and Nussbaum as my primary interlocutors. Concerns about compassion’s performance gather loosely around its non-egalitarian character, its dissembling tendencies, and its parochial scope. A hypocritical compassion that obscures oppressive power dynamics burrows into political and social institutions in ways that are counter-productive to eradicating structural inequalities.

The presumption that compassion creates a more equal relationship between self and other(s) is inaccurate. Critics charge that compassion actually encourages egoism and voyeurism (Arendt 1968; Berlant 2004; Boyd 2004; Orwin 1997a, 1997b, 2000). A non-suffering person feels superior to a suffering person or preys upon that suffering, thereby increasing the former’s happiness or sense of self-satisfaction while dousing those emotions with the good feeling of being compassionate and, thus, virtuous. Consequently, compassion encourages an unhealthy self-love. Or, as Boyd (2004) and Berlant (2004) worry, compassion creates a world of “reluctant spectators” who, faced with severe suffering, avert their eyes and return to the minutia of their lives without engaging or actively helping the people suffering.

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Conversely, Arendt criticizes compassion for being too egalitarian. This particular concern will be detailed in Chapter Two.
Hypocrisy aggravates the situation because compassion’s purports to be an altruistic or selfless response to suffering. Berlant (1998, 2004) and Orwin (1997a) cite the tendency of politicians who, like Clinton’s “moist eyes” and utterances of, “I feel your pain,” or Bush’s rhetoric of “compassionate conservatism,” employ compassion in ways that appear sentimentally appropriate or good while actually obfuscating policies or manipulating their constituents. Compassion cloaks specious activities or attitudes and distracts political attention, resulting in impoverished or illusionary deliberations about political goals, decisions, and consequences. Stoics\textsuperscript{23} believe that compassion actually increases rather than decreases the amount of suffering because it publicly acknowledges an insufficiency or weakness in both the pitied and the pitier (Nussbaum 2001, 2003). Compassion is dissembling not only because it encourages hypocritical behavior or rhetoric but also because it relies on an optimistic, if naïve, hope.

Berlant argues that hope cloaks power’s role. A sentimental politics, in which compassion prefigures, imagines that human emotions can “topple great nations and other patriarchal institutions” because it links those with power to the “socially abject” (Berlant 1998, 640). Stories and images are used to support the misplaced belief that compassion achieves social transformation or alleviates personal pain. “The political as place of acts oriented toward publicness becomes replaced by a world of private thoughts, leanings, and gestures” (Berlant 1998, 641). Berlant and Arendt see pain as inherently non-universal. Redefining freedom as “being free from pain” sidesteps the fact that it is unachievable. More worrisome is that the power dynamics between those with power and those without power favor the former. The “thoughts, leanings, and gestures” that are publicized and praised are those with power or privilege, those who “rise” to do “good.” In so doing, compassion perpetuates structures of inequality and

\textsuperscript{23} Nussbaum repudiates Kant and Nietzsche (2001, 378-83).
oppression like paternalism, racism, or classism. Collective focus loses sight of the dispossessed when the polity is aroused to exhibit the “right” response.

Berlant believes that compassion can and does imbue public and governmental institutions but, unlike Nussbaum, she does not see this saturation as positive. Berlant (2004) argues that the Republican’s use of “compassionate conservatism” during President Bush’s election campaigns serves as a rhetorical sleight of hand that reorganizes how the populace defines “compassion” and “need.” In it the individual’s economic sovereignty weighs more than the collective concern and policies that privilege retaining monetary or external goods through taxes extinguish policies that historically meet basic human needs through a social welfare state. The desire to belong, to be deemed “good,” or to ignore harsher realities of imbalances of power and resources can be structurally organized under sentiment. As Berlant warns, this sentimentality “unlike other revolutionary rhetorics, is after all the only vehicle for social change that neither produces more pain nor requires much courage” (Berlant 1998, 664). “Compassionate” institutions or politicized practices lack, even discourage, activism for change and supplant those revolutionary impulses with dreams of a “better,” pain-free tomorrow. In so doing, compassion privileges individual success and concern over and against the collective.

Arendt’s charge is slightly different. According to Arendt, compassion is ontologically unsuited for the public sphere or for political action. Another critical category concerns compassion’s own structure: compassion is ontologically unsuited for public or political action. The relationship between compassion and goodness renders compassion incompatible for politics. Compassion cannot be aggregated or generalized without being distorted; it is silent or, at best, gestural and it does not speak. Compassion generates intimacy between people, collapsing the necessary distance
between people in which action is generated and lasting political institutions are founded. And, as Arendt uncovers in her analysis of the French Revolution, compassion is unlikely to encourage equality and agency. It encourages uniformity and univocality around policies, unites people around social issues that are best resolved administratively, and it too easily dominates reason and rationality while unleashing violence and anger. Arendt’s charges are especially challenging: compassion is an impoverished concept, not merely a potential stimulant of bad behavior or attitudes. There is no sense in educating or recuperating compassion if it, itself, is incompatible with publicity and politics.

Even if there one could guarantee that compassion was “authentic,” “genuinely” felt, or not the least bit false, critics can still point to its limited scope (Orwin, Nussbaum 2001). Compassion most often emerges in response to an immediate situation involving one or few individuals with whom a stranger can generate a sense of shared interests or similar possibilities of fate. Or compassion emerges only when a person’s immediate circle of friends and family are involved. Compassion’s parochialism is a limitation that little encourages people to mete out sympathy with distant, unfamiliar, or radically different individuals. Included in this complaint is that, once present, it has very little endurance to be sustainable. Not only is compassion too weak to be extended too far, it is too weak to persist.

Berlant’s concerns about power are alarming and judicious. Yet there is a distinction between producing sentimentality as an “event” and encouraging individualized compassionate practices that are enacted within a social, political, or collective context. However the tabloids or media productions might have us believe, politics is not (always) intended for capitalist consumption like Hollywood films or Broadway productions. The United States also has a strong history of the “socially
abject” leading the privileged both in terms of grassroots activism and in terms of knowledge-production and imaginative, “redemptive” projects. Labor rights, populism, and civil rights were each achieved through the hard work (and compassion) of people deemed “less powerful” by traditional institutions. This tradition suggests that the question of compassion and power is less about granting privileges and powers from an elite few than it is about, first, recognizing the validity of everyday, human experiences in which power and resources may diverge widely and, second, modifying one’s political practices or endorsements on the basis of that perspective.

The critics rightly point out how dangerous compassion can be if it fails to perform as expected, if it encourages condescension, avoidance, hypocrisy, or parochialism. These consequences and attitudes are possible, and in response advocates of compassion like Nussbaum and Rousseau concentrate on refining the collective knowledge of compassion and educating individual psycho-emotional responses. Rousseau goes further than Nussbaum in delineating between a sterile and an active social pity. It is this differentiation in terms, attitudes, and consequences that compassion’s critics are weaker. Berlant and her fellow essayists in Compassion, for example, employ loose distinctions between responses like sympathy, empathy, compassion, and pity. Often their critiques of compassion are better categorized as a critique of pity, especially concerning attitudes like disdain and voyeurism.

Ultimately, worries about compassion’s performance are rooted in the presumption that compassion is self-centered, concerned more about the witness than the actual person experiencing anguish. It is this assumption that compassion’s defenders dispute. Lawrence Blum (1994) argues that compassion is characterized by its inclination for helpful action, even if or when a compassionate disposition is not accompanied by other altruistic attitudes. Imaginatively reconstructing another person’s
situation – one replete with that person’s characteristics, values, and beliefs – and being concerned with his situation generates a series of actions, a “causal history” often outside the purview of one’s interests, that designates the disposition as compassionate (Blum 1994, 179). Compassion is selfless insofar it is other-centered, generating a kind of imaginative suffering because one perceives or believes that other person’s pain (Nilsson 2011). The secondary problems of feeling superior or of intentionally deceiving others about one’s intentions are consequences more of egoism than of compassion. Clark’s work disputes the charge that feigned sympathy is unbeneﬁcial. She argues that, ﬁrst, it is still meaningful to the recipient because it signiﬁes that emotion is due and that “dueness” is a gift in itself and, second, that display can also lead to the true sentiment (Clark 1997, 65). Concern for others might not emerge from “pure” intentions but its display plays a role in mediating social interactions and testifying to a situation’s significance.

Yet it might still be charged that compassion is too narrow. Nussbaum (2001, 2003) admits this characteristic and seeks to expand its boundaries through tragedies and education. Tragedies are resources for grappling with “ambivalence and helplessness” and they encourage self-awareness of one’s own ﬁnitude (2001, 351). She couples tragedies with a cultivated, ethical self-criticism to enhance imagination and extend a “tragic compassion” beyond parochial borders. A compassionate perspective in which people are both digniﬁed agents and occasional victims can orient modern debates and provide motives for securing the basic supports for human dignity like education, health care, and a livable income (Nussbaum 2001, 406-14).

Compassion’s “unevenness” comes from the fact that it ripples outwards from the self into a circle of cares and concerns. To give it evenness and stability Nussbaum provides three kinds of judgments to complement a person’s natural inclinations and
govern it “rightly.” Nussbaum believes that the personality has internal supports for compassion; for instance, the relationship between parents and child provide a baseline relationship that is stretched through experiences of personal loss and grief. Compassion is a “reasonably reliable guide to the presence of real value,” “ubiquitously” and “without elaborate prior training” (2001, 374). Managing compassion is primarily a rational activity. First, the judgment of non-desert decides whether a person is responsible for creating his situation. Being perceived as a “victim” of a plight is more likely to trigger feelings of compassion (Clark 1997), but Nussbaum standardizes this inclination. The judgment of the predicament’s seriousness considers whether the degree of compassion felt is commensurable with the degree of tragedy or pain. A person who has just lost his significant other will merit more compassion than a person who has given herself a paper cut, for example. Finally, Nussbaum offers the judgment of eudaimonism in place of Aristotle’s judgment of similitude.24 The judgment of eudaimonism also begins with the discernment of like interests or a similar socioeconomic position, but magnifies that perspective so that an unfamiliar, strange, or distant person can be seen as tied into one’s life goals and intentions or one’s given set of concerns and interests. For eudaimonism to function (and, consequently, Nussbaum’s compassion) wonder and imagination need to flourish, enabling a person to not only draw someone unknown into her sphere but also to see that other person as playing a role in her sense of flourishing.

Education offers an avenue for harnessing and strengthening imagination, compassion, and eudaimonism. Nussbaum suggests that public education (K-12) “cultivate the ability to imagine the experience of others and to participate in their

24 Snow (1991) also relies on a judgment of similitude insofar as a person’s misfortune generates the recognition that one’s self is similarly vulnerable to such suffering.
sufferings” so that children form the habit of empathy and conjecture (2001, 426-27). Tragedy and the arts that present “social barriers and their meaning in a highly concrete way” promote empathy across barriers as spectators learn about a variety of circumstances and become actively involved in those struggles (2001, 431). Political, economic, and social history alongside literature engage students such that they not only learn the significance of the events but how those depictions compare to their “own evolving conception of the good” (2001, 432). Nussbaum also takes compassion into politics, admonishing political leaders to embody it, economic models to take account of its information, and the justice system in considering “human facts” before them (2001, 435-45).

Nussbaum is more positive about compassion’s embedment in structures and institutions. When she turns her eye to public life, Nussbaum focuses on compassion “in connection with a form of political liberalism, a political conception that attempts to win an overlapping consensus among citizens of many different kinds, respecting the spaces within which they each elaborate and pursue their different reasonable conceptions of the good” (2001, 401).25 Approaching compassion26 on an institutional level as well as through the individual psychology better stabilizes compassion and makes it less partial. Even just and equitable institutions need a vibrant compassion at the individual level because Nussbaum believes that political systems are human and good only as they are

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25 Nussbaum’s conception of political liberalism follows John Rawls’ insights, and she acknowledges that she prefers Rawls’ original position because it does not require a normative theory (2001, 341). Were compassion to be developed outside of Rawls’ purview, it would need to demonstrate with whom and to what degree a person should be concerned, what goods are worth caring about and to what degree, and desert and responsibility (2001, 341-42). Nussbaum enumerates the basic elements of a liberal society: “a set of capabilities or opportunities for functioning”: life, bodily health, bodily integrity, senses/imagination/thought, emotions, practical reason, affiliation, other species, play, and control of political and material environments (2001, 416-18).

26 Nussbaum does not think that empathy is sufficient for compassion but it does “underwrite” the judgment of size and the eudaimonistic judgment while helping compassion be “appropriate” (2001, 331-34). Nussbaum asserts that empathy is not value-neutral and it is fallible. Clark disagrees with Nussbaum on the necessity of empathy.
interact with individuals’ judgments and eudaimonistic concerns (2001, 405, 419-21).

Withdrawing “concern altogether from any group of fellow citizens is a moral failing from the point of view of the public political conception, and one especially grave when linked to long-standing prejudice and discrimination” (2001, 421). When politicos fail to display compassion through their policies or practices, especially if they ignore historical and current inequities, then they fail as ethical agents.

Porter (2006) takes a different tact, arguing that increasing global interdependence\(^{27}\) knits a network of responsibilities that extend beyond an individual’s immediate reach. The resulting “practices of responsibility,” when combined with a strong drive for justice, foster a politics that responds “emotionally and practically to the need for human security…the emotion of compassion is central to the practice of an ethical life and thus compassionate political responses are integral to decent politics” (Porter 2006, 99). The humanitarian responses to national and international crises like the 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Japan or the 2011 tornadoes that bulldozed the Midwest support Porter’s claims. The response may take form as charity through donations of money and resources rather than an active or physically immediate form of help, but compassion’s display is not always limited to just one form. Clark’s work demonstrates how variables like gender, resources, time, age, or proximity affects compassion display.\(^{28}\)

I am unconvinced that immediacy is so great a weakness that it merits either transformation or expansion. As Merleau-Ponty helps clarify, attention on another person has greater depth and mutuality than might be presumed. These dimensions are

\(^{27}\) Snow (1991) implies that compassion’s rationality is due to human interdependency. “A compassion-based account generates its own social support in virtue of the fact that, all things considered, rational persons would prefer living in a society in which compassion is fundamental to living in a society in which social allegiance is generated only to the extent to which persons’ rational self-interest is served” (Snow 1991, 201).

\(^{28}\) See also Blackstone (2009) and Cannon (2005).
salient in creating a “moment of insight” in which the sufferer is revealed within and beyond his immediate suffering. Compassionate responses thrive in local levels. The difficulty of replicating them on a large scale might limit their corrosion or distortion. Locality might also prove helpful during an era in which media and social networking tools not only increase people’s awareness of human suffering but also distract them from sustained or serious attention.

Unfortunately Nussbaum does not meet Berlant’s concerns, in part because of how she configures political and public space. Nussbaum’s politics presupposes a fairly congealed polity, distinguished by its relative stability and respect for diversity of interests, opinions, and persons. Excessive political fragmentation or partisanship seen in times like the Civil War, World War II, or contemporary ideological rhetoric around social issues like union rights and women’s health care rights threaten Nussbaum’s recommendations. Berlant’s vision of political space is more agonistic, fragmented, and oppressive. As Arendt worries, in such dangerous times compassion can act as a fuel for rage and violence rather than bridging unlike people. Nussbaum’s failure to respond to this charge suggests that her recommendations and analysis are not as helpful in certain political times and spaces.

Berlant turns to “compassionate conservatism” and the archives of “pain” found in literature, theater, and media for evidence of sentimentality’s challenges and perversities. The political climate has shifted since her analysis and, while the GOP might still hold to a form of compassionate conservatism, this language has eroded under the battle cries of Republicans and Tea Party members. Compassion may seem ill equipped in resisting strong partisanship that refuses to compromise. I believe that not only is compassion one of the primary means of dampening strong passions, but the extremity of the political bluster reflects a politics in which compassion is largely absent.
When compassion is rendered silent, seen as irrelevant, or made apolitical then the substance of political virtues like moral courage and the content of principles like justice and equality are weakened. Without compassion there are no prosocial attitudes and actions that orient the polity and its politicians around what is “humanly valuable.” Congress and the President have an especial representative effect insofar as their decisions and their rhetoric not only shape our political, economic, and social structures but also communicate whether and how we ethically interact with others, even those radically different or ideologically estranged from us. Berlant might be right in her analysis – she is in her warnings of compassion’s dangers – but a different set of examples and situations may offer an alternative. Chapter Five is devoted to this investigation.

Few of the problems raised by Arendt have been addressed in the current literature on compassion. Nussbaum focuses her sights on Stoic criticisms, most of which are concerned with compassion’s performance rather than its conceptual coherence. Other theorists are silent. If compassion is structurally unsuited for politics, then any criteria that facilitate “right” judgment or any activities that “educate” the populace are both unfruitful and unnecessary. The moment that compassion enters a public or political arena it is rendered ineffectual. Or, in Arendt’s more strongly terms, it is distorted into a dangerous and potentially “pity.” Recuperating compassion requires us to build upon Nussbaum’s exemplary work. Chapter Two begins a response to Arendt, elaborating her position and its foundations. Chapters Three and Four, focusing on Rousseau and Merleau-Ponty, respectively, extend and detail my response.

1.3. Alternatives to Compassion

An ethic of care is a powerful alternative to compassion given its numerous challenges. Nearly three decades of cross-disciplinary reaction to Carol Gilligan’s 1982 In
the ethic of care as a form of morality replete with practices and perspectives, vigorously deliberated, and documented through psychological, sociological, historical, and anecdotal research (Larrabee 1993, Maihofer 2000). Given the academic treatment of care, it appears as a well-established response to fragmented politics and raises questions about compassion’s validity or necessity: What, precisely, does compassion do that care does not? Were we to admit that compassion might have a place in the polity, is it not still trumped by care insofar as care provides a distinct alternative to rights- and justice-based moral judgments? My initial response is that care is not as independent from compassion as it seems – care’s function relies on a vibrant and celebrated public and political compassion. This section briefly sketches Gilligan’s argument for an ethic of care as well as portions of the resulting conversation. I then analyze how an ethic of care relates to compassion.

Gilligan constructs an “ethic of care” from women’s experiences and language. She turns to women because they more often express this mode of perceiving and judging moral situations and because they consistently score low or rank as morally deficient on traditional psychological development models. Gilligan perceives the theoretical exclusion of women as a “limitation in the conception of the human condition” (1982, 2) and argues for developing theories that better reflect the range of the human moral experience. Care is a contextual, relational morality that people use in addition to the justice-based morality that dominates the developmental literature. An ethic of care, she claims, sees moral conflict as a problem of conflicting responsibilities rather than competing rights and is concerned that the actors involved are not hurt.

Gilligan constructs a three-stage development model. First, a person focuses on survival of the self, overriding other considerations in order to prioritize herself. When
the moral agent criticizes this stance as “selfish” and recognizes the existing relationships between herself and others, she begins to transition into the second phase. This second phase responds to responsibilities for dependent or unequal others at the expense of caring for one’s self. Questioning the disequilibrium between self-care and self-sacrifice that recurs in “conventions of feminine goodness” transitions her into the third phase. The third phase is defined by a clearer understanding of the interdependence between one’s self and others and focuses on the dynamics of that relationship. Self-care is factored as one variable among others within a relationship. Gilligan calls it a “contrapuntal” development model, meaning that a person slips into different stages depending upon the context. Care emerges as a “principle of judgment” that is psychologically contextual but universal in its injunction to refrain from harming others. This judgment includes discerning when and how the dilemma contains power inequalities or violence, the presence of which compromise the possibility of achieving a just resolution (1982, 100-01, 103).

The literature spun from her book often interprets Gilligan as claiming that women have a distinct experience and moral judgment precisely because they are women. Or, as seen in Kerber’s criticisms (1993), that women have a biologically and psychologically distinct moral judgment. It is precisely this “claim” to “gender difference” that stimulates a bevy of conflicting investigations that assert there is or there is not a difference (Larrabee 1993, Maihofer 2000). Gilligan hits a sensitive nerve in how

29 Though a woman might progress into the third stage, she can also easily “regress” into the first or second stage if she feels unsupported. This lapse suggests that cultivating an ethic of care requires that its proponents are confident in their voices and concerns, have support themselves, or have experienced care.
30 The contextual ethics that emerges in Gilligan’s account is due to a reluctance to assign judgment because of awareness that a personal judgment is limited (103).
31 An ethic of care occurs within a discernment of power structures, thereby resisting Puka’s implications that care perpetuates powerlessness. Care is, in part, a complementary way of perceiving “justice” insofar as relatively powerless people are cared for and considered in the equation of acting. Attention to “individual suffering” is a part of seeing what is unjust and constitutes “justice” (Gilligan 1982, 101, 103, 172, 174). Gilligan implies that women are better able to see and respond to structural inequalities because they have worked through issues of power, violence, and exploitation as they develop through Gilligan’s three stages.
women and all of their accompanying attributes or qualities are seen or see themselves publicly, privately, stereotypically, historically, and culturally. The more interesting question is why women remain controversial either in asserting their differences or their similarities to men. What is the symbolic or functional value of maintaining gender-specific qualities, perspectives, locations, or reasoning? And what does it mean to either validate gender difference or dispute it? Unfortunately addressing this question is a separate project and will not be undertaken here.

Proponents of a care ethic modify or elaborate Gilligan’s work so that it better complements a justice ethic (Baier 1993; Flanagan and Jackson 1993; Friedman 1987, 1993; and Tronto 1993). However, as Friedman worries, “considerations of special relationships and of caring seem merely to enrich with compassion the judgments that are based on prior considerations of justice” (1987, 195). She argues that an ethic of care is separate from and complementary to a justice ethic. For instance, particular relationships generate universal responsibilities that are not based on justice but remain significant and valid. At times, particular caring responsibilities usurp universal principles of justice (1987, 195-97). Friedman’s arguments and examples demonstrate an ethic of care’s validity as a separate, alternative moral model.

Tronto takes a different approach. Appreciating Gilligan’s arguments Tronto nevertheless fears that prescribing an ethic of care as a “corrective” to politics puts in unnecessary parameters. This argument is a functional argument, effectively placing care secondary to other moral values and permitting people in power to disagree to its use or need. As a result, an ethic of care can be easily dismissed as irrelevant or inadequate to social dilemmas or moral theory (Larrabee 1993). Tronto argues in Moral

32 This latter question becomes particularly irksome since the reasons for disputing it range from unconscious bias, e.g. assuming men set the standard for moral judgment, etc., to concerns about continuing male privilege, to asserting that women do not have a fundamentally different experience than men, which in turn might affect their perceptions (a point Gilligan makes in responding to her critics).
Boundaries that care is a moral and political concept that reveals human interdependency while prescribing an ideal for democratic, pluralistic polities in which power is more evenly distributed (1993b, 21).

An ethic of care exposes an ideological and power-laden social and political structure that an ethic of justice obscures. Boundaries between morality and politics, the private and public, and the “moral point of view” that elevates the rational over the emotional, disinterest over personal attachments, and universality over particularity are apparent when politics is considered through a caring perspective. Tronto’s care challenges the ideological power of concepts like autonomy, individualism, and the “self-made man” that binds care to private sectors, thereby devaluing care while ignoring how pervasive care is in everyday activity. An ethic of care offers a vocabulary and a lens by which to see, understand, and change these dimensions.

Tronto defines care as a “species activity” involving what we do to “maintain, continue, and repair our world” so that we can live in it “as well as possible” (1993b, 103). Her definition implies that care is neither self-absorbing nor self-referring and that it leads to an action. Like Gilligan, Tronto divides care into phases but she then attaches a corresponding ethic to it. “Caring about” requires empathy or perspective taking, and it cultivates the ethic of attentiveness. “Taking care of,” or assuring responsibility for a need and defining how to respond to it, corresponds to an ethic of responsibility. “Care-giving” in which a person directly meets care needs is facilitated by an ethic of competency. Finally, “care-receiving” entails responsiveness. Responsiveness is not empathy, compassion, or reciprocity but hearing the object of care’s perspective; it

33 Despite her citation of Arendt, Tronto does not wrestle with Arendt’s concern that species activities belong outside the political and public realm.
34 Tronto, in hoping to offer a new vocabulary, does not consider how estranging a term like “object of care” is. “Subject of care” imbues the care recipient with individual humanity while retaining their position in a caring relationship.
recognizes a care-recipient’s power and agency as well as the possibility for abuse in vulnerable and unequal relationships. Tronto asserts that phases one and two are the province of the powerful while phases three and four belong to the less powerful and are devalued. Regardless, acting from a place of care requires context, or a deep knowledge of the situation and “all” of the actors’ situations, needs, and competencies\(^35\) (1993b, 136-37), so that the best solution for all of the actors results.

Proponents of care see it as a superior ethical model for several reasons. First, care reveals what Maihofer (2000) terms “plural universalism,” or the existence of multiple ethical models. It unveils the distinct ways in which genders are moralized. And it offers potential points of collaboration with other modes of morality like a justice framework, virtue ethics, feminist ethics, Marxism, and Confucianism. Its durability and pliability across multiple disciplines demonstrate its validity and functionality as a moral model. Consequently, care is more than a set of passions. It is an active practice found in different forums and used by diverse practitioners. Second, as a moral model, it is better than others in perceiving structural and relational injustices and power imbalances. This point is debated. Puka (1993), for instance, charges that Gilligan’s model is not emancipatory precisely because care is contained in an oppressive and sexist system. Yet Benhabib (1986), Tronto (1989), and Maihofer (2000) reply that oppression cannot be remedied if it is not first seen and analyzed in order to outline potential emancipatory projects. Finally, while care might be seen in gendered roles – or, the gender division of labor within social and private caring practices is stereotypic, with women receiving the larger burden – it is a perspective and practice that both genders can employ. Though Tronto admits some difficulties here if men are

\(^{35}\) This claim forgets that not all emotional and mental matters or their consequences are wholly transparent to either one’s self or another.
consistently care-receivers engaged in “caring about” rather than acting as care-givers in “caring for.” While she recognizes this as a problem, she provides little advice for helping men and society-at-large shift roles.

Compassion appears diminutive against such an ethical model. Theorists of care can argue that compassion is a singular emotion already encompassed in the care ethic with neither a system nor a literature that substantiates its role beyond a faltering, unsteady feeling. Unless compassion can prove that it provides a moral alternative, it remains subordinate to any ethic of care or systematic ethical model.

This point is good but it presumes that compassion’s goal is hegemony. Care’s tacit incorporation of compassion provides a different reason to attend to it. Compassion acts as a necessary prerequisite for care. Compassion is the dominant emotion of care (Benhabib 1986; Brabeck 1993; Friedman 1993, 1987; Gilligan 1982, 1993; and Tronto 1993b), it is central in revealing the power imbalances of a relational dynamic (Gilligan 1982, 100), and it forms a crucial element of judgment, in determining how best to proceed with as little harm to all of the actors involved in a situation (Gilligan 1982, 130, 148; Tronto 1993b). Unless compassion is recovered as a plausible civic virtue then there will neither be practices nor attitudes that enable care to flourish. Compassion cannot out-compete alternative models like justice, care, or feminist ethics yet its recuperation is essential to those models because they implicitly rely upon compassion in either judgment or assessments of power dynamics.

Moreover, implicit within the care ethic is an injunction against violence. To care is to affirm, to attend to, or to practice loving acts towards another person or people. In times when violent or warring acts and relations are present, care offers little response. Care has a role but its introduction and practice first requires that a person feels compelled to assist others towards which he is apathetic or angry. Why might he assist?
He could have a strong moral personality that shapes his actions as positive or non-violent (Glover 1990). Failing this disposition, he may feel compassion towards that other person (Taylor 1999). In the midst of enmity, our moral agent perceives another person who is suffering, who is vulnerable, or who is fallible. Admonishing a person to “care for” or “care about” or “care with” a person he sees as ethically or politically wrong is more likely to render an abrupt, “Why should I?” then a caring response. Asking them to try to comprehend that person’s situation or perspective compassionately is more likely to foster some common ground of understanding, which in time might bloom into also caring for that person.

**1.4. Why Compassion? Why Now?**

Compassion is highly contested both in its form and in its consequences. Is compassion good for politics or ought it be writ out and made silent? I believe that compassion forms an essential and necessary base out of which political contestation can flourish, and this possibility is uncovered by responding to the critics, what they both explicitly mention and leave out in their accounts. That compassion is already found on battlefields, literal and metaphorical, suggests that it is an enduring and valuable capacity that can traverse multiple sites, interactions, and people to gather a strange if delicate solidarity. Here I consider compassion’s role in war as well as the specific practices of listening and taking responsibility that it promotes. Applied in the United States compassion sustains the “*e pluribus unum.*”

*The Iliad* – Homer’s wondrous epic of war that depicts its frenzy, strategy, and politics – climaxes not with a battle scene or a heroic act but with an old man prostrating before lion-like Achilles. The interaction between Priam and Achilles is tense. Priam wishes to bring his child’s body home for a proper funeral. Achilles wavers between grievous anger for his friend and something like sympathy for Priam before capitulating...
to grief for his own and his father’s mortality. Will Priam survive and succeed in gaining Hector’s body for his funeral? Will Achilles recognize his own humanity and mortality, reading his life as somehow bound with Priam’s? After a spellbound interlude between the two men – each reflecting the other somehow – the two separately see aspects of themselves in the other. Priam takes Hector home.

Homer ends *The Iliad* before the war’s completion and before the hero Achille’s own death, suggesting that the lessons to be drawn and the scenes to remember are not those revolving around war games and strategies. Rather what remains significant, especially in a time of war, are those moments involving “what is humanly valuable.” For Achilles and Priam, the humanly valuable encounter is one laden with compassion, power, depth, distance, and intimacy. Homer’s insight into this moment of self-other revelation is echoed throughout the countless wars, battles, and conflicts humanity has engaged in since. Compassion is not so strange to enmity.

Soldiers’ memoirs, projects for helping soldiers recuperate from PTSD or war, and narratives about war often include a moment in which an individual soldier encounters an enemy soldier and realizes his “humanity.” Friendships were made across trenches and brief truces were held for Christmas during World War One. Veterans showed remorse, hesitation, or less violent treatment towards women, children, and seniors in the Vietnam War; violence against these populations tend to haunt them afterwards. Focusing on the individual person or making a “small human gesture towards the victims” prompt compassionate moments (Glover 1990, 346, 383). As will be elaborated with Merleau-Ponty, this moment’s power lies in the startling realization that not only is a person similar to his “enemy” but he is that “enemy.” The other reflects who a person is – not because of an emotional contagion that overspills individual boundaries but because a complex of sensations, memories, and power dynamics cuts
through mental shortcuts and reveals humans as fundamentally intercorporeal, as somehow bound to one another. Both individuals are seen as more than a “generalized other.” They are particular individuals who are loved, who have idiosyncracies, fears, and hopes (Glover 1990, 53). I call it a moment of insight because it often creates a radical shift in understanding the situation and ourselves, one that can facilitate “progress” towards self-recuperation or, minimally, a kind of “truce” that repels violence.

These moments occur despite both the specific training soldiers undergo and the conditions of the battlefield. Glover (1990) reports of several battle defenses that “anaesthetize” compassion. The imagery and language around war relies on depicting one’s enemy as a dehumanized or inferior category of people. War is depicted in terms of “us versus them,” where knowledge of the other is limited either to specialized categories of information that enable us to engage in espionage or information gathering or to a sub-category of generalized “other.” Stereotypes, slurs, and other linguistic tools create mental shortcuts that obviate the need or desire for sympathy while casting the enemy as “enemy” – foreign, strange, unknown, dangerous, and untrustworthy (Glover 1990). That compassion, weak as it is in comparison to such strategies, shyly lingers and unexpectedly emerges when it can is a testimony to its endurance in the human condition.

The presumption that compassion has no place in war is echoed in politics. Critics argue that compassion is not functional or helpful in an agonistic political climate in which ideologies, partisans, and policies “battle it out” in order to gain political “wins” for their respective sides. Interest groups and politicians have taken rhetorical and ideological “arms” against one another, battling for political supremacy at the cost of collective health or conciliation. The Republican Party has responded to economic and
fiscal crises with spending cuts to social services and the loss of bargaining rights for
unions. Planned Parenthood, union rights, education, public radio and television, and
health care have each faced the political and budget knife. The populations most often
under attack, deemed as either “lazy,” “incompetent,” unethical, or unhealthy to the
polity at large, are also our nation’s historical minorities – women, immigrants, racial
and ethnic minorities, homosexuals, and lower classes engaged in hard work with
minimal wages and benefits.

Surely compassionate practices like listening and being responsible ought to be
present in national debates about our future through its policies. Insofar as we refuse to
see that the people we are combating are bound to us – more precisely, as reflections of
ourselves – then we will not see the full effects of politics become too entrenched.
Agonistic politics works insofar as all parties recognize that, despite differences, their
opponents represent vital and healthy aspects of the body politic at large, without which
it is incomplete. Recognizing diversity as such exceeds the power of virtues like respect,
liberty, or equality. That recognition is undergirded by something like compassion,
which itself refuses to disavow a person merely because that person is different from
oneself.

Author Maxine Hong Kingston recalls a series of writing workshops that she
created for veterans from World War II, Korea, and Vietnam, including voluntary
enrollees, draftees, and pacifist resisters, in which listening to one another and to one’s
self was key to giving voice to one’s suffering and finding healing. Out of a disparate
and contradictory group – resisters and veterans – she hoped to generate a community.
She narrates how, at their last gathering, the veterans begin to refuse “reconciliation”
with the pacifist resisters. They discuss the feeling of betrayal. Hong Kingston panics, “I
groped for a point of agreement. ‘But do you agree with the need for reconciliation?’
They nodded, doubtfully” (2003, 394). Hong Kingston refers the veterans to Avalokiteshvara, a Buddhist embodiment of compassionate listening. “She has many hands – even her hands have hands – and an eye in each hand...Therese took the picture down and held it in the middle of the circle. ‘We have asked her again and again to help us be like her. To be compassionate and to listen. To listen without judgment’” (ibid). A resister reads his story after Hong Kingston speaks. After which, an unspoken reconciliation is reached. None of the participants find reconciliation easy, either with portions of themselves about which they feel shame or with portions of the population that were “against them.” Compassionate listening is a practice that opens the possibility for reconciliation.

Compassion also works to instill a sense of responsibility. Glover notes that soldiers often diluted their personal responsibility for violent actions committed during war, especially against civilians (1990, 82). Retrieving responsibility requires facing up to one’s actions in order to transform the suffering and regain a fuller sense of self. Hong Kingston records the following interaction between Buddhist teacher, Thich Nhat Hahn (Thay), and a group of veterans:

He was scolding the veterans; his voice was soft, impatient, adamant, scolding. Stop suffering. Cut it out. Thay continued, “You are a veteran, but you are more than a veteran. You have to remember that. Mmmm, and all of us, Vietnamese and Americans, we are veterans. All of us have suffered. So you have to remember that you are whole human beings, not just veterans. That apply for me and for you also...I have to be able to not only to help myself but to help my sisters, my brother, my child, my society. Because I have the responsibility of a brother, a father, a teacher, a sister, a mother, I cannot just imprison myself in my own suffering. I have to transform it.” (2003, 386-87)

Thay reminds the veterans that they are more than their wartime selves. He reminds them that they have whole personalities, complete with a fuller sense of obligation and responsibility, existing outside the past’s purview. Furthermore, civilians who reside at home during war cannot evade the responsibilities for suffering. Thay emphasizes that suffering cannot remain a mental, physical, or emotional torment. Suffering becomes a
baseline for understanding the human condition that then grounds personal action and responsibilities towards others.

Notice, too, Hong Kingston’s description of Thay’s voice. He scolds the veterans. Compassionate practices are not just soft whispers and hushed light. They are not just cozy words of solace wrapped ‘round aching bodies, hearts, and minds. They are “impatient, adamant, scolding.” They require toughness and courage to face suffering and endurance to undergo transformation. They are critical but nonjudgmental. In a word, they are hard practices that seek to nourish “what is humanly valuable” in the person and the polity. And nourishment is not always in the form of cake. Nussbaum seeks to educate compassion as do I.

Responsibility requires one to acknowledge involvement in a shared situation and to actively working for “beneficial” change. U.S. racial history provides several examples both of the overwhelming lack of accountability and of the compassionate interracial interactions that constructed spaces and perspectives to resist and challenge white supremacy. James Baldwin indicts the majority of his “countrymen” for their ignorance and abdication of responsibility: they are “destroying hundreds of thousands of lives” and they “do not know it and do not want to know it…It is the innocence which constitutes the crime” (1998, 292). He later states that “[p]eople always seem to band together in accordance to a principle that has nothing to do with love,36 a principle that releases them from personal responsibility” (1998, 333). For all the power and scope of a universal democratic norm like equality, equality easily shies from building communion between and responsibility to people. Equality, unlike compassion, does not hinge a person’s self-recognition of that right upon recognizing another person’s right to

36 For Baldwin, love is more than the personal sense; it is “a state of being, or a state of grace – not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth” (1998, 341).
it. Compassion explicitly requires at least two parties to recognize, partake in, and respond to one another; equality needs only the presence of another person and some form of authority that can establish it in specific (contractual) terms. Certainly political work around the color line articulates itself in terms of democratic practices. Yet its practices rely on acknowledging a shared situation and in accepting responsibility for changing it so that *de facto* and *de jure* political rights either are achieved or coincide.

Compassion contains the possibility for gathering people together when other forms of social or political relating begin to break down or dissolve: when there are no shared interests between them, when natural disasters literally break communities, or when an oppressive or totalitarian politics severely constrain human togetherness, for example. It can also provide some sentimental catalysts and sustenance for democratic activity within polities deemed sufficiently democratic. At times, the creation of a social relationship via compassion is a political act. Compassionate practices otherwise considered social became political acts precisely because a totalitarian political regime had collapsed political space; these acts created alternative spaces for autonomy and critical resistance. We might see the decades of political work done by abolitionists and then CORE and SNCC activists similarly. People deliberately crossed boundaries and places hemmed in by a color line; compassion helped instigate the creation of shared and participatory spaces perhaps more democratic and political than options found in the dominant regime.

Moreover, as Nussbaum emphasizes, compassion provides a particular perspective that can be vitally political: it orients attention towards “what is humanly valuable within the possibilities of the moment” (Merleau-Ponty 1964c, 219).

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38 See Jonathan Schell’s introduction to Adam Michnik’s *Letters from Prison and Other Essays*.
Neurologically, compassion is the mode in which we attune to people in order to make sense of their situation and comprehend what affects it. Consequently it can enable a fuller understanding of the political and personal stakes involved in our actions, reframing political choice and activity within what may be achievable and beneficial. This perspective, which may be significantly built out of relationships, can inform our daily practices and shape the significance of political struggles. Baldwin’s critique of seeing African Americans as a social problem, known through a catalog of statistics, rather than a human or personal problem is an example of a critical viewpoint that sees the significance of a political struggle in terms of what is humanly valuable.39

Compassion turns attention to a basic but significant aspect of the human condition – the human person – because, in W.E.B. DuBois’ terms, it recalls “the pulse of hearts beating with red blood.”40 When universal norms like respect, dignity, solidarity, or justice are separated from this attention, they can become hollow, serving as ideologies of faith to be achieved in name regardless of the means employed or their actual correspondence to people’s situations. They are not only as susceptible to warping as compassion but may also, as Rousseau asserts, rely on a baseline of compassion.

Certainly compassion contains dangers and rough spots. It is neither a complete answer nor the sole answer to a politics that can thrive in agon without dissolving to sectarian pedantry. The remaining portion of this project considers compassion in more detail, expanding on those portions of compassion gestured to, ignored, or debated. Compassion can act as a civic virtue that illuminates the multiple dimensions and disagreements about “what is humanly valuable” in a given situation. It can also generate practices of resistance, criticism, repairing and change in shared spaces of

acting and relating. It supports a political ethos that affirms the individuals incorporated into a nation-state and resists their degradation. All of this work nourishes the United State’s “e pluribus unum.”

Conceiving this dissertation as, first, an apology for compassion; second, an elaboration of its plasticity and multidimensionality; and, third, an argument for recognizing that it is already a political ethos that can be strengthened, I turn to Arendt, Rousseau, Merleau-Ponty, and Robert Kennedy because their conversation with each other illuminates both our presumptions about compassion and the ways it surprises us. As noted earlier each theorist offers a distinct sense of compassion, its contours, its application, and its relationship with politics. Arendt brings us to Rousseau, Rousseau to Merleau-Ponty, and Kennedy brings us back to the context of the United States.

Arendt’s critiques revolve around the ontological incompatibility of compassion with politics and, as yet, are largely unaddressed in the literature on compassion. Her concerns challenge compassion’s entrance and use in politics: attempting to create compassionate politics is folly if, as she argues, compassion itself is adverse to public or political life. I respond that Arendt misconceives compassion and that her attempts at proving it an unsuitable political principle or virtue are immanently illogical. Rousseau elaborates my response. With Rousseau compassion is depicted as socially viable or sterile and its education is best formed when the individual’s disposition is taken into account. Commentators on Rousseau fail to acknowledge compassion’s complexity as well as its examples as found in Rousseau’s works.

Rousseau also hints at sensation’s role in forming and modifying compassion. These relations are not explicit, causing me to speculate at his vision from the evidence found in his treatises. Merleau-Ponty, however, provides a greater examination of sensation, compassion, and political action and judgment in Chapter Four. Merleau-
Ponty presents a psycho-visceral imagining of how it is be to embodied as someone distinct from another, a person whose radical difference actively shapes and configures her abilities to be vibrant contributors to political and public discourse, events, and action. Waking up and tending to the rich possibilities for practicing politics that emerge from a set of sensible relationships entail literally feeling or perceiving how it is to be another person. Compassion works within the midst of tension.

In Chapter Five I turn to the political style of Robert F. Kennedy to consider how compassion might be embodied in both person and policy. Kennedy’s politics was highly corporeal, he advocated responsibility geared towards critical action around racism and poverty alleviation, and he generated a form of solidarity different from Arendt’s. Discerning practical applications for contemporary politics is as necessary to the recuperation of compassion as is its recovery as a political concept. What the overall project suggests is that our understanding of compassion can still be refined.
2. The Arendtian Hurdle

Hannah Arendt dislikes compassion, or at least its appearance in politics, and believes that it is a damaging force in the world. *On Revolution*¹ provides her most startling and in-depth investigation of compassion’s relationships to politics, violence, and human distinction. The French Revolution has the dubious distinction of introducing compassion into politics, thereby transforming all subsequent modern revolutions and revealing compassion’s distorting effects. Compassion, the passion that is the “capacity for suffering with others” (*OR* 81), can only happen within an individuated and intensely private sphere. It can neither extend beyond the confines of the heart nor can it be developed in concert with others. “[N]ot only is the human heart a place of darkness which, with certainty, no human eye can penetrate,” she claims, “the qualities of the heart need darkness and protection against the light of the public to grow and to remain what they are meant to be, innermost motives which are not for public display” (*OR* 96). Asking compassion to reign outside of privacy – to move in “the light of the public” – risks introducing unwarranted intimacy and hypocrisy into the public realm and perverts compassion into pity, a form of selflessness that limits individual capacities for judgment, deliberation, and disinterestedness. Even if compassion could avoid perversion, it abolishes political space and, consequently, cannot found lasting institutions; it cannot be generalized without also being distorted; and it cannot function as a democratic norm.

Lest we are inclined to believe that compassion is detrimental only during revolutionary moments, Arendt also includes a condemnation of its efforts in her acceptance of the Lessing Prize, later included in *Men in Dark Times* under the title, “On

¹ The following abbreviations will be used: **BPF**: Between Past and Future; **HC**: The Human Condition; **MDT**: Men in Dark Times; **OR**: On Revolutions.
Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing.” The range and depth of Arendt’s discussion in these two texts challenges Shin Chiba’s claim that, “Arendt fails to identify the specific context in which the idea of compassion or fraternity turns into political disaster” (1995, 516). Here Arendt considers compassion’s tendency to operate within estranged groups that, in finding no place in the world surrounding them, retreat from the world. People who do so abdicate the responsibility for sharing in and building up the world, and they replace the public’s “light” with fraternal “warmth.” Yet Arendt finds that compassion cannot establish strong ties between diverse people and it cannot facilitate their concerted action in the world. Even if compassion could avoid its dangerous tendencies that are revealed in On Revolution, then it would still fail as an energizing and bridging principle in the polity.

Arendt dismisses compassion’s political capacities because they are too hazardous or too numbing – action and speech suffer in both cases – and turns to solidarity and friendship instead. Solidarity maintains distance, can be generalized because it operates in conjunction with reason, and is committed to ideas like honor, dignity, and greatness (OR 88-89). Friendship, which is discerning and deliberative, helps to deliver a strong humanism that can withstand political facts without reverting to moral absolutes. But Arendt’s assessment is limited by her methods and her style, and her depiction of compassion weakens her claims regarding solidarity, friendship, and political principles in general.

2.1. Revolutions

In On Revolution Arendt builds two kinds of cases against compassion. The first involves its inherent inability to act as a political or civic virtue primarily because it is so private. The second examines its entrance into and affects on modern revolutions,
especially the French Revolution, and demonstrates its incompatibility with either creating or preserving a politics wherein people can appear and act in their distinction.

Arendt employs Melville’s *Billy Budd* and Dostoyevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov* as ideal types to analyze compassion. Arendt writes that Melville and Dostoyevsky “show openly and concretely, though of course poetically and metaphorically, upon what tragic and self-defeating enterprise the men of the French Revolution had embarked almost without knowing it” (OR 82). *Billy Budd* is a morality tale between absolute goodness and evil that “talk[s] back directly to the men of the French Revolution and to their proposition that man is good in a state of nature and becomes wicked in society” (OR 83). Were we to doubt Melville, then we can turn to Dostoyevsky who writes the “the story of the motivation behind the words and deeds of its main characters” in “The Grand Inquisitor” (OR 85). Power and violence more often than not underlie sympathy for humanity. Only Jesus of Nazareth is compassionate and active in the world. Humans seem doomed to repeat the errors of Robespierre and Jean-Jacques Rousseau when they begin to employ compassion politically, caught in the battle of absolutes and prone to hypocrisy and violence.

Goodness first appears in *The Human Condition*, compared here to criminality and badness, and reemerges in *On Revolution* in relationship to compassion. Arendt considers the two to be related but not identical phenomenon (OR 83). Goodness is inherently mutable, twisting into some other thing when it receives public or private attention. Goodness might become “useful” in the public realm but it is not “good” in its literal sense. Consequently it has a curious relationship with humanity: despite the fact that goodness relies on human agency, it is a strangely non-human phenomenon

2 Alternative readings of *The Brothers Karamazov* and *Billy Budd* that offer different perspectives of compassion in politics or publics will be suggested later.
because good acts cannot be attached to individual humans with any permanency or authorship. The “good” individual takes on mythological or divine proportions if she will not also be the loneliest individual, cast out of relationship with others and herself through her love of goodness.

At first glance, goodness seems an aspect of vita activa except that, as Arendt understands it, it does not have a location in the world. Goodness is a profoundly private experience because it cannot be witnessed by another; it is a profoundly non-private experience because a person cannot even testify to his or her own good works (HC 78); and it is a non-public phenomenon because it cannot constitute worldliness, or construct anything permanent beyond its fleeting appearance as a good act. Arendt is adamant that goodness must remain anonymous if it is to remain “good” because its specific character is its “being done for nothing but goodness’ sake” (HC 74). She adds that goodness “can exist only when it is not perceived, not even by its author” and that a good act must “go into absolute hiding” if it is to retain the quality of good (HC 74-75).

This quality has several effects. When a good act is made public, either by moving into the public realm or by lingering in its author’s memory, then it is transformed. In the public realm witnesses determine whether an act is “useful” or deceitful. Goodness cannot be trusted as a revelatory phenomenon: in its appearance it opens the question, “Is this ‘good’?” and immediately in its asking, that question causes the witness to doubt goodness, to deem it something else, and to forget its first manifestation or recall only its derivative. Even the good person cannot find solace recalling the act because remembering it destroys its quality of good or stimulates suspicion about whether an act occurred or if it could be deemed good (HC 76). Goodness is impermanent, captured by neither word nor memory; it is traceless, unbound to one or several authors; and it is forgotten both because it cannot be recorded
without being distorted and because it cannot live beyond its first appearance. Goodness gains an agency of its own in Arendt’s hands that expires once found out.

Goodness as such cannot forge relationships between people or lasting institutions within the body politic. Yet Arendt sees this impermanence as a benefit to the polity because goodness tends to create unequal relationships between people and it often emerges in politically critical times. As Jacobitti points out, good works assume that we can know what is best for another person and what the consequences of our actions might be. To “take responsibility for the good of others, to act for rather than with them, is inherently hubristic, immoderate. Furthermore, it turns other people into objects. Political action involves and must involve respect for the other with whom one acts and a willingness to consider and talk about the others’ point of view” (1991, 287). A similar complaint is lodged often against service learning and volunteer programs in education wherein students or academics, rather than learning about and from their communities, enter into service relationships with the idea that they bring the skills, resources, and talents necessary to “fix” a given problem. Politics requires that a plurality of people appear in order to deliberate and decide a given direction. Goodness is not “useful” in cultivating a community of equals if the recipients of its “good works” are objectified and denied access to the conversation about such “works.” Good works focused on alleviating human suffering might derail politics if the “do-gooders” insist that politics address human needs.³ Lovers of goodness, like criminals, “remain outside the pale of human intercourse and are, politically, marginal figures who usually enter the historical scene in times of corruption, disintegration, and political bankruptcy” (HC 180). Arendt cautions us about the public role of the “good” person: she is as dangerous as, if not more than, a criminal and she appears at politically critical times.

³ Arendt ignores the political and collective actions that suggest the contrary.
Goodness’ non-worldly, “non-human, superhuman” characteristics result from its close relationship to religion (HC 76). Arendt attributes its self-concealing tendencies to the early Christian hostility towards the public realm. Wishing to live as far removed from the Roman republic as possible, Christians devoted themselves to good works precisely because they fell outside of the public realm. Jesus of Nazareth⁴ consistently serves as Arendt’s ideal type for unadulterated and earthly goodness (HC 75, OR 82). Only he was able to perform good works and retain the quality of goodness. Consider, too, the impossibility of human testimony and witness to good works: a lover of goodness is inherently a lonely figure, and consequently a religious figure. Only God can witness good works and only God can tame the loneliness found in a life apart from other persons (HC 76). Whether Arendt intends it, she depicts goodness as a phenomenon that transcends human capacity and action, seemingly yearning for other-worldly instantiation and recognition in order to create, at last, a theological permanence. But this testimony, as Arendt points out, can only be writ by a providential hand.

Arendt presents an insightful if puzzling picture of goodness. Her discussion of it unintentionally uncovers an ontological structure. In this case, it has both human and divine aspects that, while rooting it to and threading it through human realms, release it from human agency and control. Goodness is an upsurge of transcendental yearning to reveal our selves as good. For Arendt, the story of Jesus of Nazareth reveals that our love for goodness is nourished by our inability to achieve it: “no man can be good” (HC

⁴ Billy Budd is Arendt’s other ideal type for goodness. However, Jesus of Nazareth’s divinity seems to lie in the fact that he never displays an inclination for violence or cruelty. Humanity seemingly adds this characteristic. Jesus of Nazareth will reappear later in the chapter in his relationship to forgiveness, an Arendtian political virtue. Strangely, as will also be explored, we can know Billy Budd’s and Jesus’ goodness because individual biographies can be exemplary. Arendt continually makes allowances for goodness’ public appearance, suggesting that her constructed ontology is both inescapable and unsatisfactory.
75). And its transcendental inclinations and its impermanence actively negate “the space

the world offers to men” (HC 77). Goodness, despite the fact that it publicly appears and

carries the same boundlessness as any other human action, is a reclusive and destructive

phenomenon because of its anonymity. It exceeds human agency, judgment, and control

because, in Arendt’s hands, it takes on a vitality of its own; the author does not hide

goodness, for example, it hides itself. Goodness is both of us and outside of us, strangely

located in a “no-man’s land” despite its ability to ricochet through public and private

realms. Hence Arendt deems it “super-human” and casts it out of life’s activities.

Billy Budd emerges in On Revolution as the story that connects goodness to

compassion. Arendt focuses on those characteristics that compassion shares with

goodness – neither are compatible with speech, both are deformed when they enter the

public realm, and neither can be extended beyond a single person or instance without

also becoming some other phenomenon, e.g. goodness becomes charity or compassion

becomes pity. But Arendt’s typical carefulness in distinguishing between terms is not

evident in these passages. The two terms twist and twine around each other as Arendt

moves between discussing them as well as pity and other passions, creating compelling

if slightly muddied visions of goodness’ and compassion’s propensities to sour political

goals. She partly explains the overlap and difficulty by asserting that the French

revolutionaries were haunted by the “problem of good and evil” at a time when they

“were asserting or reasserting human dignity without any resort to institutionalized

religion. But the depth of this problem could hardly be sounded by those who mistook

for goodness the natural, ‘innate repugnance of man to see his fellow creatures suffer’

(Rousseau), and who thought that selfishness and hypocrisy were the epitome of

wickedness” (OR 81). Arendt blames Rousseau and his heirs for the slippage in

distinctions when, believing in natural goodness, they began to equate it with
selflessness in action in order to avoid “evil” or “wickedness.” Yet this explanation does not seem to help Arendt’s own difficulties in keeping the pair cleanly and clearly distinct. Certainly we can agree that goodness is not compassion. A person might be “good” but callous towards another individual; likewise a compassionate person need not be “good” at all. Arendt certainly emphasizes this latter situation, and we do well to keep sympathetic impulses or reactions separate from virtue or other such practices rooted in “goodness.”

Importantly neither goodness nor compassion can speak articulately, debate dispassionately, or engage in any kind of speech around political and public interests. Goodness in *Billy Budd* ⁵“‘stammers’ and cannot make itself heard or understood” (OR 83). Billy cannot disarm an advancing threat through persuasion and argument; his only recourse is violence: he strikes that threat dead. Arendt momentarily grants that compassion and passion, or the ability to suffer and to endure (OR 95), are “not speechless” like absolute goodness, but she then asserts:

> [T]heir language consists in gestures and expressions of countenance rather than words...their incapacity (or unwillingness) for all kinds of predicative or argumentative speech, in which someone talks to somebody about something that is of interest to both because it inter-est, it is between them. Such talkative and argumentative interest in the world is entirely alien to compassion, which is directed solely, and with passionate intensity, towards suffering man himself; compassion speaks only to the extent that it has to reply directly to the sheer expressionist sound and gestures through which suffering becomes audible and visible in the world. (OR 86)

Speech-acts based in compassion or passion are not speech-acts that reveal who a person is because of this reliance on “gestures and expressions of countenance.” The very language by which compassion expresses itself is mute predominantly; its alphabet and phrases are built out of the shaking of heads and limbs and the subtle movements of

⁵ For an insightful alternative reading of “stuttering,” see Peter Euben’s “What Good is Innocence: Billy Budd in The Bacchae” (2009). Euben considers the role of stuttering in relationship to power – what situations of power causes us to stutter – and how stuttering relates to silence.
eyes and mouths. Compassion may not stutter but neither does it speak the language of politics. Its language and its focus are too intensely directed “towards suffering man himself,” responding directly to speechless suffering by, itself, silently gesturing. Its narrow focus on “suffering man,” not on a world held in common, means that compassion will not be able to reach beyond this moment or this person. Its reactions are bound to alleviating misery, not to fabricating a world in common.

Compassion, for Arendt, is an intensely singular incident that brackets itself from the world at large. Even its capacity to become “talkative” occurs in private and personal space. It is in the “sphere of intimacy,” which Rousseau uncovered and which then became important in forming the modern sensibility, that “compassion became talkative, as it were, since it came to serve, together with the passions and the suffering, as a stimulus for the vitality of the newly discovered range of emotions” (OR 88). Compassion’s loquacity is tethered to speaking about and exploring human emotions. Even here it cannot disclose the world because its speech is not predicative and it is not concerned with gathering people around interests. Compassion made intimate and thus garrulous is akin to the phenomenon of love – it relies on an open, receptive, and disclosing heart and it demands privacy to flourish. The matters discussed are matters of the heart, an exchange between persons that reveals the pitter-patter of emotions, which Arendt considers universal in their appearance, but not the people in distinction. And

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6 This reading of Arendt questions whether we can agree with Biskowski’s (1993) description of action as untethered to politics. He writes, “One can certainly reveal through word and deed who one is in the close, intimate circle of one’s friends. Indeed, in the modern world, this is the only arena where most individuals feel comfortable doing so” (877). When we combine Arendt’s comments on privacy with her discussion of intimacy and Rousseau, then we see that disclosure, if it is to have any “objectivity” or “reality,” must occur among strangers as well as friends. Circles of friends can as easily mirror each other as can family members: “Compared with the reality which comes from being seen and heard, even the greatest forces of intimate life – the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses – lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of reality unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance” (HC 50). The “casual, familiar presence of one’s equals or inferiors” will not provide a space for individual excellence and distinction (HC 49).
unlike love, compassion builds negative relationships that are based on the immediacy of suffering.

Were such a compassion to enter the public realm it would turn that realm into a highly intimate realm, one based on the expression of sentiments and not on the deliberation of interests. The public realm would be occluded by the radical collapse of critical distance between people, strange or otherwise (OR 86-87). Consequently compassion actually facilitates the transformation of a public realm into the social because it elevates and, in fact, relies on, personal needs being expressed and addressed. The world is not only bracketed, but it is also displaced. Speech, if there is any, is not about a “worldly objective reality” but a specific private (and negative) experience. As a result, compassion can neither constitute nor reveal the world and its agents. Arendt deems it “politically speaking, irrelevant and without consequence. Melville determines that it is incapable of establishing ‘lasting institutions’ (OR 87). Like biological rhythms of the body and labor, the only kind of “permanence” that compassion might achieve is the cadence of human suffering. It is unable to transverse space and time because the only transcendence it gains is sublimated into a life cycle.

Compassion’s inability to deliberate and its demolition of inter-est, and subsequently worldly space, between people combine to create a dangerous situation in which violence thrives. As Billy Budd himself demonstrates, goodness is compatible with violence and it shares “with ‘elemental evil’ the elementary violence inherent in all strength and detrimental to all forms of political organization” (ibid). Indeed, goodness

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7 For Arendt, an element of violence is inevitable when humans “confront nature directly” in order to make and construct the material world (BPF 111). However, this violence is not directed towards other humans. She illustrates this point by examining Machiavelli, often cited as allowing politics of any sort in order to achieve a certain goal. “When [Machiavelli] insists that in the public-political realm men ‘should know how not to be good,’ he of course never meant that they should learn how to be evil,” explains Arendt, “The truth is only that he opposed both concepts of the good which we find in our tradition: the Greek concept of the ‘good for’ or fitness, and the Christian concept of an absolute goodness which is not of this world” (BPF 137).
even speaks through violence. Its strength is incompatible with Arendt’s sense of power and, consequently, it cannot draw humans together in concerted action without incorporating violence. Neither can compassion avoid this danger.

As a rule, it is not compassion which sets out to change worldly conditions in order to ease human suffering, but if it does, it will shun the drawn-out wearsome 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. (ibid)

Compassion cannot speak publicly without gesture. For Arendt, then, compassion can ameliorate suffering only by directly responding to it, lending “voice” to “suffering itself” by reacting violently. This tendency had dire consequences in the French Revolution.

Arendt believes that, like goodness and unlike principles like freedom, compassion is transformed when it publicly appears. It either acts out violently or its appearance is suspected of hypocrisy. Problematically, compassion is distracting, securing public attention on questions of “truth” or “motivations” rather than outcomes or consequences of political actions. “However deeply heartfelt a motive may be, once it is brought out and exposed for public inspection it becomes an object of suspicion rather than insight,” asserts Arendt, “…the motives behind such deeds and words are destroyed in their essence through appearance; when they appear they become ‘mere appearances’ behind which again other, ulterior motives may lurk, such as hypocrisy and deceit” (OR 96). Motives, intentions, and even hoped-for-consequences need to remain in the privacy of the heart for Arendt; all are too easily manipulated for rhetorical purposes or they are too easily questioned on the basis of their “purity” or “accuracy.” Compassion and goodness divert attention from serious political questions and they concentrate attention on issues fogged with hypocrisy, deceit, or manipulation. We trade in facts for a hazy realm of “appearances.”
More than this, compassion and goodness focus on singular persons and situations. If either compassion or goodness extend beyond the particular, then they are no longer what they claim to be: compassion transforms into pity and goodness into non-goodness. The Grand Inquisitor’s and Robespierre’s “sin” is that their attraction to the people was inseparable from “lust from power” and they “depersonalized the sufferers, lumped them together into an aggregate... To Dostoevski, the sign of Jesus’s divinity was his ability to have compassion with all men in their singularity, that is, without lumping them together into some such entity as one suffering mankind” (OR 85). Once compassion loses its focus on a singular person, it devolves into pity. Arendt defines pity as being “sorry without being touched in the flesh” (ibid). Pity has the capacity of reaching into “the marketplace” and of reaching out to the “multitude” because pity does not share compassion’s sentimentality (OR 89). Pity requires misfortune in order to exist and, “by virtue of being a sentiment, pity can be enjoyed for its own sake, and this will almost automatically lead to a glorification of its cause, which is the suffering of others” (ibid). Pity is also loquacious; unlike compassion’s rhetorical reticence, pity can both speak and persuade people (OR 85). This is, in part, because pity retains distance between speaker and listener, between sufferer and the witness of that suffering.

Once compassion was introduced into French Revolutionary politics, it swiftly became pity because it lacked direction and specificity. The “ocean of suffering” that Robespierre and his fellow revolutionaries encountered “drowned all specific considerations, the considerations of friendship no less than considerations of statecraft and principle” (OR 89-90). Pity overwhelmed the political actors, affecting their judgments about politics as well as their personal relationships. It is this “boundlessness” that Arendt cites as contributing to the revolutionaries’ insensitivity to
either “reality in general” or to “persons in particular” (OR 90). Pity revealed its capacity for a cruelty greater than “cruelty itself,” especially as it became conflated with “selflessness:”

What counted here, in this great effort of a general human solidarization, was selflessness, the capacity to lose oneself in the sufferings of others, rather than active goodness, and what appeared most odious and even most dangerous was selfishness rather than wickedness...The magic of compassion was that it opened the heart of the sufferer to the sufferings of others, whereby it established and confirmed the ‘natural’ bond between men which only the rich had lost...Selfishness was a kind of ‘natural’ depravity. If Rousseau had introduced compassion into political theory, it was Robespierre who brought it on to the market-place with the vehemence of his great revolutionary oratory. (OR 81)

Arendt uncovers a strange psychological logic in the revolutionaries. Revolutionaries, believing that Rousseau’s remarks about compassion meant that only those living simply, in this case the multitude of impoverished people, had maintained their “natural” capacity for compassion, glorified compassion as the civic virtue. Compassion, by Arendt’s understanding, automatically devolves into pity when it becomes public and enters the marketplace. Consequently pity, not compassion, was nurtured. If one was not already suffering, e.g. was not already poor, then the best means of achieving this civic virtue was selflessness. Personal interests and cares were secondary to the interests of the whole; conversely, holding fast to personal interests implied that one was selfish. In the revolutionary logic, such a person was not virtuous or good. Selflessness and pity absconded the particular self and, rather than cultivating active goodness, set loose the dangerous characteristics of pity – in other words, it set loose mute violence.

Despite the fact that compassion and pity appear as two sides of the same coin, their relationship is not clear. Arendt admits that goodness and compassion are related phenomenon but she denies this familiarity to compassion and pity; the two, she says, “may not even be related” (OR 85). What might this remark mean for compassion and pity? More pointedly, if compassion and pity are not even related, will compassion always and necessarily devolve into pity if it is made loquacious, public, or virtuous?
Arendt defines pity as the “sentiment which corresponds to the passion of compassion” (OR 88) and considers pity as sentimentally distant; a pitying person is not “stricken in the flesh” (OR 89). That compassion is a passion whose “naturalness” is not denied by Arendt and that pity is one of its sentiments suggests that compassion might be multidimensional, extending deeper and broader than its appearance in the world and, perhaps, taking on more than one form. Pity might be a sentiment but it is not the sentiment, meaning that compassion might appear in or as other sentiments like forgiveness. Unfortunately, Arendt does not explore this possibility.

The fact that compassion is inherently incapable of political action has not deterred its advocates. Arendt analyzes the French Revolution in order to demonstrate the deleterious affects of a compassionate politics, particularly if the polity is set on founding its political realm anew. According to Arendt, compassion defines public happiness as freedom from deprivation, and it usurps political freedom and self-actualization. Political pity replaces political goals with social goals and nurtures mass uniformity. This focus turns violent because sentiments and biological needs, not reason’s clear voice, overwhelm the populace. A “general will” emerges among the “masses” – fulfilling what Arendt considers as Rousseau’s misguided political vision – such that people behave under the dictates of absolute morals rather than act in independent judgment and interests. For now it is important to note that Arendt blames Rousseau for much of the modern transformation. According to her, Rousseau’s writings unearth compassion’s role in human nature, bequeathing it as a “natural”

8 Arendt’s refusal to define the terms beyond “passion” or “sentiment” adds to the difficulty of parsing this relationship.
9 Chiba draws similar implications from On Revolution when she examines the role of sentimental love in Arendt’s works. Sentimental love, like compassion: 1) sentimental love, prone to passionate bias, is harmful to the political world; 2) friendship is not necessarily sentimental and is compatible with solidarity; 3) for an inner attitude to be political it must partake of reason and generality and deal dispassionately with what is common and public (1995, 510). However, Chiba does not explore fully the role of society or of Rousseau.
10 This subject will be explored more fully later.
phenomenon and implicitly linking it with goodness, and explore the political capacity to develop a “general will” such that particular interests align with the general interest. That these two aspects lead to a mass depicted by their urgent biological needs, emotional instability, and violent proclivity affirms for Arendt that Rousseau’s work is dangerous and wrong. If Arendt’s hope for politics is dashed when just one of these outcomes occur then it certainly cannot withstand the onslaught of all. Compassion is not only incompatible with politics; it is detrimental to it.

The French Revolution drastically erred in focusing on pity while also introducing the “social question,” the question of when and by what means poverty can be eradicated in the polity (OR 23, 92). The social question elevated the pitied over the pitying and sought an elusive and illusory solidarity between people and classes. Pity and poverty both fixate a person on bodily needs and emotions, decimating plurality and political judgment by creating a single-purposed, univocal multitude. And both transformed action’s nature, limiting action’s ability to reveal the actor spontaneously and without subterfuge. Finally Arendt believes that the Revolution rewrote the Rights of Man, transforming it from a source of political power to “natural rights” based on biological needs, upon the “right to the necessities of life” (OR 109). These rights were understood as both the content and the goal of government and power. Unfortunately, every attempt to solve social questions with political means leads to violence and terror, especially when mass poverty defines the majority of the population. 

“The social,” which Arendt loosens from colloquial or familiar definitions and sharply critiques throughout her writings, comes to define “a collectivity of people who, though they are interdependent and active – their doings therefore continually shaping

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11 Arendt conveniently ignores numerous counter-examples to her claim, such as the non-violent labor rights work led by Cesar Chavez or the work of numerous Civil Rights activists, including Ella Baker, Medgar Evers, the Freedom Riders, or Martin Luther King, Jr.
the conditions under which they all live – behave individually in ways that preclude coordinated action, so that they cannot (or at any rate do not) take charge of what they are doing in the world” (Pitkin 196).\footnote{Pitkin’s thorough analysis of the social in \textit{The Attack of the Blob} is an insightful and helpful book for anyone trying to better understand the lineage and use of the social in Arendt’s thought.} Arendt associates the rise of society with the rise of the household, meaning that forms of housekeeping, and its attendant concern in meeting biological and physiological needs, moved beyond the household borders into politics. Society organized itself around mutual dependence for “sheer survival” (HC 46), an arrangement mirroring the economic market itself. Society also classifies and ranks people according to arbitrary categories.\footnote{The arbitrariness of the categories cannot be understated, especially as this chapter moves into its discussion of compassion. We will find just how dangerous this classification is, particularly when it is linked to participation in the public realm. Yet there seems to be some tension in how we ought to understand the resulting ranks. Arendt writes that, “with the emergence of mass society, the realm of the social has finally…reached the point where it embraces and controls all members of a given community equally and with equal strength” (HC 41). This comment is contrary to later writings, most especially her Lessing Address, that considers how certain groups bear the burden of ascriptive categories.} Feeling the need to conform, people seek status over distinction. The best means of achieving a high(er) status is to behave, to act according to “innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to ‘normalize’ its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous action or outstanding achievement” (HC 40).

In Arendt’s terms, the social is deleterious for politics and privacy. Arendt notes that large-scale conformism combined with dense and large populations almost inevitably turn despotic (HC 43). Any “politics” that results from the social’s growth is one contrary to human freedom, agency, and togetherness because the social deliberately hampers individual flourishing and elevates the activities of human survival. Pitkin describes the social as “politics manqué, the absence of politics in a context where politics is possible and desirable” (1998, 182). If we hope to retain any form of “excellence,” with its attendant possibilities for human relationships, then we must ardently strive to (re-)secure the private and public realms.
Arendt asserts that human life requires a “world which directly or indirectly testifies to the presence of other human beings” (*HC* 22), and the public realm provides that testimony. The public realm, culled out of a world created by human activity, \(^{14}\) is a defined space dedicated to appearing, speaking, and acting before and with strangers, acquaintances, and friends who come from different social locations. It relies on the plurality of humankind such that multiple people can congregate around “a world of things” held in common, “as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time. The public realm, as the common world, gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other, so to speak” (*HC* 52). This assemblage creates a dynamic and agonistic realm in which people contest and converse, spontaneously revealing whom each is through opinion, speech, actions, and mannerisms. It also constitutes an “objectivity” not found in the private household.

Public relationships, crafted around shared interests, gain texture through the interweaving of individual actions and discourse.

Since this disclosure of the subject is an integral part of all, even the most ‘objective’ intercourse, the physical, worldly in-between along with its interests is overlaid and, as it were, overgrown with an altogether different in-between which consists of deeds and words and owes its origin exclusively to men’s acting and speaking directly to one another...But for all its intangibility, this in-between is no less real than the world of things we visibly have in common. We call this reality the ‘web’ of human relationships, indicating by the metaphor its somewhat intangible quality. (*HC* 183)

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\(^{14}\) A human world, fabricated through activities, requires durability and permanence that extends beyond a single generation. Arendt calls this capability transcendence, yet she also implies that it is transversal, that is, it spans space and time. For something to be fixed beyond its founding generation, it must hold a location over time. This distinction is important since, as we will see, other phenomena like goodness are transcendental but not transversal. Interestingly, Arendt rarely comments on either how a phenomenon is immanent or rooted. She speaks more on the public realm’s roots, referring to the depth achieved through organized and shared remembrance (*HC* 95). Depth in human in human life is achieved via memory, through storytelling that threads and binds a polity’s events and its great biographies to its transversal transcendence much in the same way that a vine wounds its stake as it grows ever higher. Her inattention to immanence will be explored in-depth in the chapter on Merleau-Ponty.
Into this web falls the disclosure of unique acting selves, whose actions create reactions and stimulate consequences both immediate to and distant from the initial act. Arendt is adamant that human revelation – the disclosure of who a person is, which is primarily relayed in stories as to her actions and mannerisms, rather than what she is, known through ascriptive characteristics like religion, occupation, race, or gender – occurs only when people are “with others and neither for nor against them- that is, in sheer togetherness” (HC 180). “Excellence” is that flash of originality that asserts itself publicly while acting and speaking and that refuses to be named.

Individual excellence and distinction is eclipsed in a politics that focuses its revolution on poverty-alleviation. Arendt terms poverty a “dehumanizing force” that puts people “under the absolute dictate of their bodies, that is, under their most intimate experiences and outside all speculations” (OR 60), which is itself a “constant state of change whose movements are automatic, independent of our own activities, and irresistible – i.e. of an overwhelming urgency” (OR 59). Poverty casts a person into darkness where, without “public light,” there is also no ability to appear distinct and equal (OR 48, 69). Consequently poverty breeds a particular kind of subordination: either suffering eventually succumbs to rage, an emotional response that overpowers individual judgment, or it yokes choice and agency to the body’s automation. In both instances humans are subject to their emotional and physiological bodies; they are enslaved to their non-thinking, uncontrollable selves.

The poor “burst onto the scene” (OR 60, 91) and their needs were urgent and pre-political: they were intent on liberation from their private condition. The widespread urgency of this need unified the masses by eliminating individual distinctions and universalizing one need combined with one emotion. Hence, when this concern became the singular desire of the Revolution as well as its sole end, the multitude – “the factual
plurality of a nation or a people or a society” – gained “the image of one supernatural body driven by one superhuman, irresistible ‘general will’” (OR 60). This “superhuman” multitude pulsed with shared emotions.

The political trouble which misery of the people holds in store is that manyness can in fact assume the guise of oneness, that suffering indeed breeds moods and emotions and attitudes that resemble solidarity to the point of confusion, and that – last, not least, pity for the many is easily confounded with compassion for one person when the ‘compassionate zeal’ (le zele compatisant) can fasten upon an object whose oneness seems to fulfill the prerequisites of compassion, while its immensity, at the same time, corresponds to the boundlessness of sheer emotion. (emphasis added, OR 94)

Individuals were united but the solidarity that emerged was an illusion created by the overwhelming synthesis of need and emotions. Confusion abounded, coupled with the firm belief that they, the multitude, could receive compassion. Arendt previously proved that compassion cannot be aggregated, and the multitude exacerbated pity’s development because their synchronized emotions were both overwhelming and boundless.

Compassion became the political means to unite the elite with the uniform mass. Robespierre, applying what he learned from Rousseau, found “natural goodness” in the lower classes. If elites did not possess natural goodness by virtue of their class and their role in society, then they could emulate that goodness by sympathizing with the masses (OR 79, 106). Liberating the poor and emphasizing their natural capacity for goodness and compassion was intended to morally cleanse a decadent polity. Robespierre believed Rousseau’s claim that all people contained a “natural” capacity for compassion. Pity was employed as a political virtue because it both united the upper class with the lower class and provided a common ground for action.

But Arendt’s critique is sharper still: pity’s real difficulty was how it operated as a moral absolute, and consequently transformed into selflessness, with repercussions attached to class. That Rousseau offers a different sense of pity, one replete with
distinction as well as self-care, will be explored in the next chapter. The only norm that the Revolution offered its populace – “Appear selfless!” – rests on a series of presumptions that inhibit individual particularity and community discourse. It relies on a sweeping generalization that all poor people are good whereas all elite members of society are bad by virtue of participating in society. It uncritically elevates the poor as a moral and uncorrupt population. Dictating that “natural” compassion be reinvigorated in the body politic locked the polity into a narrow set of parameters in which people could act and speak (OR 82, 84). Disagreement and conversation stopped and the ability to respond to changing situations or to work towards different policies deteriorated (MDT 27, 30). For Arendt and Lessing, any kind of “truth” is humanized through human conversation, where each person communicates what he deems “truth.” Just as there is no single truth in the human world there can be no single absolute\textsuperscript{15} – both spell doom to politics and humanism, a diagnosis with which Merleau-Ponty agrees.

But compassion’s absolutism materialized itself in action as well. The revolutionaries can be charged with \textit{behaving} rather than acting. Hannah Pitkin defines behavior as habitual and rule-governed, where thoughtless denial of responsibility for either the world or one’s own actions enforces a sense of isolation, a desire for social status, and a need to conform to whatever is uniform or conventional (1998, 181-82). Action is a creative and spontaneous endeavor that relies on flexible prudence, is guided by principles, and, though particular to the individual, tends towards working with others in order to form the world (\textit{ibid}). Action is precisely what behavior is not; it is “genuinely, competently taking responsibility for one’s conduct, its consequences, and the norms and standards that govern it” (\textit{ibid}). The politics of pity and selflessness is a

\textsuperscript{15} Good and evil, when made absolute, spell the same consequences to politics and discourse. Arendt believes that Melville and Dostoyevsky both depict how “absolute goodness is any less dangerous than absolute evil, for surely the Grand Inquisitor is selfless enough, and that it is beyond virtue, even the virtue of Captain Vere” (OR 82).
politics in which personal responsibility was abdicated. Revolutionaries concerned themselves with appearing virtuous, appearing selfless, and relinquished their capacities to either act outside of social dictates or determine the ill affects of their actions.

Pity exacerbates an absolute’s effects because of how it is embedded in the physical body. Compassion’s passion and pity’s sentiment engage the psycho-emotional aspects of a person, and both occur as a “natural” spontaneous dictate that disengages or overrides reason. Our inability to control compassion and reign in how it infects our emotions and judgments demonstrates just how terrifying its non-discriminatory characteristic is for politics. That one can feel compassion for a criminal as much as for his victim demonstrates compassion’s inability to discern whether a person merits sympathy. When compassion or pity functions as absolute it is difficult, if possible at all, to judge good or bad actions and their consequences or to determine how to react to new developments. As a result, pity enforces behavior. Compassion also seeks to eliminate boundaries between people. Without borders, Arendt fears, people are more susceptible to establish a norm as a rule, strictly and blindly obeyed. Individual discernment and agency are discouraged, if not subverted by compassion’s public role. And, as Arendt demonstrates, it amasses the individuals it tries to aggregate. Compassion will always devolve into selflessness, pity, and violence when it enters the public realm in Arendt’s depiction.

Robespierre’s public pity deteriorated into selflessness as elites clamored to regain political and moral ground. Robespierre presumed that the interests of the whole are automatically contrary to an individual’s interests after he read Rousseau’s Social Contract (OR 79). Elites, seeking to counter their “corrupt” characterization and appear as good, subverted their individual interests to the “general will.” Deliberation ceased further because people believed that a policy’s value was determined by how well it
contradicted individual concerns and because elites wished to appear as selfless. Selflessness was sought with a single-mindedness that cut off multiple, agonistic voices and resounded with a strange univocality. More problematically for Arendt, this univocality was guided by the mass’ sense of indignation and rage at their miserable condition. It was guided by suffering. As a result, selflessness led to two dilemmas for the French: first, the general desire to look selfless led to hypocrisy and, second, the direction of the Revolution was not decided deliberatively and reasonably but out of biological needs that were highly emotional and couched in the terms of rights.

The emergence of selflessness, or of sacrificing individual interest and concern to a common one, created a politics wrought with hypocrisy. The political actor who appears compassionate is distrustful. Arendt writes,

> Whenever his heartfelt patriotism or his ever-suspicious virtue were displayed in public, they were no longer principles upon which to act or motives by which to be inspired; they had degenerated into mere appearances and had become part of a show...the search for motives, the demand that everybody display in public his innermost motivation, since it actually demands the impossible, transforms all actors into hypocrites; the moment the display of motives begins, hypocrisy begins to poison all human relations. (OR 97-98)

Seeking to accomplish the impossible – to reveal inner motivations in a manner that is neither misunderstood nor disingenuous – the revolutionaries achieved only what Arendt believes is possible: that such revelations, even if “authentic” or “accurate,” are misconstrued as something other than what they are, disbelieved, and condemned as hypocritical, deceitful, or illusory. Human actions no longer reveal the person unwittingly; they become doctored charades that suggest farce and manipulation. In such an atmosphere, human relationships cannot withstand the weight of illusion nor can they be nurtured through shared experience; even if relationships emerged, those relationships would be “poisoned” (Biskowski 1993, 883). Humans, no longer able to trust that the people with whom they interact and create their world, can no longer trust the validity of their public world.
Selflessness also created a situation in which the Revolution’s direction was determined by the masses, who surrendered reasonable judgment and conscious action to irresistible and uncontrollable bodily forces. Arendt depicts the French poor as driven by two insatiable and irresistible forces: biological needs and emotions. That the poor joined to form a singly focused multitude is due to these bodily forces that tend more towards automatism than to spontaneity or consciously controlled action. That the French people have always carried the “connotation of a multiheaded monster, a mass that moves as one body and acts as though possessed by one will” (OR 94) supports the especially virulent mass movement seen in the French Revolution. What Arendt finds terrifying, however, is that agency and individual distinction are swept under an uncontrollable mass; a republic cannot found freedom without clear-headed, thoughtful actions and discursive citizens. The general will that overpowered diverse particular wills was a particularly un-free one.

On its face, this phenomenon seems paradoxical. On one hand you have a mass that is defined by its inability to control its actions: it is a mass enchained by the need to survive and by oscillating emotions that emerge out of their misery. Yet it is also a mass that “moves as one body and acts as though possessed by one will.” Presumably, this ability to act in concert suggests some sense of agency unless the mass is affected by some super-emotional force that, akin to a virus, infects the populace and ensures that the individual moods adjust for a consistent appearance.16 Arendt’s goal here, however, is not to resolve the riddle of a “multiheaded monster;” it is to illustrate how dangerous the loss of individual distinction is. The elevation of social issues over political questions and the determination to solve those problems politically rather than administratively

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16 This latter possibility – a super-emotional contagion – is not that far-fetched given some work on empathy and the role of mirror neurons in producing similar reactions in dissimilar people (list). It also comports to how Arendt depicts compassion in the body itself.
placed the French Revolutionaries in a difficult situation. This difficult situation became
dangerous when Robespierre began preaching the “natural goodness” of the
impoverished masses and calling for a selfless virtue that sympathized with suffering.
Robespierre let loose a fury, rhetorically empowered by the fact that the “natural right”
to security and basic needs had not yet been secured by the French.

Violence was an inescapable outcome to Arendt. Conditions of poverty intensify
violence because poverty exaggerates suffering, which inevitably bursts into rage when
it has exhausted its endurance. The suffering multitude in the French Revolution was
substantial, and they now believed that freedom included a right to food, clothing, and
other basic necessities. Yet their rage was triggered “only when ‘the compassionate zeal’
of the revolutionaries – of Robespierre, probably, more than of anybody else – began to
glorify this suffering…the course of the Revolution depended upon the release of the
force inherent in suffering, upon the force of delirious rage” (OR 111). A rage made
heroic in its motivation enabled the masses to commit violent atrocities against other
citizens. Importantly, Arendt describes the multitude as powerless in controlling its rage
or force. Like pity, these sentiments overpower rational deliberation and prudent action
but are funneled into raging violence. Their furious indignation strengthened when the
revolutionaries championed selflessness, and subjugated individual interests to the
whims of “common interest” while altering action’s form.17

At the bottom of Arendt’s critique of compassion in On Revolution are her fears:
the fear that the public realm will be occluded by the social, that humans will lose their

17 This depiction of the multitude and its focus on the “social question” corresponds to Hannah Pitkin’s own
conclusions about how Arendt considers “the social.” After extensive inquiry in The Attack of the Blob, Pitkin
defines the social as “a collectivity of people who – for whatever reason – conduct themselves in such a way
that they cannot control or even intentionally influence the large-scale consequences of their actions” (1998,
16). The populace and the revolutionaries in the French Revolution can be charged with an inability to
control or influence their actions in a reasonable and agential manner, a consequence of Rousseau and his
writings on pity, human nature, and politics.
capacities to think clearly and to act responsibly with an eye towards potential consequences, and that deliberation will fall prey to uniformity encouraged and enlarged by a moral absolute that dictates behavior, limits discord, and facilitates isolation. In *On Revolution* pity becomes a moral absolute that was advocated because Robespierre and his peers believed that it would limit the amount of and kinds of violence done to the populace. Pity, nearly miraculously, would solve the problem of suffering and nurture common interests between otherwise disparate classes. Unfortunately compassion had the opposite outcome. It increased violence and fueled that violence with rage. It not only failed in forging a relationship between elites and the poor but it demolished all human relations by introducing hypocrisy, limiting individual distinction and interests, and muting public discourse. And the “morality” associated with compassion proved that it was not “good.” Arendt’s critique of compassion is not contained to revolutionary times. Rather, her critique concerns the kinds of relationships we establish in our polities and how well those relationships enhance our “humanizing” capacities, i.e. how well our potential for distinction, deliberation, and action are cultivated.

Arendt’s critique contains a siren’s call, convincing in its belief that any recuperative project for compassion is ill-conceived. But some tensions remain within her account, circulating here around her depiction of compassion and goodness within her ideal types. As Arendt argues in *On Revolution*, the context into which an “ideal” or a principle materializes matters. While Arendt believes that compassion is doomed to failure whenever it enters the political arena, this outcome is intensified in the Revolution’s extreme conditions of poverty, the attendant urges for basic survival, and its highly divided society. Examining the overall context in which Arendt’s ideal types are situated modifies her depiction of compassion as well as its related possibilities for
political negotiation and responsibility.\textsuperscript{18} Had Arendt considered more greatly the context of either \textit{Billy Budd} or “The Grand Inquisitor” she would have found a humanly fallible but workable compassion and goodness whose texture counters her depiction’s flatness and enhances her notions of judgment, responsibility, and storytelling.

To support her analysis of compassion, Arendt turns to three “ideal types:” Melville’s Billy Budd, Dostoyevsky’s Grand Inquisitor, and Jesus of Nazareth. The first exemplifies “natural goodness” as found in human form, the second warps “evil” and “power” into a form of sympathy, and the third is compassion’s sole “pure” manifestation, accomplished only because Jesus is divine. Each example has its moral.

Billy Budd, a gentle, beatific man whose goodness appears like naiveté, is hung because his response to evil’s threats is to strike that evil dead. Even goodness contains violence, and its righteous anger is inevitably mute aggression. The Grand Inquisitor so loves humanity – he is, perhaps, too sympathetic to an aggregated and anonymous mass – that he curtails human freedom and agency. Beware the person who attempts to expand compassion’s reach beyond the individual and the singular; hints of Robespierre’s sin lie here. Jesus of Nazareth emerges as the only person who can achieve goodness and compassion without reverting to antagonism or hypocrisy. Compassion and goodness are either improbable or corrupted and hypocritical. Divinity is required for human sentimental undertakings if the worst consequences are to be avoided. Arendt’s choices are fascinating studies but they are singular and specific. Expanding the scope of inquiry shows a complicated, more politically pertinent compassion.

Arendt’s reading of \textit{Billy Budd} overlooks the tension between individual judgment and an unyielding institutional authority. When the emotional strains are

\textsuperscript{18} This argument with Arendt only covers one of her three major critiques of compassion – its relative muteness and ability to engage in concrete action. Her other critiques – whether publicity perverts it or hypocrisy inevitably results – will be examined in detail in later chapters.
removed from the situation – when all that matters is the law’s dictates and compliance – then the line between “fact” and “fiction,” between “truth” and “appearance” darkens: here “deliberation” serves as an empty signifier, moral identities are risked. “War looks but to the frontage, the appearance” (emphasis added, Melville 2006, 65). With its overtones of Christ, hanging Billy Budd serves as the example for order and expediency. The
King’s law is above conscience; the individual is sacrificed for the good of the whole; and, when some boards and a mast form the coordinates of one’s world, simplicity is prized more than complexity. Captain Vere’s drumhead court is a façade. More responsible to the King’s authority than to “nature” or individual agency, Vere effectively nullifies robust deliberation about choice, consequence, and compassion and limits action and “truth” in the process. Action here is not “boundless;” it falls flat as though, upon being cast heavenward, it encounters a glass cloche that stops its movement and deadens its liveliness. As if testifying to its chains Billy Budd’s story reverses expectation and reveals that “truth” is best delivered by “fiction;” the narrator’s account, arguably the most trust-worthy and accurate, is a “story;” a mate, recalling “that face never deformed by a sneer or a subtler vile freak of the heart within” (Melville 2006, 84), recasts him in a ballad; and the public record, applauding Claggert, is more fabrication than “fact.” An act falters – its “truth” falters – when it is constrained by something like a categorical imperative; its moral heart weakens.

That Captain Vere is haunted by his decision is detailed in the story. He is plagued by the intuition that something has gone awry; that “right” is, in fact, “wrong” and that “nature” refuses to surrender to staid authority. Excluding compassion in order to follow a specific dictate does not deliver solace.¹⁹ One senses that Vere is caught

¹⁹ Cameron and Payne (2012) demonstrate that regulating compassion creates a cognitive dissonance about moral identity. Vere, unable to follow his own moral sensibility that counseled compassion, was also unable
between two competing ethical claims – compassion and authority – that cannot be resolved without also wounding his moral integrity and self-identity. Melville puts pressure on the ability of Kantian ethics, of a categorical imperative that operates universally and speaks univocally, to find remedies for contemporary conundrums while emphasizing the personal and public hazards of eradicating compassion.

In so doing, Melville questions whether Arendt is correct that compassion-free friendship and solidarity can withstand “political facts” and laws that circumscribe human action, liberty, and realization. Goodness has an energetic quality – how else to explain Billy’s magnetism for otherwise hardened and stoic men? Arendt overlooks this palpable quality of goodness, failing to see how goodness and compassion can intervene in dark times. Goodness incarnate is tangible, commanding a response to it that, in turn, generates the question of how one will greet or treat it. Do I respond to it or do I shun it? What are the consequences of “regulating” compassion and goodness? We see the effects on Vere personally; we note the reversals of “fact” and “fiction” in approximating “truth.” Vere’s struggle to act ethically – in the case, either compassionately or dispassionately – is but reformulation of a person caught in Kant’s net. Should he lie about the location of a person being chased by an angry mob or should he adhere to a maxim that makes him complicit in another man’s death? Kant would have us tell the truth; the Dalia Lama would not (1999, 153). Categorical imperatives are impervious to goodness’ and compassion’s charms; who is involved and affected matters little in determining how to act or react.

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to create moral flexibility in which he could justify and excuse his actions. As a result, he was less able to identify himself as moral. The resulting discomfort confesses itself on his deathbed.

20 For more on how this aspect of goodness functions, see Iris Murdoch, The Sovereignty of Good.
This who is important for Arendt, and she attempts to treasure and protect it through principles like solidarity and friendship. But it is doubtful that either of those phenomena influenced Vere. He had no logical reason to form a “political” or even “friendly” relationship with Billy; they had little in common, served in radically different posts, and had personal ends in conflict with each other – Billy to save his life, Vere to punish a guilty man. No, this particular response was a compassionate one, sparked by the understanding that goodness is sometimes naïve in its appearance and that goodness ought not be extinguished but nurtured. But one cannot begin considering how to nourish goodness, even when it strikes with deadly force, if one has little choice or if the persons affected matter little.

Incorporating compassion in conversations about policy, law, or administration has the potential of focusing debate on who is affected. For instance, the justice system’s ethos already reflects this understanding. With varying degrees of effectiveness, the degree of the crime and the appropriate punishment are scaled in consideration of the person and the context of actions. Politics similarly benefits when it recalls who is involved. Yes, there are competing interests and perspectives that make it difficult to determine who has greater political priority. But recognizing the validity and value in the opponent’s sentiment might destabilize the tendency to depict policy as a zero-sum game. Compromise here requires something more than solidarity, a term that presumes common interests; it also requires something more than non-intimate friendship. Rather it requires an energetic and empathic imagining of how a person radically different from one’s self might be specifically suffering under the weight of an inflexible law that simply categorizes one thing as “evil,” the other as “good.” It requires compassion.

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21 Though, as Euben (2009) insists, their differences does not mean that Vere and Claggert were not sexually drawn to Billy’s beauty.
22 Certainly the manner in which this ethos is carried out is highly variable and susceptible to cultural and individual bias or prejudice around “political facts” like race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, or class.
Compassion can generate flexible responses that care for both the person and the world.23

Likewise, Arendt’s focus on the Grand Inquisitor is unduly limited. It is understandable – the “Grand Inquisitor” is a fascinating “poem” constructed by Ivan Karamozov to help him question theology’s role in things like good and evil, suffering and compassion, and the nature of human freedom. But, while it may be Dostoyevsky’s best known and compelling examination, it is not his answer to the question of compassion and responsibility. For that we need to learn from a different character, one living in the pages with the flesh and blood of a developed character and who has struggled with the question of agency and goodness over the period of his life. Father Zosima, whose own biography quickly follows the section of the Grand Inquisitor, offers a kind of living response: one must take responsibility for oneself and others.

Arendt is right: compassion cannot generate long-standing institutions. But compassion can regenerate existing institutions and nurture long-standing practices, a way of perceiving the world and people such that judgments about them are considered in a certain light. The Grand Inquisitor pursued the former, and, regardless of whether his motivation can be deemed evil or compassionate, he sought to construct institutions and structures that made easily navigable territories wherein human choice and agency is limited. Freedom is hard. And the Grand Inquisitor’s response is to soften its difficulty by encouraging rote behavior. Father Zosima emphasizes the practice of living. He must determine what is ethically responsible in his entanglements in the world, and he greets those choices with compassion because he knows that humans are fallible. Within Arendt’s own efforts of recapturing human agency and judgment, Father Zosima’s

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23 As Arendt worries, hypocrisy and deceit can emerge in such situations but they can also appear in non-deliberative and hierarchical spaces. Hypocrisy and deceit, insofar as they arise among humans, are not wholly innate to compassion but to desire.
gentle approach fits better. It may not be a ‘grand tale’ of a perverted goodness or compassion but it accords better with the daily challenge of responsibility and action.

Arendt is well aware of the difficulty of living and, as will be discussed later, she attributes a valuable political role to forgiveness. Yet, in emphasizing the Grand Inquisitor’s impoverished pity, she fails to recognize just how urgently the Grand Inquisitor seeks forgiveness. The Inquisitor’s monologue is nearly furious in his self-justification of his actions. He lashes out at Jesus, blames his actions on Jesus, and baits him to respond in turn even though he is horrified, stunningly and passionately horrified, to be held in judgment. How will the Son of God regard him? What will he say? The silence is a burden, and even in its compassion it is hard to bear. Fear causes the Inquisitor to redouble his philosophizing efforts. “The old man longs for Him to say something, however painful and terrifying. But instead, He suddenly goes over to the old man and kisses him gently on his old, bloodless lips. And that is His only answer. The old man is startled and shudders. The corners of his lips seem to quiver slightly” (Dostoyevsky 1981, 316). A kiss on bloodless lips, a shudder, and a quiver: these are the indices of a forgiving power. Compassion is not silent; it is electric. It instantly communicates without speech. The kiss “glows” in the Inquisitor’s heart even as he chooses to ignore it (ibid). The lesson here is not that compassion will always appear as a silent gesture, though it often does that; it is that, sometimes, some encounters are so fraught with vulnerability, with terror at being seen for whom one is and the “crimes” one has committed, that any other response is inadequate.

Dostoyevsky emphasizes human fragility – for we are fragile at our core, an encumbrance that Arendt vigorously tries to mask even as she strengthens those faculties and relations that serve as armor – with the Grand Inquisitor’s foil, Father Zosima. A kiss also appears at a critical moment in Zosima’s life and he too is the
recipient, but is he who listens compassionately as another “criminal” confesses. Zosima’s friend, Mikhail, reveals that he had killed a woman several years prior and returns to Zosima’s home later that night. Zosima reports, “So we sat there, both of us, for perhaps two whole minutes, he looking at me fixedly all the time. Suddenly, and I can still see the way he looked at that moment, half smiling, he got up, hugged me hard, and kissed me” (Dostoyevsky 1981, 374). Weeks later, after confessing his crime to authorities and receiving their disbelief, Mikhail lays on his deathbed and admits he had intended to kill Zosima:

> After I left you the first time, I went out into the darkness and roamed the streets, a battle raging within me. And all of a sudden I hated you, hated you so much I couldn’t stand it. “He’s the only one in my way,” I thought. “He is my judge and, since he knows everything, I cannot avoid my ordeal as long as he exists…But how,” I thought, “can I ever face him if I don’t confess publicly now?” Even if you had been at the other end of the earth, the mere thought that you were alive and judging me would have been absolutely unbearable. I hated you as though you were the cause of it all, as though everything had happened through your fault.” (Dostoyevsky 1981, 377)

Mikhail’s kiss adds another veil. He is similar to the Grand Inquisitor: each is publicly known, each confesses to murdering “innocents,” each has the power to kill his witness but releases him, each is angered and agitated by the lingering threat of a judging witness. Self-accountability is hard but public accountability is even harder; one wishes to be “right” and to be held in esteem. And there is a certain kind of psychological and emotional hardship in having one’s character held in abeyance. Why let one’s witness go? It is not forgiveness – of what is either Jesus or Zosima in need of forgiving? – and neither is it a lack of fortitude or courage. Insofar as Jesus is believed to be God incarnate, then it is God’s grace that stirs both the Grand Inquisitor and Mikhail to free his witness. God’s grace functions precisely because of human fragility, vulnerability, and fallibility. Compassion, made tangible in a kiss, is one’s humanity both recognized
and made recognizable. Institutions and politics matter little if they lose sight of humanity, and recognizing it is itself a creative act towards regeneration.

Arendt indicates in her essay, “Truth and Power,” that people and actions, which may typically lie outside the political realm, can become politically relevant. Reality is more than the totality of facts and events: reality is truth set within a story, such that in “this story the particular facts lose their contingency and acquire some humanly comprehensible meaning” (BPF 257). Not only does storytelling render fragile facts more stable by giving them permanence within a story, but also makes the comprehension of those facts more meaningful. Stories disclose a “specifically human life, whose appearance and disappearance constitutes worldly events” (HC 97). Stories place facts and truth, especially contestable and fragile ones, in an interpretive context. Stories teach by example and persuade the hearer. Stories allow for “an ethical principle to be verified as well as validated” (BPF 243). Arendt provides the examples of Jesus of Nazareth and St. Francis as people who “verify the notion of goodness…these examples teach or persuade by inspiration, so that whenever we try to perform a deed of courage or of goodness it is as though we imitated someone else” (ibid). Arendt’s later thought seems to amend, if not contradict, her earlier writings on goodness.

That Arendt both turns to and theorizes about stories, especially stories of goodness, suggests that goodness has been made permanent and it is remembered through its exemplars. Stories told about actors like Ghandi, Ella Baker, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Rosa Parks reveal the dual aspect of goodness: we can understand how “goodness” manifested itself and also transformed itself into “usefulness” and “solidarity.” Jesus of Nazareth is Arendt’s own figure, a good man made “good” by his half-human, half-god composition (a composition shared by another hero in a different ethos, Achilles). The fact that Jesus’ story is told and retold by both Arendt and others
modifies goodness, creating it as an aspect of greatness that shines in storytelling. And if consistency is not demanded of goodness, if inconsistency and spontaneity is both goodness’ charm and method, then its appearances in the world might serve as valuable reminders of our desire to be, perhaps, our best selves.

### 2.2. Pariahs

Compassion can also wreak havoc in a body politic in seemingly quiet times. Insofar as there are portions of the population who are excluded from political life, insofar as those peoples retreat from or denied life in the public realm, or insofar as ascriptive characteristics like race, religion, ethnicity, gender, or sexuality serve as political “facts” by which political participation is denied, then Arendt finds that compassion is both unsuited for and debilitating to the polity. Arendt’s address upon receiving the Lessing Award details the problem of a humanism based in compassion. Not only is a compassion-based humanism responsible for the terrors of modern revolutions since the French Revolution, as we saw above, but it falsely promises to unite people. Compassion cannot forge alliances between unlike people because compassion is un-worldly, it cultivates a retreat from the world into privacy, and it cannot be shared beyond the boundaries of the excluded group in question. Whereas in the Revolution compassion bound people too tightly together, in non-revolutionary times it cannot bind people at all.

Arendt’s rejection of compassion seems straightforward yet she creates a contradiction that she does not resolve. Arendt asserts that compassion contains two opposing characteristics. First, compassion is egalitarian and inclusive: whether, when, and how a person feels compassion is not dependent upon either party being “good” or having a relationship to each other. Compassion, spontaneous and uncontrollable, reaches out to any and all people. Second, compassion is exclusive: pariah groups will
not feel compassion outside of their group. Compassion is controlled and only extends to particular people. We will consider this dilemma in more detail after we have laid out Arendt’s rejection of a compassion-based humanism or the extension of political rights on compassionate terms.

Understanding Arendt’s distinction between pariah and parvenu, an inquiry began in her dissertation and evolving over the course of her writing, is helpful in determining why compassion is dangerous in non-revolutionary times. A pariah is “an outcast, ascriptively defined as biologically inferior and excluded” (Pitkin 1998, 21). Because this status is given to a person, it can be assigned to entire groups. Arendt’s example is Jews in pre-World War II Germany, who live with pariah status and establish different strategies for coping over the decades. Generally the coping strategies fall into one of two possibilities: either a person will associate with pariah status and begin to craft a life within it or she will be shocked to be defined as one and attempt to flee from the status. Pariahs who flee their status often try to assimilate into society at-large, an effort that transforms them into parvenus. A parvenu is a person who climbs by fraud out of one birthplace into another (ibid). As Arendt investigates in her thesis, Rahel Varnhagen, the parvenu position is complicated and hard because there is no firm ground for the self. A parvenu cannot act and she cannot judge objectively or accurately what a situation requires because she is always concerned with crafting and protecting a certain appearance. Rahel Varnhagen, a Jewish woman who attempted to assimilate into German culture during the 19th century, denied but could not escape the political fact of being Jewish. Consequently she lived in the constant fear, and within the resulting self-scrutiny, that she would be revealed or perceived as only a pariah. As a result, Varnhagen’s efforts involved “inauthentically denying one’s responsibility for what one
is actually doing in the world or for the norms and standards governing one’s conduct” (Pitkin 1998, 182).

Sometimes pariah status generates inner emigration, not parvenu undertakings. Arendt defines inner emigration as the withdrawal from public space into an interior life (MDT 18). Resisting this emigration is especially hard during dark times, and Arendt justifies it “as long as reality is not ignored, but is constantly acknowledged as the thing that must be escaped” (MDT 22). A pariah must not lose sight of the fact that realness “inheres in the world from which they have escaped” (ibid), not in privacy or in intimacy. An external and public realm continually shapes how a pariah engages in or withdraws from that world, and denying that interaction leads to invisibility and self-denial of one’s capacity for action and distinction.

Yet political resistance is always difficult for a pariah, regardless of whether she attempts to assimilate or withdraws into an interior space, because compassion flourishes among outcasts. Denied the light of the public realm, pariahs create warmth through their relationships with each other and out of the act of living. Arendt describes a compassion-based humanity, whose arrival she pins upon Rousseau and the French Revolution, as “inevitable” when certain groups actually lose the choice to withdraw from the world at large (MDT 13).

[A] warmth of human relationships which may strike those who have had some experience with such groups as an almost physical phenomenon…In its full development it can breed a kindliness and sheer goodness of which human beings are otherwise scarcely capable. Frequently it is also the source of a vitality, a joy in the simple fact of being alive, rather suggesting that life comes fully into its own only among those who are, in worldly terms, the insulted and injured. (emphasis added, MDT 13)

Nearly palpable warmth is found within pariah groups, and the possibility of having kind and good relationships with others increases; indeed it might be found only in these arenas. Rather than turning away from life, according to Arendt, pariahs embrace it. But the life they embrace is not a public life of distinction and action, wherein they
can appear to others who are different from them and who demand disputation of opinions and “truths.” Pariahs no longer need care for the world since taking responsibility for it is not possible (MDT 14). Their is a life demarcated by the sheer fact of being alive. They are haunted by the fact of biological necessity – of being physically capable of living – instead of seeing life’s fullness revealed in the world through speech and action. Consequently Arendt believes that compassion falsely promises life: it substitutes warmth for public light and diminishes responsibility for being active participants in the world.

The intimacy found in such an enclosed and sheltered space limits pariahs’ political capacities and their own ability to establish a meaningful world that shall continue beyond their individual lifespan. Arendt requires an agonistic, deliberative politics where different opinions are not only voiced but also firmly held. Retreats more closely resemble private households than they do rambunctious public spaces. Pariahs do not hold individually specific and different opinions; even if they had distinct perspectives, then Arendt is convinced that they will be likely to avoid conflict of any sort (MDT 30). There is no friction in such a space. People’s similarities dismantle deliberations built out of intense negotiation of living in different and unlike social or political locations. As a result, a certain timelessness and impermanence occurs: outside of the public realm, cocooned by a kind of warmth and neglect of responsibilities, pariahs cannot build a world that transcends time through its promise to future generations and its literal construction of material, time-withstanding structures and institutions. A life strongly linked to biological cycles is a life that blooms and dies within a single generation.

This kind of retreat also affects a person’s common sense and individual judgment. For Arendt, the “privilege” of a compassion-based humanity is “dearly
bought” with an “atrophy of all the organs with which we respond to it – starting with the common sense with which we orient ourselves in a world common to ourselves and others and going onto the sense of beauty, or taste, with which we love the world” (MDT 13). A life built on sentiment deteriorates the human sensations that react to and cultivate the world, whether they be common sense or taste. For Arendt, common sense is a unifying force within the human person. It gathers together discrete sensations in order to form a broader understanding of the material world (BPF 218). It is responsible for adjusting a subjective person with five private sensations to a non-subjective and external world that is shared in common (ibid). Without common sense a person remains locked in his particular experience, a prisoner of his sensations rather than the “law-giver” to them.

A weakened common sense affects judgment, a political ability that Arendt roots in common sense (BPF 217). Judging requires that we share the world with others because it relies on the possibility of agreeing with others (ibid). Unlike reasoning, which can work in isolation, judgment requires that a person think “in an anticipated communication with others with whom I know I must finally come to some agreement” (ibid). Arendt borrows from Kant to term this activity an “enlarged mentality,”24 or “‘thinking in the place of somebody else’” (ibid). Judgment is conditioned on the presence of others who think or have interests radically different from oneself and dissent among the parties as to how to proceed, how to act, or what outcomes are sought. Judgment, then, relies on difference and agon. An entirely private world that denies commonality

24 Arendt lists two requirements for an enlarged mentality: first a person must be able to separate judgment from “‘subjective private conditions’” that, while legitimate as a private opinion, do not belong in the public realm and, second, the person cannot judge in isolation, e.g. she needs others’ perspectives in which she can think (BPF 217). See Lisa Disch (1995) and Susan Bickford (1995) for more detail on how this capacity works in contemporary times. People who have retreated from the world-at-large do not have access to the second condition; they are not able to think in others’ places because they are radically isolated from individual distinctions.
can be built out of difference and that secludes a person from both responsibility for and remembrance of an external, public realm enervates individual judgment. Compassion, in Arendt’s eyes, has taken a different tact from that in the French Revolution to obfuscate clear and reasonable thinking. Here, rather than unleashing overwhelming and automatic sentiments, compassion nurtures a bland uniformity that actually blunts judgment.²⁵

Thus the pariah retreat from the world is a retreat from that which qualifies life as “human:” denied world-building capacities like common sense and judgment and armed only with a compassionate warmth for similarly located pariahs, the pariah lives in solitude and uniformity. His experience is just one singular experience “multiplied innumerable times” (HC 58). Arendt is clear in The Human Condition that an entirely private life means above all to be deprived of things essential to a truly human life: to be deprived of the reality that comes from being seen and heard by others, to be deprived of an ‘objective’ relationship with them that comes from being related to and separated from them through the intermediary of a common world of things, to be deprived of the possibility of achieving something more permanent than life itself. (ibid)

A weak common sense cannot form “objective” relationships because it cannot even establish the world as “common” to its participants. Because judgment is enervated, people mistake how or where commonality is rooted and locate it in a characteristic of human nature, e.g. rationality, or in a sentiment like pity (MDT 16). Like the lover of goodness, a compassionate pariah is radically estranged from the realms and actions that keep people separate even as they bring them together in solidarity.

²⁵ Taste gives the world a “humanistic meaning. Taste de-barbarizes the world of the beautiful by not being overwhelmed by it; it takes care of the beautiful in its own ‘personal’ way and thus produces a ‘culture’” (BPF 221). While it is tempting to pursue this thread of thought, it is beyond the scope of this chapter and dissertation. For now, let us say that Arendt makes an astonishing claim concerning the relationship between beauty, taste, and politics. “The fleeting greatness of word and deed can endure in the world to the extent that beauty is bestowed upon it. Without the beauty, that is, the radiant glory in which potential immortality is made manifest in the human world, all human life would be futile and no greatness could endure” (BPF 215). More work on this aspect of Arendt’s thought would be fruitful.
Problematically the desire to retreat is not limited to persecuted people. Arendt abhors this desire, seeing compassion-based humanity as the province of pariahs and asserting that we are obligated to the world if we are not excluded involuntarily from it. And though non-pariah people and groups might find such warmth compelling, “the humanitarianism of brotherhood scarcely befits those who do not belong among the insulted and the injured” (ibid). To seek refuge among pariahs out of shame of the world or due to compassion’s mesmerism comes at too great a cost. We substitute appearances for realities and deny the fact that we can, in fact, change our world through our actions. Persecuted people lose potential allies who, by virtue of the fact that they can participate in public affairs, can act to change exclusionary political facts. Arendt cannot advocate a compassion-based humanism beyond pariahs’ borders if she hopes to nurture public realms vibrant with deliberation and action.

Arendt believes that theorists like Rousseau, who assert that compassion\(^\text{26}\) is a common human characteristic, do not provide tools for dismantling structures of injustice or violence. Humanity cannot be spoken of generally, especially when particular humans are denied political or public rights because of ascriptive characteristics. Rather, if humanity wishes to comprehend persecution’s reality, then it must speak in the particular (MDT 17). In the case of German Jews prior to 1945, the only response to “Who are you?” is “A Jew” (ibid). This claim is not a generalizing claim, categorized by ethnicity or history; rather, it refers specifically to the political fact that determined and outweighed any questions of individual or personal identity, rendering those distinguishing characteristics “nameless” and “anonymous” (MDT 18). Political facts erase the individuality of the people that they wish to categorize, erecting a broad

\(^{26}\) Conversely gratuitous cruelty is also seen as a common human characteristic. See Shklar’s (1982) incisive analysis, for example.
“commonality” over the rich and diverse personal characteristics that reveal just “who” a person is. Arendt believes that it is “only in terms of the identity that is under attack” that we can resist political facts (ibid). Any humanism that overthrows political facts must work out of the identities that are under attack. One can only do that if one accepts the identity, resists its political implications as well as the social desire to be accepted, and remains an active and acting pariah. A consequence of this resistance, then, is the denial of compassion-based humanisms.

As in On Revolution, Arendt offers two types of arguments against compassion. The first concerned its influence on political faculties while the second concerns whether compassion can bring people together. Arendt discounts compassion on two seemingly contradictory statements in the Lessing Address. First, she shares Lessing’s concern about the “egalitarian character of compassion,” by which she means that compassion, because it is an uncontrolled and nearly automatic response to things like human suffering, cannot be selective. Billy Budd felt sympathy for Captain Vere despite the lack of a common interest between them and Captain Vere’s singular role in determining Billy’s death. Disturbingly, a person can feel compassion for an “evildoer” and an “evildoer” can similarly feel compassion. Arendt eliminates compassion because it is too inclusive. Second, as explored above, compassion is the privileged domain of the pariah that cannot be extended beyond pariahs. Compassion appears as an exclusive phenomenon, one that cannot create common interests between people with radically different political and social locations, and it is not a bridging phenomenon. Arendt asserts that compassion is simultaneously inclusive and exclusive, a force that both bridges and divides unlike people.

To be fair to Arendt, these claims do explain two different phenomena. The first claim that compassion is too inclusive is more about whether the recipient or the agent
of compassion is somehow “deserving” and whether a person chooses to establish a connection with others. Arendt, like Lessing, wants compassion to be more selective on both counts. She carries her dislike of its spontaneity, freedom from personal control, and seemingly “naturalness” that she discovered in On Revolution into “On Humanity in Dark Times.” Compassion is “unquestionably a natural, creature affect which involuntarily touches every normal person at the sight of suffering, however alien the sufferer may be” (MDT 14). Compassion blurs too many personal boundaries, establishing relationships that can be uncomfortable in their intimacy, their immediacy, and their intensity. Individual agency is threatened, if not lost, by sentimental surges. A person can neither choose what emotions are felt or with whom she will establish a relationship. This situation is especially troubling if she disagrees with that person; condemns his behavior, character, or person; or otherwise feels distaste for him. An egalitarian compassion signals the loss of agency and judgment, two essential political capacities.

The second claim concerns whether a pariah and a non-pariah will ever be able to find common ground through compassion. Arendt declares compassion’s “purest form” to be a “privilege of the pariah, is not transmissible and cannot easily be acquired by those who do not belong among the pariahs” (ibid). Perhaps the pariah has retreated so far from the world, has worked so hard to generate warmth in otherwise hard spaces, that things like trust, reciprocity, and compassion with outsiders are to be doubted. Surely a Holocaust prisoner will have little sympathy for his Nazi guard but much concern for his fellow inmates. If compassion is going to enter that relationship then it will be the prisoner’s choice, not the guard’s. This aspect seems both reasonable and expected. But it also suggests that compassion is mediated by other factors like context, practices, habits, and desires. We might, in fact, control our “natural” and
“spontaneous” emotions, adjudicating when or how to feel compassion, and this capacity might itself be a source of agency and self-determination.

The Dalai Lama recounts how a fellow Tibetan monk, Lopon-la, endured years of “grievous treatment,” including “re-education” and torture, during imprisonment but that his “gentleness and serenity remained” (1999, 102). When asked if he had ever been afraid, Lopon-la replied that he feared he would lose compassion for his jailers (he did not). Lopon-la’s ability to remain compassionate towards his tormenters suggests that compassion contains more durability, agency, and value than Arendt suspects, particularly if it is actively cultivated as a general perception or habit. And there is a certain form of power here: one that is exerted deliberately against and within a construct of violence and powerlessness, that maintains individual distinction, and that acts unexpectedly in a venue that debilitates action. Importantly, it is a practice of power that crosscuts institutions.

Lopon-la and Billy Budd both encounter institutions that are neither fully public nor fully private. How does one categorize a prison cell for political dissidents or a captain’s quarters on an imperial ship? Insofar as they are manifestations of institutionalized power, they might qualify as public. Yet neither offers the agon, deliberation, or publicity that Arendt prizes; both are darkened by an authority’s unilateral presence that conjures a feeling of powerlessness. Lopon-la’s careful preservation of his compassion is a contrast to Billy Budd’s explosive reaction. Lopon-

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27 One is inclined here to argue that Arendt’s categories – private, public, and social – insufficiently capture the full dimensions of human life with others. Michael Warner’s counter-publics; W.E.B. DuBois’, James Baldwin’s, and Zora Neale Hurston’s depiction of black life in the United States; my own preference for the term “civic;” and even Arendt’s study of pariah retreat are examples that defy the public-private dyad. Arendt may respond that these alternate spaces are encapsulated in the “social” yet that “fit” seems a strange and difficult stretch, especially since Arendt’s social prevents coordinated action. I dare say that the people seeking action in alternative forums, especially against injustice and restrictions on freedom, would argue that their individual and collective actions are acts of resistance to “political facts” and political (mis-)authority.

la’s compassionate practice is action within inaction; Billy’s silence momentarily fills the space between action and inaction until it gives into compulsive force. One is inclined to argue that here a kiss is better than a strike given the prospect of death. Responding with a kiss certainly requires more training, a means of harnessing the inchoate and inarticulate emotions that arise in response to the sight or experience of injustice. Had Billy been able to either respond gently or withhold action he might have extended the time for either personal reason or collective judgment. In both cases the decision to withhold or extend compassion to Claggert would have remained his decision. Each of these alternatives is an action that offers self-determination and distinction despite the quasi-public, institutional space in which he found himself.

Arendt creates a tension between exclusivity and inclusivity that, if present, need not be debilitating but empowering. More than this, her depiction of compassion forgets how it interacts with context, power, practices, habits, and reason in order to make sense of a situation and antagonistic “others” who “threaten” one’s existence. Unfortunately, Arendt does not explicitly admit these possibilities nor investigate them. They highlight small fissures in a phenomenon she depicts as irrefutable and irresistible, however.

2.3. Arendt’s Alternatives

Arendt sees retreat and passivity as characteristics of compassion, and she looks to the Greeks for alternatives that can engender action. While Arendt’s analysis of alternatives here is brief, and its clarity suffers as a result, she reminds us that we cannot presume compassion or shared sentiments are good in themselves or good for the body politic. She relates compassion to five other passions29 - fear, envy, selflessness, gladness,
and cruelty - in two concise paragraphs while opening (and simultaneously closing) new investigations. She concludes that solidarity and friendship are the only alternatives that encourage human togetherness while discouraging intimacy, passivity, and resentment.

Arendt reports that the Greeks relate compassion to fear, meekness, and jealousy.30 Both fear and compassion overwhelm a person. A person caught in on-rushing fear or misery is unlikely to save himself from floundering in that sentiment. And like fear compassion stimulates a desire to recoil from a critical or active response to the world’s demands or to what pains us. Were we able to throw off passivity’s heavy weight and stir ourselves to action, then the consequences themselves may not be helpful as Arendt uncovers in her analysis of the French Revolution. Gladness is briefly considered as a ground for humanism – it is, at least talkative – but Arendt discounts it because it shares with envy a proclivity towards cruelty (MDT 15). Joy is more likely to trigger resentment and jealousy than shared happiness in its witness, regardless of whether that person is compassionately or happily moved.31

Selflessness is revised from its appearance in On Revolution. Selflessness, here “the question of openness to others” rather than a sacrifice of personal interest to general will, no longer has the same relationship to compassion. In the Lessing Address selflessness is a necessary pre-condition of a compassion-based humanism. It remains separate from compassion but acts as its ground. This relationship is radically different from On Revolution where selflessness is compassion twice perverted. There, selflessness

pleasure does not mean that passions are suitable for politics. Arendt consistently argues that, while passions are an integral part of the human condition, they are best suited for the private realm and that the social blurs that discriminating sensibility.

30 Other sources suggest that the Greeks have a more complex relationship to fear. See Peter Euben (1995), p. 161.

31 Arendt herself does not pursue this line of inquiry and, consequently, she makes no remarks concerning whether compassion can also be ignited by joy. But, given her general remarks about the affinity compassion has for suffering and her brief separation of compassion and gladness, it seems likely that Arendt incorporates the Stoic concern only as a critique.
sprung deformed from pity’s rallying cry, and pity was depicted as compassion’s
distorted and crueler twin. Arendt does little, however, to reconcile the changes in her
understanding of compassion. Regardless of selflessness’ definition or its relationship to
compassion, it is still discarded on the basis that it engenders a conflation between self
and other, effectively making individual interests secondary to others’ or the common
interest.

Compassion itself has not changed form. It is as contagious and unruly as before,
a reminder that Arendt fears sentiments that cannot be controlled and, consequently,
deliberately deployed. This section also affirms how uncomfortable Arendt is with
relationships that are too intimate. The vulnerability suggested in selflessness’
“openness” is perceived as negative and highly dangerous because a person’s individual
judgment, agency, and uniqueness are susceptible to manipulation. While Arendt does
not comment on mass movements here, their tendency to uniformity and anonymity
linger at the text’s edges. What Arendt seeks is a humanizing force that keeps people
close but separate and acts on reason, not impulse. She sharply asks, “[S]hould human
beings be so shabby that they are incapable of acting humanly unless spurred and as it
were compelled by their own pain when they see others suffer?” (MDT 15).

Arendt prefers that solidarity and friendship prompt human action. Solidarity
emerges in On Revolution as a means of dispassionately and deliberately organizing
people around common interests, especially when those interests are concerned with the
“‘the grandeur of man,’ or ‘the honour of the human race,’ or the dignity of man” (OR
88). Solidarity can address and comprehend the multitude without also warping their
aggregation. And unlike compassion, pity, or selflessness, solidarity can act equally in
unequal populations whose people are differentiated by wealth and income, strength, or
talent; it does not favor poverty, it does not attach virtue to class, and it does not

94
encourage manipulative rhetorical strategies or hypocritical politics. Solidarity can act as a political principle that tames and controls the boundless and overwhelming drives of sentiments and passions, especially because it “partakes of reason” (ibid). Solidarity’s reasonableness, which, for Arendt, indicates a kind of mental and emotional steadiness, is especially important given pity’s propensity for violence. The French Revolution became violent precisely because it emphasized selflessness and pity, overlooking the political or personal relationships tying people together and unleashing boundless sentiments (OR 92); and this emphasis derailed its direction, focusing it on alleviating social suffering rather than establishing strong political foundations.

Solidarity emerges again in the Lessing Address but Arendt places it in the context of friendship. This move seems a response to her general fear that a principle, if untied to human relationships, might again fail to agitate against oppressive political facts for a generalized interest of “the dignity of man.” The critical question for resistance cannot be, “Are we not human beings?” (MDT 23), but rather, “What fact has been made political and how does it remain human?” In the case of Nazi Germany, Germans must affirm, “A German and a Jew, and friends” (ibid). This lesson Arendt gleans from Lessing’s play, Nathan the Wise, and it informs how she wishes to ground any activism based on humanism. Arendt’s strategy offers “an unusual conception of political subjectivity that turns on identifying herself and her audience as if from a third-person vantage point, by the groups to which they belong…[it] conceives of identity as a ‘political fact’ that is the contingent effect of specific contests” (Disch 293). Naming these terms from a third-person vantage refuses romantic and rational humanism (294); it attempts to “map the positions in a specific contest in the hope of intervening in a way that reconfigures party lines” (294). Compassion-based humanism too easily demarcates
“victims” and “oppressors,” magnifying and concretizing party lines in ways that resist intervention and transformation.

Arendt’s peculiar sense of friendship enables this kind of political subjectivity, based in part on her understanding of Lessing. Arendt and Lessing both praise friendship’s inherent selectivity. Importantly, though, friendship is not rooted in empathy or in intimacy; it is not a phenomenon in which “friends open their hearts to each other unmolested by the world and its demands” (MDT 25). Rather friendship is discursive, worldly, and political. It is an inclination to participate in the world with others and it remains cool and sober, not sentimental. Friendship is built on interest, “a space that exists where people engage in disputation about the meaning of worldly events,” writes Lisa Disch, “Paradoxically, then, the ‘between’ that sustains Arendt’s conception of friendship is not a common moral framework of identity, but distance” (304); it is also not the paradoxical proximate-depth found in Merleau-Ponty. It is this distance that enables friendship to operate despite (or because of) other political facts that might otherwise determine action and relationships. After all, Nathan’s wisdom, according to Arendt, is his ability to sacrifice “truth” to friendship (MDT 26). In other words, his wisdom consists in seeing “absolute” truths as man-made, always disputable, and requiring intense discussion in order to keep them dynamic. Consequently Disch sees Arendt’s friendship as a kind of “‘vigilant partisanship,’ which involves ‘taking sides for the world’s sake, understanding and judging everything in terms of its position in the world at any given time’” (Disch 1995, 289).

That friendship is defined primarily by discursiveness and distance encourages the growth of alternative communities that can resist political oppression. Chiba terms its outgrowth an “analogia publicae,” or “public activity of citizens, characteristics of

32 Though Lessing also states that a compassionate person is best.
which can consist in spontaneity, discussion, speech, common deliberation, persuasion, cooperation, or the absence of hierarchy” (1995, 519). Disagreement, discourse, and deliberation can flourish among friends, producing actions that are born out of reason and judgment rather than norm-induced behavior. Chiba concludes that friendship helps mediate the private to the public and vice versa (1995, 520). In the context of On Revolution, this capacity is important because one of the revolution’s original sins is its attempt to substitute the private for the public. It attempted to transfer the intimacy found in compassion into the public realm in order to unite unlike people, interests, and classes. Arendt’s non-intimate friendship preserves space between people and an ethical relationship of living “face-to-face with reality in the presence of others” (Nelson 2006, 88).

Arendt turns to friendship because she fears that we will (and have) too easily slide into moral high grounds with a determined fixity, one that blinds us to agon, multiplicity, or difference and dampens a spirited response to oppressive political facts. Friendship defined as discourse is more flexible to hearing others’ opinions and to speaking one’s own. It discourages a humanism based on a static absolute like the one that the French generated from selflessness. Disch reads Arendt’s friendship as a way of accounting for “the differences among various actors’ locations in relation to an event...without pride or pity, maintaining what Arendt describes as a relationship ‘without false guilt complexes on the one side and false complexes of superiority or inferiority on the other’ (MDT 23)” (Disch 1995, 304-05). People united through friendship are less likely to become illogically judgmental, bound by individual opinion or reason to a particular perspective that, in its formation and maintenance, necessarily occludes other people’s opinions and perspectives. Because Arendt sees friendship as akin to respect, her alternative is also less likely to become overly sentimental and, as a
result, less discerning. Friendship is a moderating force: it generates a space for opinions to be declared and disputed and it maintains sentimental distance between participants.

But there is something jarring about Arendt’s depiction of friendship. Not only does it seem strangely sterile but it is unlike how we often experience friendship.33 Surely Arendt is correct that a politicizing friendship, one that instigates dialogue and activity, cannot only be an intimate sharing of the heart. But might not intimacy also be a part of its experience? For a friendship to withstand dark times, for it to gather together political facts that otherwise estrange people and to sacrifice truth for its endurance, might it need some kind of intimate seedbed? How else might a friendship withstand demagoguery, ideology, or partisanship? It seems we do need something that causes us to look into the eyes of another person in order to discover another beating heart.34 Perhaps the reliance upon friendship for political stability and dialogue is reliance upon too few pillars to uphold a civil or political space: there are too few friendships to withstand the weight of dark times.

This worry increases when we consider a primary reason that Arendt prefers friendship: its exclusivity, which Arendt favors over compassion’s egalitarianism, can tend towards a radical rejection of anyone different from ourselves. This dismissal is intensified in dark times or when social and political hierarchies based on ascriptive characteristics exists. Not only is it more likely that such a polity will have an attenuated public realm, if it even exists, but it is also more likely that specific groups of people will be excluded from that realm. The opportunities for interacting in public spaces and for

33 Disch’s (1995) writing points to this strangeness, most especially since, after arguing that friendship is distant-laden partisanship built around interests, she concludes with an example of intimacy between Arendt and Jaspers wherein Arendt acted because their friendship had both depth and intimacy.
34 The writings of Levinas, W.E.B. DuBois, Iris Murdoch, bell hooks, and Simone Weil, to name a few, attempt to capture this moment, and this need, for human interactions to move beyond propagandized social and political hierarchies based on ascriptive characteristics, or political facts. A large part of the difference in their perspectives might be found in how they view human goodness and whether they believe that goodness is in the province of human action plays a large part of how it can be displayed.
perceiving who a person is, rather than what she is, are greatly reduced. The pre-Civil Rights era in the United States provides numerous examples of how hard it can be to forge bridging relationships without social opinion and political will. Given our tendency to befriend people similar to rather than unlike us, we need to cultivate bridging capacities or possibilities.\textsuperscript{35} Compassion’s egalitarianism provides assistance here.\textsuperscript{36}

\textbf{2.4. Responding to Arendt}

Arendt provides numerous reasons for casting compassion out of the polity. Whether it is inherently doomed to hypocrisy and a perverted pity when it enters the public, it defeats political goals like founding freedom, or it lulls people into apolitical complacency, compassion appears as dangerous for politics. Yet Arendt’s analyses are incomplete, as suggested by the addendums I have weaved into the explication. Compassion can be empowering in situations of powerlessness and it can individuate an otherwise inflexible justice system provided it is practiced, cultivated as a virtue, and geared towards specific individuals. It is also necessary for both solidarity and friendship. Given these hesitations, why subscribe to Arendt’s limitations? Compassion itself could be a necessary but not sufficient condition for politics, complementing other political virtues and principles like freedom or equality. Such a possibility requires looking at compassion dialogically rather than ontologically.

These arguments hope to retrieve both compassion and Arendt herself from tensions that are immanent to her methods of arguing and from questionable


\textsuperscript{36} See W.E.B Dubois’ \textit{Souls of Black Folks} and James Baldwin’s \textit{Collected Writings} for examples of segregation’s affects on interracial relationships and the need for compassion to facilitate racial progress.
presumptions upon which her analyses rest. Arendt’s phenomenological depiction\textsuperscript{37} of compassion – the adjectives by which she describes it and the attributes she attaches to it – creates a problem in her analysis that is similar to how Hannah Pitkin describes Arendt’s use of the social: “The symbolic role [it] plays in her argument, the predicates she attaches to it, and the metaphors in which she embeds it run directly counter to her central heading and replicate the fault she most criticizes in other thinkers…she stresses human agency and condemns those who hide it by invoking superhuman entities and forces, yet she herself invokes the social in just this way” (1998, 15). Pitkin’s summation of the social’s greatest faults show them as similar to compassion’s – it organizes politics around the biological life process, it creates a singular interest for the polity as a whole, and it normalizes behavior (1998, 13-14). Arendt builds a sense of irresistibility in both phenomena. Neither can have characteristics other than what Arendt depicts and at no point in the chain of logic can a person practice compassion or politics differently than what Arendt has outlined.

This rigidity is partly intentional since Arendt prefers clear distinctions between terms and she creates dichotomies in order to teach us about the experiences and meanings that we have lost or are in jeopardy of losing.\textsuperscript{38} As Jacobitti affirms, “It was part of Arendt’s method of writing to find exemplary cases (or ideal types) and use them to draw us away from traditional concepts which block us from seeing new experiences clearly (from thinking what we are doing)” (1991, 286). In the case of compassion, Arendt employs ideal types and case studies and generates distinctions that jar us from complacent acceptance of contemporary experiences and demand that we think. She distinguishes between public and private realms, action and behavior, goodness and


\textsuperscript{38} For more information on Arendt’s methods, please see Villa (2000, p. 1, 7-9), Peter Euben (2000), Hanna Pitkin (1998), and Suzanne Jacobitti (1991).
evil, solidarity and fraternity, and friendship and compassion. These stark contrasts in study are intended to pull important stakes and perspectives into relief, and we, as Arendt’s readers and students, are intended to reflect on and judge between the oppositions. The implicit sense that we know these terms crumbles, and we actively determine whether a social category is useful or invidious (Pitkin 1998, 184-86). Arendt shows us how to think, or how to inquire into “human experience, including our customary prejudices and moral claims and the language we use to talk about them” (Jacobitti 1991, 285). Arendt’s insistent criticism of compassion incites us to rethink the overall optimism with which we cloak compassion and to seriously consider compassion’s political consequences and dangers.

An unintentional result of Arendt’s methods, however, is that she creates flat terms that are easily mired in the stubbornness of their oppositions. And Arendt’s capacity to retain or re-establish human agency and freedom suffers by virtue of her methodology. This consequence is unsettling when we consider Arendt’s love of spirited and differentiated discourse. Praising Lessing, Arendt writes that his “greatness does not merely consist in a theoretical insight that there cannot be one single truth within the human world but in his gladness that it does not exist and that, therefore, the unending discourse among men will never cease so long as there are men at all. A single absolute truth, could there have been one, would have been the death of all those disputes…And this would have spelled the end of humanity” (emphasis added, MDT 27). Truth is discovered anew through disputation; human discourse needs to reconsider and revisit “absolutes” so that they appear in variety of perspectives and opinions. “Truth,” for Arendt, is rarely firm and always multidimensional. Yet the whittling of multiple truths, jostling against one another in public spaces, into dichotomies is strangely suspect in these terms. What is gained for the sake of clarity? Might not “paradox,” truth
acting as a trickster that appears first in one mask, then a second, a third, and a fourth – sometimes simultaneously – provide a suppler image of the ductile threads that tether opposing (or complementary) terms? Might not navigating “paradox as truth” require more skill or virtú, the Machiavellian “excellence with which man answers the opportunities the world opens up before him in the guise of fortuna” (BPF 151), an excellence found and judged in the performance? Arendt trims compassion’s dimensionality into a single aspect: it functionally operates in her texts as an absolute that is debated foolishly. In so doing, she forecloses both the revelation of different political possibilities and public contestation about its role. Clearly there is as much to be wary of as there is to be grateful for with Arendt’s use of dichotomies and ideal types.

If careful thinking and contestation is a part of the liberal tradition and Arendt’s own aspirations, then reconsidering compassion’s potential is situated in a tradition of “truth”-seeking in which Arendt serves as the primary gadfly. Her concerns are many. It is not just that compassion unleashes dangerous and uncontrollable forces in the body politic while failing to serve as a democratic or political principle. It is that compassion might signal the absence or depletion of other critical political faculties. The collapse of thinking and judgment, the retreat into privacy and out of responsibility for one’s distinction and one’s world, the abdication of responsibility for others, and the persistence of dark times are entwined with the emergence of a naively optimistic social that, in turning to compassion, eliminates the possibility for action. Not only does Arendt want to safeguard the individual’s capacity to be uniquely distinct and to speak and act, she wants to secure the space by which individuals can appear.

This question is redoubled by some of Arendt’s methodological choices. Virtues and principles of which Arendt approves are either eerily similar to compassion or may be derived from compassion. Her phenomenological descriptions of phenomena
generate ontological ascriptions – compassion is unruly and degenerates into pity, for example – that bind her analyses. She is able to exclude them from public or political matters as a result, but she also inadvertently threatens human agency by inserting a sense of irresistibility into those terms. I suggest that key political capacities like judgment and responsibility are disabled by Arendt’s exclusion of compassion for the same reason that solidarity and friendship are weaker than she believes: without compassion, itself a biological-cognitive comprehension of a given situation, there is little affective reason to perceive something like injustice or to feel compelled to respond. Arendt ignores this aspect of human perspective and reason because of her worries about the monolithic compassion she depicts and because of her presumptions about the human body and sensations.

Curiously Arendt singles compassion out as the passion that cannot operate as a principle or political norm. This prohibition is strange given how Arendt defines principles and considers their effects in politics. Phenomenon as diverse as goodness, fear, love of equality, distrust, virtue, and hatred can equally serve as guiding political principles, instigating action and gathering people around shared interests (BPF 151). Given that Arendt considers at least two of these “principles” as closely related to compassion – goodness and fear – and that three of her examples are also passions – fear, distrust, and hatred – her exclusion of compassion is noticeable but unexplained. Why does Arendt primarily exclude compassion but include other similar phenomenon?

Principles emerge in Arendt’s essay, “What is Freedom?” in Between Past and Future, as capable of rallying action. Unlike motives and sentiments, which spring from internal personal processes, principles externally motivate actions. That is, a principle inspires a person to act. Arendt characterizes a principle as having continual strength

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and vitality and being general enough to be adapted without prescribing set goals (BPF 150-51). She further writes that, “in distinction from its motive, the validity of the principle is universal,” unbound to a particular group (ibid). A principle’s content is adaptable: there are no pre-set or governing modes of conduct involved in principled action; rather, the actions fit within its specific context. Consequently, Arendt believes that a principle has an enduring validity – freedom’s ability to call out actions will persist through time – but the direction and content of the actions will shift. We judge that principle on the basis of how well the actions were performed.

Principles do share some qualities with goodness and compassion. The three phenomena are manifested and judged in their performance, and that performance is fleeting. Arendt asserts that principles “are manifest in the world as long as the action lasts, but no longer” (ibid). However, unlike goodness and compassion, principles are not distorted when they enter public light. Consequently they have a solidity and permanence that extends beyond the moments in which they are actualized, characteristics that enable principles to help fabricate portions of the world, because their echo in the world stays true to their origin. For Arendt, principles are public in a way that goodness and compassion are not.

Part of compassion’s privacy is its concern with motivations that arise from within the self. Is this the case? Is compassion associated with a person’s desire to “appear” a certain way either to himself or to his audience? A compassionate response is, for Arendt, a passionate response to another person’s suffering. Insofar as this response is either uncontrolled or innate then it cannot be externally motivated or determined in the same way that a principle is. But Arendt overlooks an essential

\[\text{\textsuperscript{40}}\text{Arendt discounts our ability to sympathize with other people’s joys, but this point will be disputed more fully in future chapters.}\]
component of compassion’s emergence: the sufferer. Without a second person or situation to stimulate it, compassion would lie dormant within the self. Given this dependence, how do we define its point of origin? It is initiated within a relationship between the self and other, and its movement is better described as a call-and-response between the sufferer and the witness. Compassion, by its nature, cannot be described as wholly individual or private because it is a communal sentiment.

Perhaps we are not persuaded by my brief rejoinder regarding compassion’s motivations, and we wish, with Arendt, to reject it on the basis of its sentimentality, which conjures the images of the French Revolution’s crazed and uncontrollable multitude. We then encounter Arendt’s odd admission of sentiments like “fear or distrust or hatred” into principles (ibid). How is fear or hatred any less internal or corrosive than compassion? Is it because compassion seems to introduce hypocrisy or because it devolves to selflessness? Are we willing to accept that a sentiment like “hatred” can act as a principle merely because it does not morph in the public light? If compassion is excluded on the basis of its relationship to goodness, then what is Arendt suggesting about her dichotomy between good and evil? Surely Arendt does not affirm evil’s “constructive” skills over and against goodness’, particularly in light of her strong condemnation of violence and strength in political enterprises, but her inclusion of hatred and her exclusion of compassion creates a tension that she does not resolve. The twentieth-century demonstrates the tragedies that result from politics guided by disgust, and their policies, methods, and outcomes can hardly be praised or repeated. Indeed, these are times in which the extinction of compassion might also extinguish sentiments and passions that temper violence.

Arendt has made a strong case against compassion when it acts as the political principle of its time; she has not considered if or when it can complement or invigorate
other principles. Nor has she considered how it might act as a seedbed for other human faculties that she praises. Forgiveness is a key political capacity because it redeems action’s irreversibility (HC 237) and it is “mobilized by men toward each other” (HC 239), and it was established by the same man Arendt attributes goodness, and subsequently compassion, to – Jesus of Nazareth.

Forgiving exists in the political and public sphere that is created through human interaction and mutual fabrication of that space of appearances. Actions have unforeseen consequences\(^\text{41}\) that both fall in this web and remain tied to the doer and they require a secondary action that can, as it were, “undo” them. Forgiveness is unexpected, “unconditioned by the act which provoked it and therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven” (HC 241). Without forgiveness human actions would be yoked to a single deed and the ability to act anew would be severely truncated.

Because forgiveness occurs in, creates, and sustains the public realm, it is explicitly dependent upon the presence and actions of others. Forgiving requires publicity – it cannot occur in private or within one’s own heart – if it is to have reality and significance (HC 237). Without publicity forgiveness contains the same solipsism as any other private relationship: we lack the ability to perceive ourselves as others perceive us. And this self-reflection wraps a person in himself to such a point that we

\(^{41}\) Interestingly, Arendt does differentiate between actions that can and cannot be forgiven. For example, she asserts that “radical evil” cannot be forgiven (HC 241). How this exception affects future generations is unclear since Arendt also writes that forgiving undoes “the deeds of the past, whose ‘sins’ hang like Damocles’ sword over every new generation” (HC 237).
“would never be able to forgive ourselves any failing or transgression because we would lack the experience of the person for the sake of whom one can forgive” (HC 243).

Arendt enfolds one’s relationship to oneself within the relationships established with others: a person will be unable to forgive himself unless he has received forgiveness and liberation from a past action. Forgiveness is a dialogical phenomenon that relocates a person outside of himself so that he might gain a particular perspective (HC 238). It has its own virtuosity wherein the act of being forgiven informs and shapes how a person can forgive either himself or others at a future time. Forgiveness discloses the mutual interdependence of human relationships in a public, dynamic, and disputing world. As such it offers a different set of “guiding principles” from those that depend upon one’s own observance of and mediation in one’s relationship to oneself (HC 237).

While forgiveness reveals mutual dependence, it also places individuals in unequal positions wherein a transgressor is subordinate to his forgiver. Not only does the forgiver determine whether a person will be bound to a single action, but also whether he will encourage the development of faculties like thinking, judging, and action. Forgiveness, then, contains the same structure that is criticized in compassion: one person holds the decision-making power on how to judge a situation and proceed. Arendt neither remarks on this structure nor does she seem to notice it, creating another unresolved question about compassion’s exclusion.

Forgiveness’ structure echoes compassion’s. The relationships they develop cultivate certain perspectives towards others and one’s self; they have some element of inequality, mutuality, and dependence; and they share a relationship to Jesus of Nazareth and goodness. But, while we can confirm that compassion is stimulated through the sight of suffering, we do not know what acts as the seedbed for forgiveness. In what is forgiveness rooted? Arendt links it to the principle of natality, or humans’
ability to initiate new beginnings, but this principle corresponds to a secondary effect – the act of forgiving. Prior to forgiving, a person must decide upon this action. Assuming that decisions are the result of thinking, which itself has been sparked by some kind of desire or query, what then instigates that desire? Arendt might refer to the fact that forgiving is “always an eminently personal (though not necessarily individual or private) affair in which what was done is forgiven for the sake of who did it” (HC 241). If this is the case, then what human capacity enables a person to recognize and decide that the transgressor is more important than the transgression? Arendt does not provide much guidance here but, given its similarities to compassion, forgiveness itself might be rooted in compassion. For what is compassion but the spontaneous reaction to a person, a reaction that casts a kind of relationship between the two, in order to stimulate the recognition that hurt itself is universal but the person hurting is particular? Determining to forgive relies upon seeing that person without, or in spite of, prejudices. And it is a decision drawn more from the recesses of the heart than of a calculating mind.

Arendt’s inclusion of sentiments like hatred and fear into principles and her incomplete examination of forgiveness generate more questions than answers about why and how compassion is singled out as the deleterious force. Part of the difficulty results from Arendt’s methods. She chooses to explore the phenomena through case studies, ideal types, and specific dichotomies and, in doing so, develops a phenomenological understanding of their operations in the world. But this process simultaneously generates ontological claims. Arendt’s examinations do not depict just a term’s function and outcome; they also produce a corresponding knowable and unchanging structure. As a result her terms appear both inflexible and irresistible. But

42 Several commentators on compassion root forgiveness in compassion. See (CITE).
this ontological structure also opens a small crack in which to root through Arendt’s
terms and unpack each potential, a useful way of working immanently in order to
loosen compassion’s own comportment.

Part of this exploration is to retrieve some of the elasticity that Arendt allows to
her terms. As explored earlier, goodness and compassion are related but distinct
phenomenon. Unlike compassion, however, goodness has a mutable quality in Arendt’s
analysis. Goodness can appear in public in an altered version of itself; it can become
“useful as organized charity or an act of solidarity” (HC 74). Arendt admits – but then
forgets or obscures – that solidarity is goodness modified, made useful. One of her
primary bridging and political relationships, then, has its roots in a quality that she
deems inherently apolitical. Because Arendt does not comment more on this
relationship, she opens a series of questions within her analysis. Is goodness a human
trait, a capacity, or a phenomenon tied to action? When is a principle ontologically based
in goodness? Might other human capacities or virtues, like compassion, for instance,
remain ontologically good or compassionate while simultaneously encouraging certain
kinds of action that Arendt endorses, e.g. forgiveness? How do we begin to distinguish
between the principle’s appearance in the world and its ontological structure or root?

Arendt’s ontological analyses imply a certain stretching of phenomena, starting
from when they are first initiated and extending to some other point of time and
location. There are at least four points of contact with the human world: first, a
phenomenon is somehow rooted in human affairs either in sentiments, traits, faculties,
or actions; second, it transcends human realms and either remains itself or transforms to
some other “useful” phenomenon; third, it traverses that human realm; and finally it
remains immanent and contemporaneous to present-minded actions, behavior, and
sentiments. Of these four, Arendt discusses two – transcending and traversing – and she
assigns this capability to principles and actions, not to compassion and goodness. Her inattention to both how a phenomenon is rooted and remains immanent in human affairs generates a kind of a-historicism. Compassion, for instance, is studied and then preserved in its relationship to the Revolution, as if that single appearance the world is replicated ad nauseam. Yet goodness’ plasticity illustrates the full arc of a phenomenon’s involvement with the human world. And it is to this arc that compassion must be compared.

If goodness enters the world via action, then it must remain anonymous if it will retain its “good” quality unless it enters the world by provoking particular kinds of action that need not remain anonymous. In this latter case, it loses its name “good” but remains ontologically based in goodness. That is, an action like solidarity is one mask for goodness; it emerges out of goodness, is transformed when it enters the public, and it binds people together. The seemingly continued existence of goodness at an immanent level, regardless of its public form as friendship or compassion or solidarity or charity, suggests that goodness is much more entangled, and much more deeply entwined, in the public realm than Arendt might wish to admit. Might not compassion share these qualities? Might it remain pervasive if quiet among human sentiments and might it, in becoming public, change into another useful quality like forgiveness? Arendt asserts that it can devolve into pity or selflessness; can it not also “evolve” into other political faculties or, at the least, act as a buttress to their development? Might its transcendence simultaneously generate depth, which, in turn, might offset or alter the way in which it “collapses space” between people, as Arendt worries? These questions signal possibilities unexplored by Arendt and anticipate Merleau-Ponty’s contribution.

Throughout this chapter, I have suggested that Arendt’s depiction is alluring so long as we overlook compassion’s other possible manifestations, transformations, and
practices. By ignoring alternative depictions of compassion – ignoring that compassion itself might be beneficial in tandem with other principles or virtues – Arendt weakens solidarity, friendship, judgment, and responsibility. Compassion is a bonding affect (Gilbert 2005), tied to feelings of responsibility and the compulsion to act for and with one’s companions. Current research also shows that affect facilitates reason and its scope of comprehension is greater than conscious awareness’. Compassion, reflecting this amplification and re-organizing the body and the mind accordingly, can engender Arendt’s “enlarged mentality” as well as solidarity.

Arendt employs friendship or an enlarged mentality to bring disparate others into solidarity. Since I am concerned with the mechanics of bringing together strangers for political purposes, I concentrate on the latter. Arendt writes that the thought process guiding enlarged mentality is neither empathy nor pure reasoning, which is “me and myself,” but “finds itself always and primarily, even if I am quite alone in making up my mind, in an anticipated communication with others with whom I know I must finally come to some agreement” (emphasis added, BPF 217). Enlarged mentality is “the ability to see things not only from one’s own point of view but in the perspective of all those who happen to be present” (emphasis added, BPF 218). On its surface Arendt’s enlarged mentality appears inclusive, but it presumes a certain degree of knowledge and visibility. I must know the others with whom I might converse and “anticipate” how that conversation might flow. I must acknowledge the possibility of compromise. And I consider the perspectives of those present. What happens when the participants cannot be known in advance? When compromise is not seen as an option? Or when I unwittingly exclude a valuable perspective simply because they are not “present” or in my field of “vision”? These challenges are exacerbated when power structures intercede to pre-determine the participants and the content or structure of the dialogue. Arendt
might qualify such maneuverings as non-political or non-dialogical, but that theoretical categorization does little to solve the problem of exclusion. Regardless of whether exclusions are intentional they hamper the possibility of solidarity across a broad spectrum of people. “Solidarity” disguises how some are excluded in order that others with more means, resources, acceptance, or vocality are known, made present, anticipated, and incorporated.

Contemporary politics in the United States has demonstrated its deafness to compromise and conversation as well as its blindness to the “least of us.” Republican legislators, for example, pledge to refuse considering raising taxes, regardless of compelling reasons that might justify it. Conversation is stymied before it can begin because of issues like “integrity,” what is “right,” what is “just,” and what “freedoms” are. What might compel a person to “anticipate” communication and potential compromise when principles like “rights” or “justice” are at stake? The contestation around defining and implementing ideals like freedom can become antagonistic beyond the point of collaboration or resolution. Just as Arendt’s dichotomous terms require us to “choose” one avenue over another so do principles and ideals: a dyadic dynamic can emerge in which one party, perspective, or person claims to be in the “right” and all others are “wrong.” Enmity is enkindled; anticipated dialogue and compromise extinguished. For conversation, or “enlarged mentalities,” to flourish, a more nuanced understanding of the given situation, the competing perspectives involved, and possible “wins” that are more than zero-sum results is required.

This broader view is facilitated by affect. Research in the emotional systems demonstrates that emotions are essential in creating and sustaining habits, learning, reasoning, and surveying one’s environment. Affect is so essential to one’s capacity to enact new habits that the latter will not emerge if emotions are disabled (Marcus 2002,
Scientists know of at least three emotion systems responsible for a person’s well-being and conscious awareness: the flight and fight system, the disposition system that regulates habit, and the surveillance system that responds to novelty and change. Together these systems monitor and make strategic assessments of one’s situation. As a result, the “emotion modules use far more of the sensory information than can be presented in consciousness. Thus emotions have more information about the state of the world, as well as about our own resources, than is available to consciousness” (Marcus 2002, 62). Emotions have a broader scope than consciousness or reason, determining what is “central and vital to us (aspirations as well as conserving dispositions” and initiating and managing actions (Marcus 2002, 76). Emotions precede reason and, correspondingly, shape to what and how we pay attention (Marcus 2002, 60).

If we place this research in conversation with Arendt, then we can see how it alters some of her claims. Arendt’s enlarged mentality is a thought process that relies on information already gathered and pared down by one’s emotional processes. Who is included in that imaginative discourse and how his perspective is envisioned relies on a pre-reflective, affective perception of the situation. If that conversation omits valuable perspectives then it can either be intentional, a conscious narrowing of scope, or unintentional because one either fails to “see” or emotionally discounts, in some way, that perspective. Both possibilities are worrisome; Arendt cannot escape bias in her enlarged mentality, and merely striking emotion out of the equation will not solve it. If anything, “eliminating” emotion ignores our cognitive experience of thinking and ignores a broader range of information.

Understanding emotion’s alliance with reason and attention can shift our understanding of other people and their actions or perspectives. Marcus remarks that “the distinction between the aware and the articulate and the unaware and inarticulate
remains crucial” (2002, 63). He intends us to maintain those pairings, especially when considering a politics that prizes reason, discourse, and good speech. Yet the inarticulate, the “gut feeling,” the silences, or the gestures can point towards something more broad and meaningful than the articulate: one can well be aware of something, at some level, without being able to moor it in speech. The fact that the mind possesses different emotion systems that provide more information than conscious awareness moves to the forefront – that they, in fact, determine what is consciously noted and whether or how it can be framed in speech – suggests that silence, either a stuttered and stunned silence that erupts in response to an incendiary claim or a specific practice of attention, or visage can be more expansive and communicative than speech itself insofar as it results from a broader and deeper emotional comprehension of the situation at hand.

Compassion, then, begins to take on fruitful dimensions. Compassion is an affect that combines “biological primary affects” with “cognitive references” (Marcus 1988). We might think of it, along with empathy, as dilating the lens by which one perceives other people and specific situations and organizing the body along affective and energetic lines such that certain reactions are engendered. This form of sympathy is more than small acts of altruism – bringing lasagna to a person whose parent or partner has died, donating money to charity, or lobbying for animal welfare policy changes, for example – though these acts are important in and of themselves for social bonds and morale, and may be political depending upon the situation. Rather it is a shift in comprehension that also potentially recalibrates civic culture via. It is an energetic and bodily adjustment first that guides and narrows an individual’s attention while simultaneously either broadening the comprehension of the situation or stimulating

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43 Examples include individual efforts in the Polish solidarity movement, the Civil Rights Movement, or the Underground Railroad in which small, specific acts of sympathy coalesced to create an avenue for liberation and relationships across politically drawn borders. These acts of compassion, which are also acts of solidarity, worked against a context of oppression, segregation, or estrangement.
curiosity about what has happened. In both cases the attention shifts from solipsism to “otherness.”

If we return to The Brothers Karamozov, we find an example in the monk Zosima. Prior to joining the monastery Zosima was a Russian military officer preoccupied with social status, public appearance, and maintaining a sense of self-superiority. He “picked up enough new habits and even new opinions there to turn [him] into a cruel, absurd, almost wild creature” (Dostoevsky 1981, 355). His pride incites him to taunt a man into a duel merely for marrying a woman that Zosima admired and desired. On the eve of the duel he beats his man-servant Afanasy. When he cannot sleep he recalls his late brother’s final sentiments, “every one of us is answerable for everyone else, but we don’t know it; if we did, we would at once have heaven on earth!’ Might that not be true?” (Dostoevsky 1981, 359). He recounts:

So I rushed back upstairs and straight to Afanasy’s tiny, partitioned-off room. ‘Afanasy,’ I said, ‘last night I hit you twice in the face. Please forgive me,’ I said to him. He started as if frightened and stared at me, I saw then that I had to do more, and the next thing, just as I was, in dress uniform with epaulets and all, I threw myself down at his feet, touching the floor with my forehead. ‘Please forgive me!’ I begged him. This time he was completely dumbfounded. ‘Sir…Please, sir…how can you…who am I for you to do that…please…’ And, just as I had done earlier that morning, he covered his face with his hands and started to sob; he turned away from me, facing the window, his whole body shaking with his weeping, while I rushed out of the room, tore downstairs to my second, and jumped into the carriage. (emphasis added, Dostoevsky 1981, 359)

Zosima repents for his actions towards Afanasy, casting aside social stature and hierarchies, because of a psychosomatic prompting. Without being disturbed on a physical and emotional level first – without a compassionate impulse that disrupted sleep and “wild” habits – Zosima is unlikely to self-reflect, recall his brother’s words, or conclude that Afanasy’s forgiveness would be liberating. That the actions are unexpected and socially disorganizing but bridging – “who am I for you to do that” – is precisely the forms of opportunity that compassion creates in order that solidarity might emerge. And it focuses on for whom actions are merited. I suspect that, like Zosima,
people cannot get to reconciliation and solidarity – they often cannot see beyond the parameters of habit and social blinders – without an affective impulse that better grasps what lurks in the unconscious, in the periphery, or outside of social expectation than mere reason alone, no matter how “enlarged.” Compassion contains the possibility for bridging unlike people and focusing a blurry outlook in a way that can temper extreme partisanship or commitment to singular ideals.

This notion of compassion is broader than its traditional definition – an emotional response to suffering – but within the parameter of Clark’s more extensive analysis. And, as will be developed in the upcoming chapters, it has parallels in interpersonal accounts by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. A conversation about compassion cannot avoid becoming, in part, a conversation about the body and sensations. Compassion’s physiological and phenomenological dimensions will be much discussed in upcoming chapters and, as hinted at above, is key to reframing our understanding of it. Because Arendt’s conclusions about compassion are indebted somewhat to her presumptions about sensation, it is useful to discuss them.

The sense of irresistibility found in her concepts is related to Arendt’s understanding of the body and sensations. Sentiments mirror bodily sensations in their ability to incapacitate a person’s agency and decision. This concern emerged in On Revolution when a moral absolute like pity operated in concert with individuals’ emotions and in the Lessing Address when common sense deteriorated due to individuals’ isolation from the public realm. In both cases the physical body became a site of disruption and disorganization because neither sentiments nor sensations could be adequately leashed and guided. Arendt borrows much of her understanding of the

44 Recall Chapter One, in which I explore and affirm Clark’s investigation of compassion.
body and sense sensations from Kant, wherein the self is a “law-giver” to disparate sensations that otherwise threaten to overwhelm the mind, and she partly resonates with Rousseau’s own sense of it; Merleau-Ponty strongly disputes this vision, however.

Sensations are external phenomena that intrude into the body. Arendt believes that the absence of pain is simply the “bodily condition for experiencing the world; only if the body is not irritated and, through irritation, thrown back upon itself, can our bodily senses function normally, receive what is given to them” (HC 113). If the body is irritated either because of intense pain or because its sensations are too intimate – taste and touch are the primary intimate sensations – then the sensations effectively eject a person from the world. Extreme or intimate and private sensations generate experiences in which the body is clearly thrown back upon itself and therefore, as it were, ejected from the world in which it normally moves” (HC 114, emphasis added). Subsequently they are not just isolating but solipsistic. Taste and touch intensify a sensation-based privacy because they eclipse one’s own knowledge of the body – they give too much of the world and they cannot be managed by the self as a result. As Arendt explains, “I am aware of marble and a living body, and not primarily of my own hand that touches them” (ibid).

Accordingly sensations are regulated by common sense, and thus made communicable and communal, or they are uncontrolled and chaotic, isolating the self in a tyrannical modality. Because Arendt connects common sense to political capacities for judgment, the consequences for an unruly body are dangerous to the individual and to the polities. Any phenomenon that subordinates clear thinking to sensational or emotional processes, like compassion, also diminishes our ability to transcend the immediate privacy of our own bodies. Arendt’s perception of sense sensations and its

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45 Detailing the scope of her reliance on Kant is beyond the scope of this project. For similarities, please compare The Human Condition, pp. 112-115, 208-09, and Kant’s Critique of Judgment.
role in forming human relationships will be challenged in the chapter on Merleau-Ponty. For now, it is significant that compassion’s relationship to the body relies on a set of presumptions about sensations and sentiments that are not discussed in the literature on Arendt or in her own writings.

This section has responded to Arendt’s concern by raising a set of questions about the rigidity and assumptions imbuing her analysis. Arendt’s exclusion of compassion as either a political principle or as a seedbed for forgiveness and other human faculties creates a series of strange tensions in her work that is not often commented on either by her or her readers. Most worrisome is how these perspectives combine with her methods, unduly limiting her ability to advocate for and create human agency within capacities like sentiments, characteristics, and body management. While Arendt has demonstrated instances in which compassion is not “good,” she has yet to fully elaborate when it might restrain violent or inflexible tendencies or offer its own set of “useful” practices that encourage relationships despite political facts, estrangement, or indifference.
3. In Defense of Rousseau’s Pity

Jean-Jacques Rousseau frequently appears in Arendt’s criticisms of compassion and conformity in the polity. Whether deriding his attempts to establish pity as a social virtue or disagreeing with his conclusions in the *Social Contract*, Arendt remains adamant that Rousseau offers a deficient form of politics. Many of Arendt’s concerns traced out in the previous chapter are echoed in the Rousseau literature. Yet Rousseau’s works indicate that a more sociable pity, working with perceptions and sentiments, might also have a role in politics. Perception is relational in two ways: first, it concerns the objective relationship of objects to each other and, second, it considers the relationship of people to each other. Pity operates as an undercurrent in an increasingly complicated world characterized by political, socio-economic, and psychic-emotional interdependence and integration. It motivates action-oriented engagement with others and limits the degree of self-isolation. I consider the general criticisms of Rousseau’s pity before moving into an exploration of the relationship between sensation and sentiments, most especially pity and self-love. I argue that Rousseau not only distinguishes between natural, sterile, and sociable pity but he provides four examples of the latter in his novels *Julie* and *Emile*.

In describing Rousseau’s motivations and intents for his writings, particularly concerning compassion and safeguarding individuals from the social realm’s creep, Arendt registers her skepticism and concern. Jean-Jacques Rousseau is seen as a rebellious, reactive, and self-centered political thinker despite his protestations to the

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1 The following abbreviations will be used for Rousseau’s texts – C: *Confessions*; DI: *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*; DP: *Discourse on Political Economy*; E: *Emile, or On Education*; E+S: *Emile and Sophie, or the Solitaires*; J: *Julie, or the New Heloise*; LD: *Politics and the Arts: Letter to D’Alembert on the Theatre*; OL: *On the Origin of Languages*; and SC: *The Social Contract*.

2 This strong dissociation with Rousseau is puzzling, however, since Arendt admits that both are concerned with the encroachment of society upon individual liberty and the capacity for action that discloses the self while involving the self with others (*HC* 39, 41). Canovan also writes of parallels between the two thinkers. According to Canovan, Rousseau’s paradox in the *Social Contract* – freedom is preserved at the expense of a slave – has its echoes in Arendt’s writings: her “insistence on the costs of freedom is part of her stress on the fragile, unnatural quality of human goods” (1978, 6). Arendt, like Rousseau, oscillates between utopianism and practical commitment to politics (Canovan 1978, 7-8).
contrary. Compassion grew out of Rousseau’s rebellion against high society, and, “while the plight of others aroused his heart, he became involved in his heart rather than in the sufferings of others, and he was enchanted with its moods and caprices as they disclosed themselves in the sweet delight of intimacy which Rousseau was one of the first to discover” (OR 88). Arendt’s characterization of Rousseau is pointed if a bit unfair, but it indicates some of the challenges his pity encounters. Like Rousseau the person, Rousseau’s pity is criticized variously as self-involved, subject to hypocrisy or self-superiority, manifesting a form of spectatorship, and unreliable. Each of these spells difficulties for combining compassion with politics.

The pitying witness of suffering is suspect in any politics that espouses equality or a sense of egalitarianism. Pity suggests an elevated stance – a perch from which to view suffering that remains distant (and potentially disdainful) – that relocates otherwise “equal” citizens into positions of superiority and inferiority, strength and weakness, generosity and need. The asymmetry in the relationship is exacerbated because of pity’s affects. The witness feels “good” in providing succor, she thinks well of herself, and others admire and speak well of her. “Inasmuch as pity is influenced by the imagination that activates it, its characteristic of reaching out is here belied by its function of sitting in self-righteous judgment,” argues Morgenstern, “Its sympathy for others is reduced to self-referentiality” (1996, 68). Even if pity is not immediately, spontaneously, or “genuinely” felt, its social rewards encourage a person to pretend at being concerned. Hypocrisy emerges. How does a polity decipher “truth” or integrity in its politicians and citizens if its social sentiments promote deceit?

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3 Clifford Orwin (1997b) shares this concern.
4 See Ruth Grant’s response, for example (1997, 170).
5 This argument avoids the question of de facto equality, assuming that the de jure expression of equality is an actual political, socio-economic condition regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, or class.
6 See Boyd (2004), Morgenstern (1996), and Marks (2007), for example.
The possibility of a pity-inspired theatrics and spectatorship adds to the political masquerade, threatening the quality of political debates as well as active participation in governance. Both Clifford Orwin (1997a) and Jean Bethke Elshtain (1996) worry that a compassionate politics breeds an emotion-laced exhibitionism around visions of suffering. Orwin argues that Rousseau sought to replace virtue with compassion and goodness, a kind of moralism that “creates a demand for public displays of affliction” (1997a, 17). Elshtain (1996), equally dismayed, is not so harsh towards Rousseau. She borrows Arendt’s fine distinctions between pity and compassion in order to elaborate a politically viable notion of compassion. Compassion emerges in politics when “relief [is] animated by a moral calculus” and “sufficient distance between people is maintained” (Elshtain 1996, 29). Though Orwin and Elshtain differ in their diagnosis of and optimism for Rousseau’s pity, they agree that the depiction and language of suffering in political arena carries dangers. Pity, if it is to be used at all, requires an exacting discipline that may be too difficult for the average participant. Orwin is especially critical of pity’s deployment, fixing his gaze and the bulk of his concerns on how pity is institutionalized. Politicized compassion is “[a]lmost always way too much or too little, too intense or too sporadic” for policy (Orwin 1997a, 20). When it is legislated it creates a “Nanny state” with “state-financed bureaucracies of caring” (Orwin 2000, 143). The paternal, “compassionate” state threatens liberty and effectively dissolves citizenship.\footnote{I offer a more specific response to Orwin’s gendered characterizations of compassion later in the chapter.}

Are Rousseau’s critics correct? Is his pity not only apolitical but anti-political, more a danger than a boon to the society that develops it? The literature largely focuses on Rousseau’s “natural” pity, assuming that the pity found in “savage man” is also the pity found in modernity. Yet heeding Rousseau’s assertion that natural pity is weakened, if not eclipsed, when humans move into a certain stage of civilization and development (DI 68, 70, 81) questions this presumption. If Rousseau’s readers do find
pity in modernity then they argue that it is present only because it has been transformed or sublimated into something else such as *amour de soi* (self-love) or a sentiment of conscience (Morgenstern 1996, Cooper 1999). Pity’s form is much contested. I argue that Rousseau actually provides different portraits of a civilized pity that is either self-directed, or what Rousseau terms “sterile” pity, or other-directed, which I call “sociable” pity. The aforementioned concerns about egocentrism, superiority, voyeurism, or hypocrisy are associated with sterile pity, of which Rousseau himself was critical as Marks’ (2007) rightly observes. Yet Marks and others fail to distinguish the sterility of this pity with the fecundity, activity, and focus of Emile’s kind of sociable pity. Various forms of the latter are found in *Emile* and *Julie* in the characters Emile, Julie, Wolmar, and St. Preux.

Of Rousseau’s writings on pity, his best known is the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* (Second Discourse) followed by sections of the *Emile*. Gathering fewer comments, however, is his *Letter to D’Alembert* or his novel, *Julie, or the New Heloise*. And its apparent absence in *The Social Contract* creates questions as to whether compassion can even be political, a point I will return to later. Yet as Cooper (1999) argues, the novel is the best vehicle for describing psychological-moral development such that both the process and the end can be seen. Incorporating *Julie* into the dialogue enriches it because, as Rousseau admits in his *Confessions*, all that was bold in *Emile* is found previously in *Julie* (C 342).

Several commentators have pointed to Rousseau’s uncanny ability to craft his voice in order to elicit certain responses from his reader. Kelly argues that this craft is itself a means of political activism that generates a “rival form of authority based on personal conviction and exemplary behavior rather than conventional status” (2003, 21). That the reader might wish to be like one of Rousseau’s characters indicates that the

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8 See Grant (1994, p. 422), Kelly (2003), Shklar (1978, p. 13), and Cooper (1999, p. 68), for example.
character is drawn so well as to be loveable and instructional: in admiring Julie, for example, a reader might emulate her strengths and learn from her mistakes. By offering a range of characters, virtuous and not, Rousseau is able to wed generality with particularity. This particular reader finds resonance with that general character type and so gains an education that is both broad and tailored through her reading.

This attention to particularity, while harnessing it to more general principles, is counseled in both his novels and his political texts as a means of refining individuals and their polities. He warns, “Trying to be what we are not, we come to believe ourselves different from what we are, and that is the way to go mad” (J 15). And so Rousseau urges the reader to study and know her student’s (or her own) disposition in order to better shape it so that its natural “nobility” might flourish. And while willingly changing that temperament can be immensely difficult (E 94, J 464), it is susceptible to subtle modifications over time from one’s environment and peers, or even from what one reads.

That humans are in a near-constant state of change indicates the pliability that lingers in individuals and raises the simple question, how? The seemingly easy but complicated answer involves the sense impressions. Sensations open up the world to a person and open the person to the world. Rousseau indicates in several texts that externalities ranging from climate to one’s peers can influence an individual’s own behavior, sensibilities, and possibilities as well the political and socio-economic institutions that comprise a polity. Yet little attention is paid to sensations and their relationship to the passions, reason, or human relations. Even less attention is paid to the relationship between sensation and pity. Always at issue for Rousseau is the kind of person being developed within the broad context of society at large: Does she retain any “natural goodness”? Is she able to stand self-sufficient, remain relatively independent

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9 This possibility also questions whether Cooper’s (2003) categorization of “natural” models fully covers the breadth of Rousseau’s characters.
yet recognize how she depends radically upon others, or act with compassion, integrity, or virtue? Is she able to maintain what is “natural” and eschew the forms of “artificiality” that society often demands?

To answer these questions a more specific sense of the word “natural” is required. Is “natural pity” the pity innate to sentient beings? Is it the pity that flows unhindered in a natural state? Claiming anything as “natural” is difficult to do when humans have been “artificially perfected” as civilization erodes the natural state. Rousseau’s analyses consider at least two dimensions of the human experience, the social and the natural. The social can also be thought of as the “moral,” most broadly defined as a civilized state wherein social convention, mores, and laws shape human relationships, behaviors, and actions. It is an arena that requires both objective and subjective judgment, and, consequently, both reason and sentiments like compassion to make those judgments. The natural refers to both the natural wellsprings for human faculties and the deliberate imitation of nature. The natural sustains the moral by providing models, which are critical of and revelatory for social relations, and by providing resources that can be accessed in making social decisions.

3.1. Sensation and Pity

Before moving forward it is instructive to look more closely at the role sensations have in forming and modifying behavior and psychological responses like pity. Shklar terms this “sensationalist psychology,” Starobinski calls it “sensuous ethics,” and

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10 Understanding these distinctions seems even more complex upon reading Rousseau’s claim that the Second Discourse’s investigations “should not be taken for historical truths, but only for hypothetical and conditional reasonings, better suited to shedding light on the nature of things than on pointing out their true origin…O man, whatever country you may be from, whatever your opinions may be, listen: here is your history, as I have thought to read it, not in the books of your fellowmen, who are liars, but in nature, who never lies. Everything that comes from nature will be true; there will be nothing false except what I have unintentionally added” (emphasis added, BW 39). Regardless of the tenuousness of his claims, Rousseau affirms that there are critical reasons for making these conjectures. An idyllic image of human relations provides a strong contrast to contemporary relations and stimulates dissatisfaction: “This feeling should be a hymn in praise of your first ancestors, the criticism of your contemporaries, and the dread of those who have the unhappiness of living after you” (BW 39).
Rousseau himself labels it “wise man’s materialism.” People are “modified” continuously though unconsciously through sense impressions – “in our ideas, in our feelings, in our very actions” (C 343). Rousseau believes that, if one could ascertain these changes and direct them, then she would be able to make herself “better and more certain” of herself (ibid). A number of his works refer to the relationship between environment and mores: in these texts, the particularities of the physical environment factor into which mores are developed and what institutions or laws ought to be implemented for social and political behaviors that maximize individual happiness as well as community health. These analyses might be thought of as macro-level examinations of the sensational effect of environments on people. I believe that Rousseau also offers micro-examinations in Emile and Julie.

But this endeavor is not without difficulties. Even if we accept that sensation plays a role in moral formation and “rational” judgments, the excavation of evidence for the argument is fragile. Rousseau’s drafts and notes on the topic are lost, inadvertently divesting his successors of a systematic examination. The following sketch is generated much in the same way that an archeologist constructs an idea of a lost specimen – by finding chunks of argument that can then be threaded together to create a somewhat coherent whole that gestures at something once complex and exquisite in its own right but now lost. The endeavor is not futile, however. Insofar as it helps us pull out a more nuanced consideration of pity – one both confounding but intriguing, especially in light of neuroscientific research – then it initiates new investigations and generates novel implications in a conversation considered settled, if not dismissed.

Let us begin by answering two basic questions: Why do sensations matter? Just how does sense perception interact with pity, ethics, or agency? Because perception is

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11 Shklar and Starobinski will be discussed in the chapter. Rousseau refers to his “sensitive morality,” also called “wise man’s materialism” in Book IX of The Confessions. It was not completed since it was one of several documents stolen during Rousseau’s flight from Montmorency in 1756 (C 509).

12 See, for instance, the Social Contract, Letter to D’Alembert, Emile, Confessions, and Julie.
relational – it is developed in relationship to inanimate objects as well as to other people – accurately understanding and gauging how a situation affects one’s perception is vital to ethics generally and to developing a sociable pity and a perspicacious judgment. A person’s appraisal is tied inextricably to the sensations gained, the organs directing them, and the resulting judgments. For, as Rousseau urges, the “truth of sentiments depends in large measure on correctness of ideas” (E 227). Rousseau’s position on sense impressions is not unlike Arendt’s – they both believe that the person herself can influence the reception and assessment of sensation, albeit unthinkingly and quickly. The power Rousseau references is more unilateral than reciprocal. Either the sensations work upon the person or the person consciously directs those sensations, chaining the “animal economy to favor moral will” (C 343). Hence they are both concerned with unruly sensations, sentiments, and passions that overpower reason, conscience, or action and threaten individual agency.¹³

Enlaced in this conversation about sentiments and sensations is one about bodies and inter-personal borders.¹⁴ Rousseau’s pity has the facility to pick a way through that human bramble of emotions, sensations, and mind gently, opening some inter-personal borders while carefully guarding the original “I” that ventures forth on such an expedition. Pity, insofar as it transports a person such that she might feel the tangible, physical, emotional, or psychological nuances of a particular life – insofar as it locates those common elements that makes another person both other and same – bridges particularity and generality, sentiment and sensation. Tracy Strong, in offering an understanding of Rousseau’s claim that humans are “naturally good,” asserts, “they are so in nature, that is, when they find themselves in others and others in themselves” (Strong 123). Pity is Rousseau’s primary social mechanism (as opposed to cognitive

¹³ As will be explored in the next chapter, not all theorists are wedded to this understanding of sensation. Merleau-Ponty, for instance, bucks against traditional conceptions of sensation that emphasize mastery and control and argues for a more reciprocal relationship; in so doing, he also finds Rousseau’s lax use of terms like sensation and perception highly problematic and unhelpful.

¹⁴ This aspect especially becomes apparent in the following two chapters.
powers like imagination and judgment) for discerning commonality. Pity also functions as a moderating force on over-fraught passions, where the senses threaten to overrun the physical and emotional self. Rousseau often restrains sexual desire by redirecting attention and actions in compassionate activities; though this passion is ultimately sublimated into *amour de soi* (Cooper 1999) and virtue, it is pity’s movement that first calms the passions. Pity consistently refers a person outside of herself, thereby reducing the possibility of self-isolation while enhancing both the spirit and the comprehension of inter-dependence; and, when other passions threaten to overtake necessary boundaries between self and other, pity re-establishes the self by virtue of establishing new relationships more connected with common purpose.

Rousseau provides an experiential explication of sensation and emotion in *The Origins of Language* where he argues that the two influence each other. Sensations elicit pleasure in the activity of sensing, but they also operate as signs and images that extract “intellectual and moral” impressions from aesthetic works like music and drawing (OL 53, 59, 61): “For the ear does not so much convey pleasure to the heart as the heart conveys it to the ear” (OL 61). The act of hearing a musical note, for instance, is distinct from the act in which the note “moves” a person. Sensation is a vehicle for an impression or idea but not for sentiment. Shklar offers the idea of a “fund of aesthetic energy” that is stimulated by sense impressions wherein feelings speak directly to each other, their messages conveyed through the sense organs (1969, 83). If a person is moved in spite of himself, it is due to the fact that those notes “represent” a sentiment already present in the soul. Rousseau’s work in the *Origins of Language* indicates that, while he is

15 Rousseau worries about reducing feeling and meaning only to the analysis of sensations, signaling that his understanding of sensation and materialism is different from his peers (OL 54-55). Discussing this difference further, Rousseau writes, “[Modern philosophers] no longer recognize anything but sensitive beings in nature, and the whole difference it finds between a man and a stone is that man is a sensitive being with sensations while a stone is a sensitive being without them…If each elementary atom is a sensitive being, how shall I conceive that intimate communication by means of which one senses itself in another so that their two ‘I’s merge into one? …attraction, acting according to mass, contains nothing incompatible with extension and divisibility. Can you conceive the same thing of sentiment? The sensible parts are extended, but the sensible being is indivisible and one: It cannot be divided; it is whole, or it is nothing. The sensitive being is therefore not a body” (E 279).
materialist, he refuses to reduce everything to sensation. Latent human faculties and sentiments, those that emerge both because of and separate from sensation, interact with sensation in order to create a meaningful life (E 42).

Rousseau’s materialism is malleable. One can educate one’s senses, enhance one’s judgment, and create the conditions for greater independence, agency, and natural temperament. A “natural” education like Emile’s, one in which sensational development precedes intellectual and moral instruction, endeavors to hone “objective” perception of cause and effect prior to applying those evaluations to social relationships. Emile’s education brings him “ever closer to the great relations he must know one day in order to judge well of the good and bad order of civil society” (E 190). We are easily deceived when it comes to causal relationships and we often confuse physical causes with moral ones. His education relies on the “incontestable maxim” that nature’s first movements are always correct and that the particular disposition of a child or person must be taken into account if the education is to be right or successful (E 39, 92, 94). Emile’s education might be a template for pedagogy and development but it is not universally applicable. Particularity still matters.

Learning how to think is learning how to understand sense perception\(^\text{16}\) (E 132, 215). Rousseau focuses on sense perception in the period between infancy and adolescence when children only have a prudential reason\(^\text{17}\) (E 89, 92). This kind of reason pertains to the knowledge of strength, its use, the relationship of bodies to the external world, and of natural instruments that are suitable for any age (E 124). For a child who has limited reason, a naturally subdued imagination, and few awakened sentiments, those instruments consist largely of the five sense organs and his own limbs.

Our first masters of philosophy are our feet, our hands, our eyes...To learn to think therefore, it is necessary to exercise our limbs, our senses, our organs,

\(^\text{17}\) Note that Rousseau calls this reason “childish” or “sensual” reason in the Emile; I call it “prudential” because it most resembles that kind of reason Rousseau discusses in the Second Discourse as it relates to “natural savages.”
which are the instruments of our intelligence... Thus, far from man’s true reason being formed independently of the body, it is the body’s good constitution which makes the mind’s operations easy and sure. (E 125)

Not only do childhood games and experiments provide opportunities for exercising the body and sense, but they also train mind and judgment. Rousseau endeavors to make an active and thinking being before adolescence’s sentimentality overtakes him.

Sensations deliver the world to us, which in turn give birth to perceptions and ideas when judgment makes sense of them (E 107). Judgment, reason, and sensation are correlates for Rousseau. “The consciousness of every sensation is a proposition, a judgment,” he explains, “Therefore, as soon as one compares one sensation with another, one reasons. The art of judging and the art of reasoning are exactly the same” (E 206). Despite this correspondence, Rousseau asserts that human error lies in judgments made about sensation, not in sensation itself (E 204). I can be wrong, for instance, that this tickling sensation on my hand comes from a feather rather than my dog’s whiskers. Conscious attention to the messages relayed through sense impressions is a “proposition” that can and should be verified as either correct or incorrect by comparing it to other such propositions. I feel the sensation and I speculate that a feather has broken loose from my pillow until, when I glance down at my hand, I note the black tufts of hair, followed by a shiny black nose, now nuzzling against my hand. Over time I become more adept at noticing the fine distinctions between a feather and a hair; I become more adept at reasoning what causes the sensational effect. The sensation has not changed but the quality and veracity of my induction does. This process of verifying simple experiences grows in complexity until, at last, a person is able to conjecture ideas that conform to the truth. This whole process Rousseau understands as reasoning. The course of Emile’s education inculcates him with ability to judge well because the process of reasoning is broken into its smallest parts, evaluated, and brought together in its whole. But he also judges well because he acknowledges that “judgments about appearances are subject to illusion, be it only the illusion of perception” (Emile 205). If I
am unable to determine whether it is my dog or my pillow that haunts the edges of my being, then it is quite likely I will be even less able to decipher when *amour de soi* or *amour-propre* governs another’s behavior. The judgment of the first shapes the judgment of the latter, and it can spell folly or success in a society increasingly filled with “artificial” people.

Memory and reasoning are distinct faculties that rely on each other. “An image can stand all alone in the mind which represents, but every idea supposes other ideas. When one imagines, one does nothing but see; when one conceives, one is comparing” (E 107). That the memory of previous experiments and experiences linger in the mind and body is one more reason Rousseau is so careful about the environment and objects that surround a person. A child stores up what she hears and sees - “all that surrounds him is the book in which, without thinking about it, he continually enriches his memory while waiting for his judgment to be able to profit from it” – and influences her future judgment and conduct (E 112). This relationship also uncovers one of the bodily mechanisms by which character is formed: actions, thoughts, and sensations all work with memory to form habits, good and bad, that then coalesce and influence future activities and responses. It also demonstrates why Rousseau counsels pity in times of sensational, emotional, or mental conflict – pity, in referencing one’s past sufferings, (re-)establishes a baseline for action, reaction, and attention that draws a person into commonality with others, thereby limiting feelings of isolation while redirecting energies on other-centric projects. If pity functions as a base to which the self can return continuously, then it nurtures a beneficent character that sees particular interests as fundamentally bound with general ones.

But Rousseau finds more interaction between sensation and morality: people instinctively and unknowingly add a moral dimension when they synthesize and
comprehend sense perceptions. Sense impressions inform people about “those it is suitable for us to be near or to keep at a distance, about the way we have to go about overcoming their resistance or setting up a resistance against them which keeps us from being injured” (E 150). Aversion and attraction are dominant modes ensuring self-preservation, and sensation ensures that the calculations are immediate, subconscious, and basic. This capacity is not diminished merely because humans evolve from “savages;” rather, Rousseau finds that human relationships play themselves out in a sensational melodrama made all the more difficult to cognitively decipher because of the rise in pretense as well as in passions. But, as Rousseau’s characters demonstrate, some people are magnetic energetically, capable of subtly drawing others towards them. We feel in “our gut,” so to speak, that this person is compassionate, that person is judicious, and another is suspicious and we act accordingly, justifying it through this or that reason. Unfortunately, while Rousseau is certainly aware that complex socialization can stigmatize or applaud certain groups of people, thereby affecting the “natural,” sensational analysis, he does not explore the power dynamics implicit in sensation, sentiment, and moral judgment.

This interaction gains yet another dimension when Rousseau’s admonition that “all imitation and imagination often mix something moral with the compression” of the senses is considered (E 152). Taken together, the ability to perceive and judge well how foreign bodies relate to our own can be strengthened or weakened radically by moderating imagination and imitation. A person could, for instance, be socialized to fear one person by virtue of her skin color or to scorn her by virtue of her gender. Seeing that woman, then, triggers an imaginary prediction of behavior, attitude, or action that may...
or may not correspond to actuality – perception is skewed, judgment is poor, and ethical action is limited. Believing a principle of “equality” is no security against the “compression” of sense impressions and a fear-based morality that precedes and colors any actual engagement. Yet pity has a relationship with imagination, as will be explained with more detail, and it is a social virtue that I argue Rousseau wishes to cultivate among his readers by inspiring imitation. If, as Rousseau suggests, a person can intercede deliberately in imagination’s movements – either because she wishes to emulate another’s “virtue” or because an event shifts her imaginative speculations – then she can also begin to shape the ethics that are formed in conjunction with sensations. She can begin to change how she perceives and responds in a fundamental way. And pity, Rousseau’s most basic principle founding social virtues, can be instrumental in those changes.

### 3.2. Pity’s Forms: Natural, Sterile, and Sociable

Is pity too simple – and too strong – to serve as a civic virtue? Rousseau’s commentators often portray pity more one-dimensionally than Rousseau himself has, and they often ignore how Rousseau’s pity collaborates with perception, judgment, and distinction. Rousseau’s works suggest that we are able to cultivate a sociable pity that informs relational perception and guides judgment. Perception is relational in two ways: first, it concerns the objective relationship of objects to each other and, second, it considers the relationship of people to each other. Rousseau believes that the former enhances the latter, which, is to say, “rightly” perceiving the “moral” relationships between people rests on accurately understanding physiological phenomenon like sensations.

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19 See Elshtain (1996), Orwin (1997), and Boyd (2004) for a fuller elaboration of these concerns.
20 Morgenstern (1996) and Marks (2006, 2007) allow for pity’s role in judgment but, ultimately, determine that pity is itself subservient (and, consequently, less important) than either judgment or gratitude, respectively.
21 I will use the terms “pity” and “compassion” interchangeably when discussing Rousseau’s thought. As seen in how he defines pity, Rousseau’s term does not carry the negative connotations of its contemporary.
Rousseau provides sketches of a civilized pity for his readers, offering characters that model how to apply and develop a sociable pity. Pity can be broadly categorized as natural, sterile, or sociable. Sterile pity lacks directed action because it is a hollow and egocentric emotion. Sociable pity infuses perspective and judgment with a regard for other people. It relates to the complex interdependency of people and stimulates a desire to act and respond. His characters Emile, Julie, Wolmar, and St. Preux offer distinct temperamental versions of sociable pity. Whether pity’s vitality is developed depends upon context, one’s control over passions or the imagination, and one’s temperament.

3.2.1. Natural Pity

Pity was writ out of “natural history.” As Rousseau explains in his Discourse on the Origins of Inequality, his version of that fictional “state of nature,” pity and self-love are two fundamental principles that grace a person prior to reason.

> It is from the conjunction and combination that our mind is in a position to make regarding these two principles [pity and amour de soi], without the need for introducing that of sociability, that all the rules of natural right appear to me to flow; rules which reason is later forced to reestablish on other foundations, when, by its successive developments, it has succeeded in smothering nature. (emphasis added, DI 35)

The exclusion might be understandable, thanks to the “assemblage of artificial men and factitious passions” that philosophers mistake for their originals (DI 80), but its affects on political theory are substantial. Few theories take seriously the idea that pity might play a role in social and political foundings. But Rousseau is firm in his belief that pity is an essential element of human development that facilitates interaction and,

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22 We can begin to note distinctions between Arendt and Rousseau. Arendt prefers to unite people around common interests whereas Rousseau sees pity as uniting common needs. Arendt, while distinguishing between goodness and pity, tends to tether pity to a person’s goodness; pity is only acceptable for those deemed “good.” Rousseau, on the other hand, suggests that while goodness might be related to pity, the more pertinent personal characteristic is strength of soul, which may also require that a person know how to be cruel (consider Emile’s hunting expeditions, intended to harden his constitution).

23 Yet Rousseau’s tale is not too far afield of current research on the evolutionary role of pity in forming early attachments and society.
increasingly, interdependence prior to the advent of societies and polities. Understanding why pity is foundational and why reason intercedes provides more clarity as to why critics assert that pity is infeasible and undesirable and I argue that its alternative manifestations are useful for politics.

Pity emerges early in the *Discourse on Inequality* as one of two innate principles guiding human action prior to reason’s advent. It moderates the other principle – amour de soi, or self-love – and together they ensure that a “savage” person preserves self and others regardless of relative isolation, unfamiliarity, or an undeveloped reason. Pity is an “innate repugnance to seeing his fellow men suffer…that, with all their mores, men would have been anything but monsters, if nature had not given them pity to aid their reason” (DI 54). It “carries us without reflection to the aid of those we see suffering” and ensures the preservation of the entire species (DI 55). From it “alone flow all the social virtues” like humanity, benevolence, generosity, and friendship (DI 54).

While Arendt is at pains to distinguish compassion from friendship, Rousseau is convinced that the latter relies upon the former. Without compassion there is no possibility for friendship. And it inspires its own maxim of natural goodness, “*Do what is good for you with as little harm as possible to others*” (DI 55).

It would not be wrong to remark that not only does sociability rely upon pity, an other-directed and spontaneous internal movement, but human development does as well. Pity aids reason by mitigating our worst inclinations and limiting egocentrism. We would not recognize ourselves as the thinking, sensing, and feeling beings we are now had imagination not wrenched us beyond self-isolation, foregrounding pity’s insistence to treat another person carefully and inciting observations of commonalities.

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24 He repeats this notion that a “people” must be formed before a polity can be established in *The Social Contract*.

25 Rousseau admonishes Hobbes for assuming that natural people would have the same desires and needs as Hobbes’ contemporaries, asserting that “we could say that savages are not evil precisely because they do not know what it is to be good; for it is neither the development of enlightenment nor the restraint imposed by the law, but the calm of the passions and the ignorance of vice which prevents them from doing evil” (DI 53).
When imagination takes root, it moves pity from a primitive *repulsion* to suffering to *identifying with* a suffering being\(^{26}\) because imagination and observation draw out the commonalities between two seemingly unlike objects (DI 50). Imagination effectively repositions a person’s perspective. Rather than focusing solely on one’s own experience, a person who witnesses suffering notices how she is similar to the other person as well as that person’s degree of pain (OL 32). This double-movement opens the possibility of engaging with and being affected by another person:

“In fact, how do we let ourselves be moved by pity if not by transporting ourselves outside of ourselves and identifying with the suffering animal, by leaving, as it were, our own being to take on its being?\(^{27}\) We suffer only so much as we judge that it suffers. It is not in ourselves, it is in him that we suffer. Thus, no one becomes sensitive until his imagination is animated and begins to transport him out of himself.” (emphasis added, E 222)

Pity takes a person outside of herself in order to reveal life, or suffering, from a different position. Were we unable to get beyond our individual selves, were we unable to identify likeness in unlike persons or beings, then our capacity to function as social creatures would be crippled. And this movement is not mere projection of the self onto another but a way in which the other informs the self. As a result, a richer sense of who comprises the body politic – of different sorts of social positions created through inequalities like class, race, gender, ethnicity, or sexuality – might be found.

Yet as human faculties develop, pity itself seems to transpire. The *Second Discourse* contains three separate tracks for human “perfection” – the growth of human knowledge, the sociology of human relations, and the sensations’ development of mechanical prudence – that are not overlapped to provide a strong, singular chronology of human development. Pity intermittently emerges in the first two before diving under cover until the end, when Rousseau pronounces it practically extinguished except in a few “great souls” (DI 71). The irony is that as the need for pity increases – as human

\(^{26}\) Morgenstern terms these forms of pity immanent and active, respectively (1996, 63).

\(^{27}\) Rousseau seems to confirm Arendt’s fear that a person’s identity will be lost or subjugated to another’s identity when pity moves him or her. A response to her concern will develop over the course of this chapter and the one on Merleau-Ponty.
societies grow more complex, hierarchical, and unequal – its natural ability to function ceases. Pity departs at precisely the time humans need it most, but why?

The advent of sentiments like love, envy, fear, or esteem and of reason overshadow, if not erase, the original impulse for sociability and goodness. In part, pity itself multiplies and transforms, finding expression in other social sentiments like generosity or friendship. Passions like self-love and sensual love begin to replicate and spark corresponding passions like envy, jealousy, or desire. Reason begins to fuel a narcissistic self-love that Rousseau terms “amour-propre” (DI 54-55). People become more dependent upon others’ opinions and desires, and comparisons become suggestions that this or that person is insufficient, imperfect, “not enough,” or wrong (E 212-14, 219; DI 63, 67-68). This reliance on others’ opinions and validation intensifies as civil, physical, political, and economic inequalities grow. In time, due to the desire for public esteem, human development and striving create artificial and “factitious passions” that appear “natural” but are, in Rousseau’s eyes, distortions to the human psyche and body (DI 80-81).

Despite the extreme interdependence of psyches, economies, opinions, and commitments, humans have managed to re-create isolation. Reason so fixedly “turns man in upon himself” (DI 54-55) that pity is insufficient in stirring a person to assist another.

Philosophy is what isolates him and what moves him to say in secret, at the sight of a suffering man, ‘Perish if you will; I am safe and sound.’ No longer can anything but danger to the entire society trouble the tranquil slumber of the philosopher and yank him from his bed. His fellow man can be killed with impunity underneath his window. He has merely to place his hands over his ears and argue with himself a little in order to prevent nature, which rebels within him, from identifying with the man being assassinated. (emphasis added, ibid)

Here Rousseau provides a response to his critics: it is not pity but jealousy that leads to hypocrisy (DI 63). “It was necessary, for his advantage, to show himself to be something other than what he in fact was. Being something and appearing to be something became two completely different things; and from this distinction there arose grand ostentation, deceptive cunning, and all the vices that follow in their wake” (DI 67). The desire to prove superior to one’s peers, regardless of whether suffering is present, is rooted in a desire for a certain kind of esteem and a jealousy for those who have it. Hypocrisy may conceal itself with pity, but pity is not “naturally” inclined to deliberate obfuscations. To name this reaction as compassion is a misnomer that forgets the artificiality of civilized people.
Reason halts pity’s imaginative transports and stifles nature’s inclinations. This point is important. Rousseau claims that the inability, even the desire, to see oneself as somehow related to another person is a conscious result of personal deliberation, one which elevates the self over others; decisions about whether or how to intervene, assist, or support become calculations of self-interest. Particular interests are shored up with numerous, logical reasons that ignore compassionate impulses that might secure those interests to a more general one. That it is admitted “in secret” suggests that the person is aware that such indifference is neither “good” nor reflects well upon him. It is not pity but reason’s presence that enables a form of hypocrisy wherein the desire to self-identify a certain way, as “good” or “beneficent” for instance, cannot square itself with a calculated apathy. The person “perfected” and “civilized” is but a shadow of his savage ancestor in terms of “natural” goodness and compassionate inclination. And unlike the savage’s simple, naïve isolation, the modern’s isolation is self-directed and fails to secure him from society’s demands.

Interdependency itself is not a problem; in fact, it comprises one of the more difficult challenges: How does one moderate one’s activities and attachments so that dependence does not create artifice, competition, or indifference? The quality of the attachment and the ability of a person to moderate action accordingly are significant.

“It is man’s weakness which makes him sociable; it is our common miseries which turn our hearts to humanity; we would owe humanity nothing if we were not men. Every attachment is a sign of insufficiency. If each of us had no need of others, he would hardly think of uniting himself with them. Thus from our very infirmity is born our frail happiness… I do not conceive how someone who needs nothing can love anything, I do not conceive how someone who loves nothing can be happy.” (E 221)

Certainly attachments signal dependency, or an inability to acquire one’s desires or needs solely with one’s own resources and person. Yet Rousseau also believes that this inter-dependency is what brings happiness, solidity, and collaboration into being.

This tale of human development reveals a strong conflict. How do we understand sentiments or “innate principles” like pity if they have undergone an
internal evolution and our language does not distinguish between the “artificial” and the “natural”? Even more, how are we to understand Rousseau’s own ambivalence on the matter? He remarks that pity “no longer resides anywhere but in a few great cosmopolitan souls”\(^{29}\) (DI 70) but also that the “force of natural pity” is such that the “most depraved mores still have difficulty destroying [it], since everyday one sees in our theaters someone affected and weeping at the ills of some unfortunate person, and who, were he in the tyrant’s place, would intensify the torments of his enemy still more” (DI 54). Pity is stifled, itinerant and rare when Rousseau concludes his *Discourse on Inequality*. How, then, can Rousseau’s readers be certain that natural pity will display itself similarly in a complex society than in a primitive state?

The following arguments turn on the progressive transformation that “natural” pity undergoes. At most we can consider “natural” pity as that psycho-emotional transportation that grounds other social and civic virtues, but this principle has itself been modified, scarred, covered over, forgotten, or ignored through the march of time. When pity emerges in Rousseau’s later texts – the *Emile*, *Julie*, or the *Confessions*, for example – it is a civilized pity, which means that how it displays itself and the degree to which it functions well is highly variable, individual, and not entirely “natural.”\(^{30}\) Moreover, it displays a malleability wherein it adapts itself to environments as well as deliberate educations.

\(^{29}\) The full passage is as follows: “With civil right thus having become the common rule of citizens, the law of nature no longer was operative except between the various societies, when, under the name of the law of nations, it was tempered by some tacit conventions in order to make intercourse possible and to serve as a substitute for natural compassion which, losing between one society and another nearly all the force it had between one man and another, no longer resides anywhere but in a few great cosmopolitan souls, who overcome the imaginary barriers that separate peoples, and who, following the example of the sovereign being who has created them, embrace the entire human race in their benevolence” (DI 70). See also p. 68.

\(^{30}\) Rousseau begins his treatise with this distinction. He likens humanity to the “statue of Glaucus, which time, sea and storms had disfigured to such an extent that it looked less like a god than a wild beast, the human soul, altered in the midst of society by a thousand constantly recurring causes, by the acquisition of a multitude of bits of knowledge and of errors, by changes that took place in the constitution of bodies, by the constant impact of the passions, has, as it were, changed its appearance to the point of being nearly unrecognizable. And instead of a being active always by certain and invariable principles, instead of that heavenly and majestic simplicity whose mark its author had left on it, one no longer finds anything but the grotesque contrast of passion which thinks it reasons and an understanding in a state of delirium” (BW 33).
3.2.2. Sterile Pity

Rousseau is most explicit about sterile pity, writing in The Letter to D'Alembert that though theater produces pity, this pity is a “fleeting and vain emotion which lasts no longer than the illusion which produced it; a vestige of natural sentiment soon stifled by the passions; a sterile pity which feeds on a few tears and which has never produced the slightest act of humanity. Thus, the sanguinary Sulla cried at the account of evils he had not himself committed” (LD 24). Sterile pity is narcissistic in that the person feeling the emotion gains pleasure because of what pity suggests about the self. It is form without content, a solipsistic emotion that requires little more than an illusionary external stimulus that activates a self-feeding cycle. It neither depends upon being a “good person” nor on initiating an other-directed action. Rather it serves as a means of re-establishing the ego’s dominance and enflaming *amour-propre*.

Rousseau finds the theater particularly dangerous because it promotes incessant emotions without harnessing them to action.31 Feeling emotion continually actually “excites us, enervates us, enfeebles us, and makes us less able to resist our passions. And the sterile interest taken in virtue serves only to satisfy our vanity without obliging us to practice it” (LD 56). The prolongation of emotions – the fact that they are constantly exercised or that they change in pitch, climbing to moments of joy and laughter then succumbing to terror, shock, or anger – enervates one’s capacity to control emotions while enkindling pride at feeling them so completely. A similar diagnosis is found in the *Emile* when Rousseau warns that physicians, clergy, and other professions having continual contact with suffering are more likely to become hardened against human misery and pain.32

31 Also see Kelly (2003), p. 59.
32 Rousseau seems to foresee what we term “compassion fatigue.” Neuroscientific research on empathy supports Rousseau’s evaluations: the overstimulation of sensation or emotions can over-stress the mind, resulting in a severe withdrawal from the situation or de-sensitization (Perry 2010). Boyd (2004) considers this consequence a reason to disregard compassion. Yet I would suggest that these situations are things to
Over-stimulated emotions or the habitual sight of suffering restrains the desire to actively respond to suffering. Rousseau attributes this reaction to the loss of novelty – the sense impressions attenuate and the imagination dulls when we see the same situation continually (E 231). Instead those sights unleash the witness’ own previous memories as well as their accompanying judgments (ibid). A strange cycle begins: rather than noting the particularities of that individual’s suffering and of that circumstance, which might otherwise trigger theimaginative transportation out of one’s own experience, a witness gets further entrenched in his own mind. His experiences harness him tighter and tighter into his own reactions, memories, or emotions. The memories stall or override any potential for moving beyond the confines of one’s self, and pity flounders in the resulting self-absorption. The idea of engaging distressed others – of providing “relief, consolation, and work” (LD 25-26) – either does not occur or deflates when contrasted with the feelings of pleasure or relief that are generated by the notion that one has been moved by suffering. At worst, as Rousseau’s critics identify, the witness feels superior to the suffering person.33

Yet it remains important to maintain distinctions: pride, cruelty, or hypocrisy is a sentiment separate from pity. Rousseau attributes cruelty to fear and weakness (OL 32) and he finds that it is our “right to be esteemed” that leads to the distortion of virtues and egocentrism (DI 64, 78). Shklar calls pity the “psychic source of human goodness” (1969, 46) and rightly points to increasing inequality for disruptive passions like amour-propre and the desire to be esteemed by peers. If pity is twisted to appear other than it is – hypocrisy cloaks itself in compassion, for instance – then pity is no different from any

33 Rousseau recognizes this dilemma, too, but attributes it to amour-propre: “In pitying them, he will despise them; in congratulating himself, he will esteem himself more, and in feeling himself to be happier than them, he will believe himself worthier to be so. This is the error most to be feared, because it is the most difficult to destroy” (E 245).
other virtue that can be manipulated for a specific interest. We need only to consider the use of terms like “justice” or “right” to realize that the banners under which political campaigns gather are susceptible to misrepresentation.

Sterile pity, while more easily diagnosed through theater’s example, extends into “civilized” society. Because Rousseau locates pity’s sterility in the dominance of other social passions and untamed senses, he indicates that apathy is not just a consequence of spectacle but also results from habit and self-interest. Habit and self-interest encourage solipsism. Remember that philosopher who covers his ears and whispers the several reasons as to why he should ignore the person below his window? Accustomed to rationalizing self-interest (and perhaps unaccustomed to listening to the pity that faintly beats within him) the civilized philosopher has habituated himself to not responding unless immediately culpable.

Sterile pity’s danger lies in self-deception. If a person believes that his emotional reactions are genuine and those reactions feel alive and active without being coupled with action, then he is less likely to be able to change his reaction. His indifference gathers about him until it functions much like armor: insensitive to external blows, no doubt, but cold to the touch and isolating for the wearer. Yet whether his indifference grows out of conceit or out of the over-stimulation of emotions and the elicitation of memories, the psychic reaction is itself hollow. Pity’s activity must be other-directed and energetic, and motivating such a pity requires that we temper the overreach of self-interests and passion. This kind of pity is possible in contemporary situations provided we nourish it.

3.2.3 Sociable Pity

Julie offers her own solution to a sterile pity that “hardens us to others’ sufferings” when she writes, “woe to him who knows not how to sacrifice a day’s pleasure to the duties of humanity” (J 97). Julie, like Emile, Wolmar, and St. Preux, is
capable of engaging with others so that needs are met in a thoughtful way and, in so doing, she demonstrates that pity can function in society without fueling also *amour-propre*. Sociable pity\(^{34}\) is responsive, it involves a fruitful tension between emotion and reason, and it operates when it is expansive, marrying generality with particularity. While the *Emile* and *Julie* contain character sketches that might inspire the reader to act more compassionately, the texts are not explicitly analytical. The novelistic form of writing is beneficial for persuading the hearts of Rousseau’s readers, but it also leads to a concern about over-reaching with or overlooking sociable pity itself. This examination begins by gaining an overview of sociable pity’s characteristics before moving into the *Emile* and *Julie*.

Many of sociable pity’s general characteristics are found in *Emile*, and it builds on natural pity’s vestiges. That Emile is conceived as a contemporary of Rousseau and that the project is envisioned as a means of preserving what is “natural” in a developed, complicated social being implies that the pity found here is not “natural.” Rather it is latent, a “natural” tendency that requires cultivation if it is to be preserved without also being barren.

Of the numerous passions coursing through humans, including self-love, pity is “the first *relative* sentiment which touches the human heart according to the order of nature” (emphasis added, E 223). No one is absolved from pity (E 227) just as no one can evade mortality and suffering; humans are all “born naked and poor,” Rousseau remarks (E 222). Pity’s movement is not only a reminder that humans are interconnected, consciously and unconsciously bound to each other, but that there are common elements of the human condition that are unavoidable, regardless of wealth or status. Because these references require imagination and the comprehension to find

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\(^{34}\) Disinterested affection (BW 28-29), disinterested virtue (J 249), and active beneficence (E 250) are terms that appear intermittently in Rousseau’s works. Of the three, active beneficence has the most similarity to sociable pity because both focus on actively engaging others.
similarity between unlike people, Rousseau marks pity’s entrance at adolescence. A certain degree of cognition or awareness is necessary for pity to move beyond an instinctual repulsion noted in natural pity’s original form.

Emile’s education in compassion is an intimate study intended to draw parallels between his experience and others’. He learns that “there are beings like him who suffer what he has suffered, who feel the pains he has felt, and that there are others whom he ought to conceive of as able to feel them too” (E 222). Upon an immediate encounter with suffering Emile conjures the possibility that others, yet unseen, might similarly suffer. As Rousseau depicts it, pity displays similarities to Arendt’s “enlarged mentality:” we “do not become what they must be, but remain ourselves, modified” and our “rational” judgment of their situation is merely a comparison of “their prejudices to ours” (emphasis added, OL 49). Unlike Arendt, Rousseau also introduces the possibility of subjectivity – the comparison is not “factual” but a matter of personal prejudice, or interest. Pity instructs by moving from the particular to the general (and back again), and it functions in relation to interests, prejudices, experiences, and opinions. The result is an understanding of what might be an adequate response or reaction, but any action is humbled by the fact that a person cannot know the entirety of another’s relationships. Rather, in a more modest endeavor, pity enkindles an understanding of what his position might be like.

Yet Rousseau does believe that some persons are so sensitive to others that they can respond accurately, quickly, and powerfully. He offers sweet Sophie as such a person, who, upon visiting a couple infirmed by injury, is “like an angel from heaven that God sends them:”

Her gentle and light hand knows how to get at everything which hurts them and to place their sore limbs in a more relaxed position. They feel relieved at her very approach. One would say that she guesses everything which hurts them. This extremely delicate girl is rebuffed neither by the dirtiness nor the bad smell and knows how to make both disappear without ordering anyone about and without the sick being tormented. (E 441)
Sophie’s grace lays in her ability both to perceive precisely what to do, how, and when and to execute her actions without belittling or embarrassing the infirm couple. She has authority without superiority and maintains a sense of equality and solidarity. Sophie, “intended” for Emile, has had an equally careful education so that her innate sensitivity is joined to insight, sensibility, and activity. Rousseau recognizes that disposition influences how a particular person displays and works with her capacity for pity, as will be explored with more detail later. No matter one’s “natural” capacity for sociable pity, its responsiveness depends on careful cultivation of imagination and observation.

Sociable pity, like its sterile counterpart, works in conjunction with imagination and memory. Unlike sterile pity this operation does not settle oneself back into one’s ego; it does not nourish *amour-propre*. Imagination and memory, particularly the memories of one’s past sufferings, knit a temporal continuum that links the past, present, and future such that one feels the continuity of one’s own personal pains (E 225). It also enables a person to create a temporal comparison: the immediate situation simultaneously reaches back into the past, uncovering similarities, and into the future, prophesizing that a similar situation might recur. To witness suffering is to re-acknowledge human fragility – at any moment, one can slip into destitution, broken attachments, or physical illness. In this way one shares another person’s pains.

Pity’s movement thus enkindles the instinct for self-preservation, or *amour de soi*. “I feel that I *am, so to speak, in him,*” explains Rousseau, “it is in order not to suffer that I do not want him to suffer” (emphasis added, E 235). Insofar as one identifies with another person and suffers alongside him, recalling pain, then *amour de soi* is extended because nature itself “inspires in me the desire of my well-being in whatever place I feel my existence” (*ibid*). Cooper argues that this extension means that *amour de soi* is foundational to both sociable pity and conscience (1999, 90). But I am not persuaded that Rousseau privileges *amour de soi* over pity. He devotes more textual energy to elaborating and cultivating *amour de soi*, but this focus seems the result of humans’
solipsistic tendencies in which each privilege one’s self over others, even daring to raise one’s self through deliberate oppression or abuse. Pity asserts itself, along with conscience and reason, in order to moderate self-isolating and misanthropic tendencies. It is pity that perceives suffering; it is pity that ignites a response; it is pity that transports a person, enabling identification and triggering amour de soi. The relationship between the two, three if conscience is included, grows more complicated once we recall that Rousseau establishes pity as the root of all social virtues (DI 54, E 223). As Cooper himself relates, “As pity is the sentimental source of nearly all social virtue and fellow feeling, a proper education in pity amounts to a wide-ranging social education. And a successful education in pity yields all the excellences – moral, intellectual, and aesthetic – that Rousseau cites in this interior portrait of the maturing Emile” (1999, 99).

In part Cooper’s reluctance to accord equal, or even some, weight to pity might result from the lack of attention to sensations and desires. As noted above, this inattention is a problem in the literature at large, perhaps fairly, since the senses seem trivial in grand schematics for human psychology, behavior, and ethics. But Rousseau believes that senses play a pivotal role in wildly strengthening sexual energy and desires, even pushing them into debauchery. Pity does more than moderate self-love; it tempers the very things that inflame it – the senses.

But at the age when he has become more sensitive and is more intensely or more constantly affected, more profound impressions leave traces that are more difficult to destroy; and from the habitual condition of the soul there results an arrangement of the features which time renders ineradicable...Put their nascent imaginations off the track with objects which, far from inflaming, repress the activity of their senses. (E 230-31).

Rampant sexual energy, driven by (inflamed) senses, engenders greater attachments to others and concentrates the comparisons between self and other on one’s self; the desire

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35 My dispute with Cooper is on this point: his belief that pity is only an aspect of an extended amour de soi and requires amour de soi to originate it (1999, pp. 56, 57, 96). But even this assertion grows unclear when placed alongside his arguments that conscience originates pity (1999, pp. 82, 90, 96-98). Clearly the three terms are tangled intricately with each other. I find his arguments for conscience more compelling, and I do not believe that those arguments invalidate my own findings on pity.

36 The Second Discourse displays a similar structure: Rousseau moves from his discussion on pity into one on sexual energy (DI 55). He clearly sees the two as linked.
to be esteemed, to be desired, to be superior grows. Rousseau prescribes two separate but complementary tracks that restrain a burgeoning *amour-propre* – “active beneficence,” or sociable pity manifested, and historical readings.37 Both “suspend” *amour-propre* while providing experiences that foster knowledge about the human condition, both in terms of suffering and subsequent actions that may or may not prove “helpful.” Activities like advocacy, volunteering, or care-taking and observation reveal commonalities between the self and others (OL 32) while providing instruction as to the sources of “others’ misfortunes” (J 249). It also fixes that disposition in the self (J 202). The imagination employed in pity and history nourishes reason, firmly fixing it in oneself while also enabling it to comprehend others. The boundary between self and other is secure but permeable. One is both for one’s self and for others, but one is not one’s self *because* of others. Emile later remarks that, “[at] the age of strong passions, I shaped my reason with the aid of my senses” (E+S 199). Yet it is also the case that his senses were formed with the aid of pity. The result was to extend his “universal self over all of humanity” (*ibid*).

This element of sociable pity – its tremendous capacity to expand the self’s borders – correlates to Cooper’s expansive *amour de soi* (1999) and Kelly’s “strength of soul” (86). By finding objects that “swell” one’s heart and extend it outwards, one’s heart can begin to “find itself everywhere outside itself” while it is steered clear of those things “which contract and concentrate the heart and tighten the spring of the human I” (E 223). In so doing, particular interests join with general ones. Rousseau believes that particularity encourages novelty, which leads one to evaluate what is familiar (OL 33), but that particularity also devolves into an aggrandizing self-interest through *amour-propre* if it is not generalized. “The more one generalizes this [particular] interest, the
more it becomes equitable, and the love of mankind is nothing other than the love of justice” (E 252). The ability to generalize “individual notions” under the “abstract idea of humanity” allows a person to join particular affections with broader ones that encourage identifying with others (E 233). It also proliferates social virtues like humanity and justice. Unlike Arendt, who claims that pity can function only when it is particular, Rousseau asserts that pity maintains its strength when it combines particularity with generality. And unlike Arendt’s solidarity, which looks to interests stripped of their affective dimensions, Rousseau’s sociable pity creates human binds through both interest and affect. The net effect is to find one’s interests and affections in concert with a concern for what is held in common, an endeavor not unlike the aspirations of The Social Contract’s general will.

Particularity’s conjunction with generality enables pity to be extensive without also being weak. He writes, “one yields to it only insofar as it accords with justice, because of all the virtues justice is the one that contributes most to the common good of men” (E 253). Yet even this statement is not simple: pity seems to play a large role in determining exactly what is just. Rousseau admits that justice emerges from a capacious amour de soi because “love of mankind is nothing other than the love of justice” (E 252) and it clearly moderates an active pity so that it is neither insipid nor sterile. Yet “love of mankind” seems akin to “humanity.” What is humanity but pity extended to the “human species in general” (DI 54)? Besides which, pity itself encourages the movement of the “I” beyond its personal borders so that it can consider and identify with others,38 a pre-requisite to “loving” them. There can be no expanded self-love without a sociable pity that jars one’s self out of self-idealizing fantasies. It is pity’s education that delivers “judicial clarity” and the “true principles of the just” (E 253). Rousseau concedes that a

38 An implication that Rousseau does not explicitly make is that this identification, when combined with interdependency, emphasizes how my existence itself rests in another’s existence. Strong (2000), however, argues similarly.
person may be just without also being compassionate, but he quickly rejoins, “I say that they may be just — if, that is, a man can be just when he is not merciful” (E 227). What is mercy but pity for the guilty (DI 54)? Justice is “inseparable from goodness” (E 282) but pity is the “psychic source of all possible goodness in human relations” (Shklar 1969, 46). Pity does not have a simple relationship with justice (or self-love, for that matter) but it is clear that it remains a powerful, influential force in human relations.

In the *Emile* Rousseau offers three maxims for pity that he believes universal. In setting the parameters for pity Rousseau also provides insight into human psychology and behavior (223-25):

1. “It is not in the human heart to put ourselves in the place of people who are happier than we, but only in that of those who are more pitiable.”
2. “One pities in others only those ills from which one does not feel oneself exempt.”
3. “The pity one has for another’s misfortune is measured not by the quantity of that misfortune but by the sentiment which one attributes to those who suffer it.”

Suffering provides a surer baseline for finding commonality than happiness does, which more often triggers the reflex to envy, covet, or disdain the other’s joy. Happiness appears exclusive and the happy woman appears self-sufficient. While this observation appears negative, it provides clarity about the nature of attachments in a highly interdependent world: unconsciously or not, humans wish to be necessary to each other’s projects, goals, or aspirations. When this desire to be needed is unfulfilled then it potentially heightens one’s own feelings of insecurity, insufficiency, and dependence. Certainly envy or abrasion is easier to swallow than admitting one’s attachments. Consequently if one does not believe that a similar misfortune may befall one’s self, then the possibility of pity falters. A rich fellow who feels secure in his fortune is less likely to be moved by the mundane challenges of a severely impoverished woman, for instance.
And this incapacity to identify with another person leads directly into Rousseau’s third maxim – the degree of sympathy correlates more to the value one gives to the other person than to the magnitude of suffering. “It is natural that one consider cheap the happiness of people one despises,” Rousseau explains, “Do not be surprised, therefore, if political men speak of the people with so much disdain, or if most of the philosophers affect to make man so wicked” (E 225).

These maxims suggest that sociable pity’s movement might encounter psychological or emotional blocks. Rousseau’s diagnosis in the Second Discourse considers reason as a restraint on “natural” impulses; the Letter to D’Alembert over-exercised emotions and amour-propre; and, here, psychological difficulties in identifying with another. It is as if socio-economic and political structures conspire against sociable pity, establishing artificial differences and tingeing them with sentiments of infallibility, superiority, or self-sufficiency in order to mask the common bases of the human condition – mortality, suffering, and the whims of fortune. It increases the feeling of self-isolation and, as a result, promotes self-interest, which now speaks in the language of “self-preservation” where “I” am in competition with and am compared to “you.” It is no wonder that Rousseau cannot find pity very easily in modern society - there are few institutions and practices that encourage it.

Yet Rousseau includes relief39 and “sweetness” – relief because one is not suffering, sweetness because of the opportunity to provide relief or assistance – as conciliatory emotional responses that mitigate psychic and cognitive tendencies to withdraw from suffering. “Who would not want to deliver him from his ills if it only

39 Boyd (2004) emphasizes what makes Rousseau’s pity sweet – relief – and then conflates it with superiority. Yet pity ought not be confused with a bloated sense of self and the creation of an unequal power dynamic. Should we condemn pity because Rousseau is honest about the relief we feel when we compare our safety to another’s suffering? Instead, why not conclude that honesty about this relief is an essential part of a balanced or reasonable judgment of conditions? But are we not also admonished, by our own sensation of pity, to limit whether and how this relief turns into glee or a narcissistic gloating about one’s own fortune? The balance is delicate but most situations concerning virtue and action are. What should remain our focus is the perspective that pity engenders and the questions it poses to the self, the ego, and self-love. Most simply, compassion asks that egocentrism be subordinate to succor.
cost a wish for that?” (E 221). Since relief requires more than mere wishing, it also encourages positive emotions like relief or joy when met by alleviatory actions. It is in recognizing and meeting others in their needs that the self expands and multiplies itself. One finds a superabundance of strength, both in opening one’s heart and in finding one’s self as capable of responding. One finds that the self-isolation encouraged through narcissistic _amour-propre_ or a self-justifying reason is not itself wholly necessary, “natural,” or fulfilling. Suffering, in pointing out commonality, and sociable pity, in facilitating interaction, secure human attachments and, by extension, human happiness.

The best means for cultivating sociable pity is experience: if one wishes to be compassionate then one must begin by practicing compassion according to one’s bent. Rousseau is clear that sociable pity is universal but that it expresses itself (and is cultivated best) according to individual temperament (E 226-27). Emile is an example of an educated pity but hardly Rousseau’s own. The novel _Julie_ with its central cast of Julie, Wolmar, and St. Preux offers very distinct but equally potent displays of sociable pity. Insofar as Rousseau’s reader might find a model – someone whose temperament or _feeling_ is similar to her own – then Rousseau might re-educate a “civilized” member of society as well as offer a valuable critique of sterile pity. The character analyses will consider this potential in detail.

This reading is not without tension, however. Starobinski raises the concern that the energies unleashed and the process for harnessing them substantially limits the

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40 Boyd (2004) worries that Rousseau unduly focuses on the witness and not the actual sufferer. Rousseau focuses on the witnessing self, rather than the suffering “other,” not because he discounts the miseries entailed in suffering but because he is providing an experiential account of pity, i.e. he is describing how it feels to be transported out of oneself and identify oneself with another. If the experience is to be accurate, then he cannot leave portions of the description out merely because they suggest that pity is not selfless. This is also to respond to Boyd’s (2004) concern that Rousseau unduly focuses on the witness and not the actual sufferer. This last sentence is a repeat of the first.

41 I am expanding the cast of characters that Cooper (1999) privileges. He argues that there are five personality types that serve as the “poles” in which all of Rousseau’s various characters can be arranged: the natural savage, the citizen, the civilized person, Jean-Jacques, and Emile. Of the five, the first two are not found in modernity, the third is most commonly found, and the latter two are the ideal because of their relationship to nature (Cooper 1999, 51-55). Clarens is only mentioned briefly, and it seems to refer more to its peasantry than its main characters.
individuals’ freedom, echoing Arendt’s concerns that imaginative transportation into or identification with another person impedes personal will, choice, or deliberative powers. I believe that a partial response can be made in the form of examining how these relationships function, such that individuality and particularity can be maintained even while a person establishes strong ties to others that help form their character and inform their choices and actions.

3.2.3.1. Emile

Emile is one of Rousseau’s better-known characters, and his compassionate upbringing is analyzed frequently. Rousseau asserts that Emile’s education is “natural,” designed to follow the laws of nature rather than human conventions, so that sentiments, reason, and imagination sustain *amour de soi* and increase strength of soul.42 Emile’s education also specifically hones his sense perceptions so that Emile can be cognizant of their effect and counteract them when necessary, an ability that Rousseau finds both atypical and necessary. The sociable pity that results is a compelling and a restraining force: it urges Emile to act compassionately, with a “judicial clarity,” and it defuses situational conflict in which Emile’s sentiments and senses threaten to overtake his reason.

Sensational education is foundational to a sociable pity that informs how Emile responds to conflict and tenuous situations, and it tethers *amour de soi* to individual’s particular strength. As discussed above educating the senses strengthens prudential reason, which in turn leads to a more robust reason and judgment that better withstands the transportations of the imagination, the passions, and *amour-propre*. The degree of clarity offered through the sensations affects the degree of relative freedom a person has

42 There is a certain degree of irony in categorizing Emile’s education as “natural” given the mentor’s machinations to ensure that each “spontaneous” encounter is, in fact, progressing as planned and in accordance with a pre-determined education. Emile’s education is highly artificial in its attempt to secure what is “natural.”
in an interdependent world, particularly in socio-economic and political dependencies. Dismissing the element of sensational education either by sliding it into experiential education or sublimating it to sexual education is akin to discounting a cathedral’s buttresses: without this structure, Emile has less control over his passions and environmental effects, thereby limiting his sense of freedom. Kelly terms this “strength of soul;” it is plausible that it forms the bedrock for Grant’s sense of integrity. In either regard, individual freedom and judgment rely upon a strong sensational development.

The education of the senses falls in the period between infancy and adolescence, in which the child is learning how to use his limbs and senses to greet and makes sense of the world. Sense perception cultivates observation of objective relationships, using the self as the basis for comparison. Through experiential learning that captures the interest by route of the senses, the child learns about how foreign bodies relate to his or her own. As Rousseau explains, “[w]e can know the use of our organs only after having employed them. It is long experience which teaches us to turn ourselves to account” (E 147). Exercises, games, kinesthetic studies, and play strengthen children’s bodies while teaching them to gauge their strength, the relations of their bodies to other bodies, and the use of instruments that are at hand and suitable for them (E 124). Questions concerning weight, shape, solidity, size, distance, temperature, and motion are answered through a kind of experimental physics.

Emile hesitates to judge rashly. He is methodical and perceptive, slowly weaning himself from his reliance on simple sense perception and generating complex conjectures out of his experiences and his sensations. Out of his sensual reason comes common sense. Like Arendt, Rousseau defines common sense “less because it is

43 This element of human interaction might seem farfetched because of the tendency to presume that the mind matters more than body; however, neuroscientific research on autism suggests that sensational “overload” matters more than originally believed in determining whether an autistic child will withdraw (Perry 2010). Fascinatingly, devices that monitor the skin’s sensorial interaction with the environment might facilitate better adult responses by cluing them into what environmental aspects might be triggering a child’s retreat.
common to all men than because it results from the well-regulated use of the other senses, and because it instructs us about the nature of things by the conjunction of their appearances” (E 157). Emile’s education – its careful dictation of sensations and perception – provides a harmonic communication between his sensations and, accordingly, the ability to distinguish between illusion and form.

Rousseau is proud of his Emile when he reaches adolescence, depicting his burgeoning disposition as “neither the crawling and servile submission of a slave nor the imperious accent of a master. It is a modest confidence in his fellow man; it is the noble and touching gentleness of a free but sensitive and weak being who implores the assistance of a being who is free but strong and beneficent” (E 161). Emile’s sensational education lays the foundation for a surety of self that others perceive but cannot quite name. Emile appears to “command” nature because he easily comprehends “how to bend everything to his will” (E 162). He is “made for guiding, for governing his equals” wherein his authority is located in his talents and experiences: “Everywhere he will be first, everywhere he will become the chief of the others. They will always sense his superiority over them. Without wanting to command, he will be the master; without believing they are obeying, they will obey” (ibid). In placing this portrayal in the segue between the two educational periods, Rousseau underscores that much of this “natural” authority is built out of an education that specifically develops sensation as it relates to judgment and individual strength. The relationship between sensational education and sociable pity grows clearer: we can gaze with greater perspicuity to decipher those things which will augment or attenuate our natural goodness through a highly-tuned and trained sense perception, itself propelled forward by imagination and reason.

It is not until adolescence flowers, the imagination moves, and sociable pity emerges that Emile studies human relations and the human condition; he studies ethics. Rousseau again emphasizes learning through practice. Of the disciplines emphasized –
histories, hunting, and social activism – only the history is “passive,” focused more on learning from previous human mistakes and follies than on actively engaging Emile with others. Most especially, Emile begins to distinguish between general principles and particular examples (E 236-37). Emile learns to love and emulate humanity’s natural goodness, parlaying that love into pity when individuals falter. He learns how to discern social sources of perversion, prejudice, and vice in particular situations because he understands that social pressures both degrade natural goodness and encourage pretense. He is predisposed to esteem individuals but refuse the multitude. He sees that “all men wear pretty much the same mask” but also that “their faces are more beautiful than the mask covering them” (ibid).

Emile begins to extend his love to other beings through an active pity that engages with and relates to individuals. Social activism – serving as a representative, resolving strife, and ameliorating oppression – provides the means for practicing “love of humanity” and bringing it to the “depths of one’s heart” (E 250). Amour de soi, joined to active compassion, becomes generalized and equitable. It centers on a love of justice and a keen practice of moral and natural goodness. It generates a potency of soul and will that works within confines while it exceeds them in desire. It magnifies the person, extending his or her capacity, intelligence, and love of equality. This person, in whom the “true principles of the just, the true models of the beautiful, all the moral relations of beings, all the ideas of order” are imprinted (E 253), is boldly capable of an excellence that does not debase his or her peers.

This spirit results from Emile’s specific education, which links objective and subjective perspicacity to compassion, and it limits his desire to seek pleasure in domination, a sense of superiority, or voyeurism regarding suffering.

44 Rousseau has few remarks concerning the relationship between compassion and “cruelty” beyond his concern that compassion itself can be a weakness if it is not also balanced with a particular toughness. Here Emile learns to hunt in order to harden his heart and body: “It accustoms one to blood, to cruelty” (E 320). This relationship will be better explored in the chapter on Merleau-Ponty.
He suffers when he sees suffering. It is a natural sentiment... The image of happiness delights him, and when he can contribute to producing happiness, this is one more means of sharing it. I have not supposed that when he sees unhappy men, he would have only that sterile and cruel pity for them which is satisfied with pitying ills it can cure. His active beneficence soon gives him understanding which with a harder heart he would not have acquired or would have acquired much later. (E 251)

Emile’s disposition meets two major criticisms of pity in the political sphere – that it cannot engender positive emotions that also encourage solidarity, joy, or assistance and that pity is allergic to actions.\(^\text{45}\) In fact, it is the active solicitation and education of compassion that enables Emile to comprehend both general and specific human relations in order to generate an active response. Emile’s perspective of social or political situations and relationships is enhanced by his education, which has a strong sensational foundation and a delayed but directed pity.

Rousseau’s measure for success is whether Emile can maintain independence of perception, emotion, and reason even within interdependent and coercive socio-economic and political relationships, an achievement born from Emile’s sensational and sentimental education. “It suffices that, enclosed in a social whirlpool, he not let himself get carried away by either the passions or the opinions of men, \textit{that he sees with his eyes, that he feel with his heart, that no authority govern him beyond that of his own reason}” (emphasis added, E 255). Certainty in one’s perceptions, the faculty to adjudicate when and how to apply a general principle to a specific context, love of one’s peers that is neither jealous nor debasing, and locating one’s authority in one’s self are the components of a free and happy being. They are essential elements of Emile’s personality.

It might seem strange or profoundly one-sided to emphasize Emile’s individual development within, and, as critics might malign, at the expense of, his relationships with others. Will Emile’s certainty in his perceptions engender a power dynamic

\(^{45}\) Note, however, that other criticisms remain: that pity can be felt by those who are deemed “undeserving” because of criminal or asocial actions and that pity itself cannot be a curative for what socially and politically ails us. These concerns will continue to be addressed in later chapters.
wherein he is *always* correct and the other is biased or incorrect? What of his own fallibility? He is, after all, an ordinary many with an extraordinary education. What of Emile’s mistakes or his own pretensions to power? Emile’s education revolves around him but only as a means of firming up his physical, psychological, and emotional resources and faculties prior to entering him into a society that Rousseau finds highly competitive and toxic. And his certainty in himself functions not as a means for power but as a hybrid “objective”-“subjective” point of reference against which to measure relations. Emile writes that he knows how to “form a true judgment of all the objects that surrounded me, and of their relation to myself...In order to discover the relation of things to one another, I studied the relation of each to myself” (E+S 9). This is not to say that Emile will not err or that his judgments will be correct, but they will have the greatest possibility of accuracy afforded a limited human being.

Part of this capacity is choosing well among the various affections that bind us to objects and people. Emile knows how to “multiply myself, as it were, in each of my fellow-beings, and thus to guard against those degrading passions which would confine me to my own person” (S+E 10). Sociable pity and an expansive *amour de soi* are functioning, effectively expanding Emile’s boundaries and associating his particular with more general interests. It is unlikely Emile will desire power, seek forms of oppression, or act in a way that sufficiently forces another person to suffer. In seeing her suffer he too suffers. Emile is no modern re-creation of the “natural savage” but a person who can engage the public and private with integrity, reason, and sociable pity.

Yet some commentators believe that Rousseau’s unfinished draft, *Emile and Sophie*, reveals failure, not success, because it chronicles the disintegration of Emile’s marriage and his succeeding adventures. Emile’s education did not inoculate him against the micro-changes brought about through the continual stream of sensations and changes in context. Paris, Rousseau’s favorite corrupted and corrupting city, succeeds in changing Emile. Where is the stalwart companion of Sophie? He has fled. Where is the
man who can manage his passions and maintain independence? He seemingly no longer exists. Where is the compassionate man? He has left his wife with nary a word. The reader’s confidence in Emile’s education dissipates.

But Rousseau indicates a conclusion more promising than the story’s beginnings. Emile refers to himself and Sophie as “regenerated children” who, despite their errors, “return to virtue” (E+S 16). In the portions we have, Emile and Sophie step towards moral regeneration and towards virtue. And Emile’s individual adventures model the kind of leadership and strength of soul that his education nourished. Rousseau’s concern with environment’s corrupting or invigorating aspects appears in a majority of his texts. That Emile encounters the same dangers and effects as other humans, regardless of their educational differences, demonstrates the power of context and the sensational affects on aesthetics, sentiments, and decisions. Emile’s response is key, however: Emile is able to both decipher the changes and remedy them. Sociable pity plays a key role in nullifying isolating passions like anger and in encouraging a sense of accountability for his actions.

*Emile and Sophie* begins by recording the breakdown of Emile and Sophie’s marriage. After a series of deaths in the family leave Sophie desolate, she and Emile depart for Paris with the hope that strange surroundings will provide healing. Unforeseen, however, is that the city and their relations with friends change their relationship to each other. Emile records what changes were wrought by the “frivulous amusements:”

[My heart] insensibly lost its first spring, and became incapable of warmth or strength; I roved restlessly from pleasure to pleasure; I sought after everything, and grew tired of every thing; I looked only those places where I was not, and endeavored to forget myself in dissipation. I experienced a revolution, of which I wished not to convince myself; I did not give myself time to return to myself, through a dread of not finding myself. All my attachments were lessened, all my affections were cooled. I had substituted a jargon of morality and sentiment in the place of truth. (E+S 15)

The estrangement between Emile and Sophie intensifies until Sophie confesses that she’s pregnant with another man’s child. Emile tears out of the house and leaves Paris,
seeking quietude in which he can calm his passions and reflect on how to proceed. Over the course of his time away, Emile finds work as a carpenter, is sold as a slave in Algiers, manages a slave revolt that negotiates for better treatment, and finally begins to advise the Dey of Algiers.

If the success of Emile’s education depends upon staying in a comfortable marriage, then his education certainly failed. If the achievement is in recognizing when one has been compromised and seeking remedies for a “return to virtue,” then Emile begins that path. His post-marriage exploits demonstrate his capacity to regain control over his passions, to perceive duplicity, to indifferently persuade and lead his peers, and to consult his reason alongside compassion. How did Emile accomplish this revolution? What role, if any, did sensational education and experiential pity play?

Emile’s departure and his refusal to return to Sophie before he felt ready were the result of his education. Emile is heeding his tutor’s advice: “So long as we do not know what we ought to do, wisdom consists in remaining inactive. Of all the maxims, this is the one of which man has the greatest need, and the one which he least knows how to follow…it is not everyone who knows how to refrain from acting” (E 442). Emile’s agitated state challenged his sense impressions - “I was beyond any ability to see anything, to compare, determine, resolve, or judge anything” (E+S 25) – and steadying his senses and imagination was a necessary first step.

Once Emile creates distance between he and Sophie, he gains an opportunity to reflect on the situation, his reactions, and how to respond for the future. Emile describes his reaction as an “extreme sorrow” that “gathers all the furies of hell in the breast of a wretched being” as a “thousand different pangs tear him apart without his being able to distinguish a single one;” “he feels himself torn in pieces by a hundred contrary forces that pull him every which way…he gives himself up to each force of his sorrow, he seems to split into many selves to suffer” (E+S 24). Emile’s sensational and sentimental experience is wild, and Rousseau’s language intensely focuses on a different form of
multiplicity. Calm Emile, secure in his attachments and his pity, extends himself outwards in a multitude of ways yet he remains wholly himself. Here his extension divides him. He is only a series of contesting, chaotic emotions barely kept together. It finally yields to anger, which spends itself out so that compassion might dawn (E+S 28).

Compassion intervenes, restraining the *amour-propre* that threatens to overtake Emile and to effectively blind him. “Without justifying, I excused her; without pardoning her faults, I applauded her good conduct. I please myself with these sentiments; I could not get rid of all my love, and to retain it without esteem would have been cruel. As soon as I thought I owed her any, I felt an unexpected relief” (E+S 34). Sociable pity emerges as a calming force that then enables Emile to take on different perspectives, primarily Sophie’s, and to consider what it means to act in an interdependent relationship. In so doing, sociable pity clears a psycho-emotional space for more rational reflection. Emile forgives; he affirms that Sophie’s goodness remains; he does not condone her actions but he recognizes what happens and why. Self-accountability moves to the fore as Emile realizes that he, too, can be reproached for changing and for being indifferent to Sophie.

Granted, Emile’s compassion here looks strange. If he has forgiven her, then why does he not return to her? Why not admit his culpability to her, repair the relationship, and move forward? Emile offers different reasons for staying apart from Sophie, each backed by a different passion such as anger or vengeance, yet the primary reason concerns Sophie herself. It is Sophie who will not accept forgiveness – “she would rather be punished than pardoned: such a pardon was no pardon to her; punishment itself debased her less in her own eyes” (E+S 54). It is in deference to Sophie’s own sense of integrity and in compassion for her pain that solidifies Emile’s decision to stay apart. I do not argue that it is a hard position to take for modern readers, especially if compassion has become equated to a kind of forgiveness that depends on erasing the memory of the “crime” or on decreasing the magnitude of harm it causes either party.
The difficult balance that Emile tries to strike is to forgive the person, to refuse branding Sophie with hatred, while also respecting her own sensitivity to her “crimes.” This compassion might be gentle towards Sophie, but it is not easy to determine nor easy to swallow.

Yet it might be argued that, while he is a fine example of education’s possibilities, Emile is a fantastical fiction: such educations are not achievable in contemporary times and they require a large amount of resources, foresight, and control over environments that humans genuinely lack. Emile is not a replicable example and, as a result, an implausible exemplar. This critique is hard to dispute. For now, let us remember that exemplars also act as standards against which we can measure contemporary dilemmas. Emile offers a critique as well as an ideal – an intentional display of human potential for compassionate and ethical living if we able to curb the growth of *amour-propre* and control our passions. Emile’s contrast to either his contemporaries or our own can generate good and necessary questions about the body politic, education, and people’s individual relationships to themselves and each other.

3.2.3.2. Julie: Dispositional Compassion

The novel *Julie* revolves around its protagonist, Julie, and her journey into and through love. It is the story of a girl whose love for virtue and for right action is challenged by her intense love for St. Preux and her family. How can she reconcile the two, particularly when her father’s classism denies the possibility of an aristocrat marrying a commoner? Julie eventually follows her father’s determination that she marry Wolmar, a “man of her station,” but not without a series of adventures, temptations, conflicts, and worries. Julie decides that virtue and familial obligations outweigh a fated love while noticing that neither choice gives her the happiness she seeks. Julie is unlike either Emile or the other characters in that she is temperamentally compassionate, which has a transformative affect on the people surrounding her. Julie’s
own education consists of learning how to temper her pity with pragmatism and her sentiments with reason.

Rousseau endeavors to make Julie loveable. Her beauty and intelligence might shine when seen through her friends and lovers’ eyes, but she is most remarkable for her natural compassion and her love of virtue. As St. Preux describes how it is that he fell in love with her, “[i]t is that touching combination of such lively sensibility and unfailing gentleness, it is that tender pity for all the sufferings of others, it is that sound judgment and exquisite taste that draw their purity from the soul’s own, it is, in a word, the attractions of the sentiments far more than those of the person that I worship in you” (J 26). The letters describing Julie are littered with similar sentiments; the people surrounding her announce and celebrate her compassionate goodness and, in doing so, implicitly persuade the reader to confirm those conclusions. Rousseau’s mastery at persuading without cajoling and speaking directly to the heart is apparent.

Julie’s compassionate disposition lends itself towards activity, rather than indifference, apathy, or sterile relief found in the expression of tears.

She is extremely sensible to ill-being, both hers and others’, and it would not be easier for her to be happy seeing people in misery than for the upright man to preserve his virtue ever pure while keeping constant company with the wicked. She has not that heartless pity that is content to turn away its eyes from ills it could relieve. She goes seeking them out in order to heal them; it is the existence of unfortunates and not the sight of them that torments her: to her it does not suffice not to know that there are some, for her peace of mind she must know that there are none, at least around her: for it would be going beyond the bounds of reason to make one’s happiness dependent on that of all men. (J 435)

The letters recount Julie’s work with her neighbors (J 75, 435-47). She enlists aid, advocates for, and consoles orphans and widows; offers advice; engages children in games, honors veterans and seniors, and provides opportunities that increase self-confidence in individuals; and provides positions to people whose natural talents are suitable. Her eventual role as a mother and the head of her household’s affairs as well as

46 Rousseau accentuates this gentleness by remarking that Julie is predominantly vegetarian, only occasionally eating fish on special occasions (J 373). See Emile, pp. 153-55, for his analysis of the effects of diet on temperament.
her preference to act than to give alms restrains the possibility that she might exhaust herself or her purse (J 438). Admittedly, the scope of Julie’s good works is limited to her neighbors: she stays local so that she can adjudicate what is required and how to respond and because she feels intimately involved with her community. This familiarity with the people alongside her own maxims, determined from the conjunction of her reason and innate compassion, tends to generate beneficial actions with few negative consequences (J 435, 437). This geographic limitation may suggest that compassion is best when it is local and initiated through an intimate interaction with its recipients and the community at large.

Julie’s compassion is magnetic. Her “innate gift of loving” (J 167, 336) invites people into her company – they wish to be near her, like her, or to have her affections. Rousseau credits this power to kindness, which is irresistible, and to the human desire to reciprocate affection when one perceives it is genuinely given (J 167). But more than kindness, Julie has a “certain temper” that is transformative: people like Julie “have a sphere of activity within which nothing can resist them; one cannot know them without wanting to imitate them, and from their sublime elevation they attract unto themselves everyone about them…You will set the tone for everyone who keeps company with you; they will either flee you or come to resemble you” (ibid). Starobinski terms this “transparency of the heart,” a quality that engenders mutual respect and affection (1988, 83). Regardless of whether a person is “naturally” like Julie or only extends kindness, he has the capacity to attract his peers such that they wish to reflect or join him. Kindness and love – compassion – ripple out from its originating person, shaping his environment and the people with whom he interacts.

The ability to influence one’s surroundings is affirmed by Julie’s work at her estate, Clarens. Indeed Julie finds success in shaping Clarens according to nature’s directions. “Benevolent sympathy, or love transfigured,” Starobinski remarks, “reigns in a regenerated society” (1988, 87). Clarens is invigorated when Julie and Wolmar take up
residence. Doors are shifted, new rooms created as old rooms are divided, and the
general internal organization of the house gains new purpose and better function. The
external estate undergoes a similar reorganization as kitchen gardens are expanded,
peacocks make room for more functional animals, and a wine press is introduced. The
domestics are carefully chosen from surrounding families – they are young, from the
country, and from a large family. Women and men domestics are discreetly segregated
by work and extracurricular activities and, when they do come together, the activities
are benign and Julie participates. Julie offers the example of wintertime dancing,
justifying her involvement with the following reason, “Finally I find that this moderate
familiarity forms between us a bond of tenderness and attachment that brings back a
little natural humanity by mitigating the lowliness of servitude and the rigor of
authority” (J 377). More than this, Julie is Clarens’ heart: she devises and organizes the
social affairs, she tends to people’s hearts, she ensures its tranquility, and she inspires
love and devotion. In following nature, Julie and Wolmar transfigure the “artificial” –
the physical environment of Clarens – in order to create a vibrant, well-functioning
estate.47

Yet Julie’s temperament has its weakness. Her perception of humanity tends be
skewed: rather than perceiving people as they are, Julie sees them as they ought or could
be (J 167). Which is to say that, while dispositional compassion might offer a necessary
critique of contemporary affairs, it cannot be the only perspective circulating within a
polity. The optimistic lenses through which Julie sees her contemporaries is itself a
fascination with “appearance” – the potential within rather than a mask donned from

47 In one small section of the estate Julie masterfully “directs” nature itself. A private garden whose wildness
suggests that the human hand is absent and that a significant period of time was involved in its cultivation.
As St. Preux remarks when he first enters the Elysium, “I thought I was looking at the wildest, most solitary
place in nature, and it seemed to me I was the first mortal who ever had set foot in this wilderness” (J 387).
The Elysium is a private garden that Julie creates for herself, Wolmar, and her children, whose own visits
are limited and supervised. “It is that a place so different from what it was could have become what it is
only through cultivation and upkeep; yet nowhere do I see the slightest trace of cultivation. Everything is
verdant, fresh, vigorous, and the gardener’s hand is not to be seen” (J 393).
without – for reasons based in goodness or a sweet *amour de soi* rather than a narcissistic *amour-propre*. Her viewpoint functions as miracles, saints, or prophets do: it shines a light on a given circumstance while it offers a model or ideal to which one aspires. And, in so doing, one might begin to take on those characteristics of compassion, kindness, integrity, or virtue. One transforms. The longevity of such powers is questionable, however. The slow disintegration of Clarens’ cohesion after her death spells trouble for the polity if it likewise arranges itself around either a charismatic figure or a singular sentiment. Compassion’s critics often decry its usage because they presume that compassion’s extreme expression is its sole form: it is too weak, too strong, too isolated, too manifold, or too hypocritical in the people; it is the only virtue allowed in the public forum.

Though Julie’s temperament is regulated “naturally” by her sentiments and her reason, she needs to learn how to control passions like sensual love so that her virtue remains intact. She falters first: unable to follow her father’s wishes and refuse St. Preux, she schemes to bind the two of them by becoming pregnant. But when this plan fails and her mother dies soon after learning of Julie’s disrepute, Julie blames herself, rejects St. Preux, and returns to a semblance of virtue. It is when her father insists that she marry Wolmar that Julie struggles anew with the relationship between conjugal love and virtue: how can she commit to a person if her heart cannot be given fully? A commitment she conceives as eternal and holy would be counterfeit without full devotion.

Julie’s ability to sublimate romantic love into love of virtue and care for her husband is facilitated by sensation and sentiment. Julie knows that the same instinct to

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48 Rousseau creates an interesting relationship between natural goodness’ flourishing and wealth: “Had it been her misfortune to be born among unhappy peoples groaning under the weight of oppression, and struggling hopelessly and fruitlessly against the misery that consumes them, every cry of the oppressed would have poisoned her life; the general desolation would have crushed her, and her beneficent heart, exhausted with pain and worries, would have made her continually feel the ills she could not have relieved. Instead of that, here everything quickens and sustains her natural goodness” (J 436). Julie would not thrive in impoverished conditions; rather, she would sink with the weight of human misery.
be good grounds an instinct to love, but her impassioned love threatens her reason, duties, and love of virtue (J 295). What is to be done when passions like love, anger, suffering, hatred, or jealousy over-run reason and tempt us to act in ways contrary to our interests? As Julie explains, “Do we not know that disordered affections corrupt the judgment as well as the will, and that conscience is imperceptibly perverted and altered in each century, among each people, in each individual in function of the variability and diversity of prejudices?” (ibid). For both Julie and Emile shifting the environment is key to regaining reasonable control. Emile physically removes himself from a disorienting environment that affects his perceptions and, consequently, his judgment. Julie finds the appropriate environment to organize her perceptions and sentiments and, consequently, stabilize her love of virtue.

Rousseau details the church and the people enfolded in it, emphasizing feelings of intimacy, transparency, and compassion. Devout Julie sees the church as an encompassing structural monument that physically signifies a higher power that can read deep into the hearts of its occupants. Seated within are friends and family but, more importantly, her cousin and confidante, Claire d’Orbe. “It was as if an unknown power repaired all at once the disorder of my affections and re-established them in accordance with the law of duty and nature,” Julie later reports, “A fortuitous glance in the direction of Monsieur and Madame d’Orbe, whom I saw side by side with compassion in their eyes, moved me even more powerfully than had all the other objects…These sentiments reawakened my hope and courage” (J 292). Claire’s continued compassion towards Julie, the church’s architectural embodiment of holiness, and Julie’s knowledge of the “eternal eye” calms her senses, her passions, and sublimes sensual love to conjugal love and love of virtue (J 293).

Julie’s temperament is instinctively compassionate and virtuous, and much of the novel’s psychological strength lies in evaluating when and how those characteristics are tested. Yet she is steadfast in modeling a sociable compassion, which both draws
people to her and enables them to reflect her goodness, pity, and orderliness. Julie perhaps surpasses Emile in her natural capacity to bind people to her and her projects precisely because her pity is active and grounding.

3.2.3.3. Wolmar: Rational Compassion

Wolmar is the contrary of Julie. Naturally calm and indifferent, he depends upon his powers of observation and reason. Wolmar describes himself as a person to whom pity does not come “naturally,” that is, pity hardly operates in guiding his actions or enlivening his passions; rather Wolmar depends upon his love of order (J 402-05). Rousseau provides additional testimony to Julie’s gift of loving in that she affects a man whose natural temperament leaves him unattached to others and indifferent towards them. Wolmar is rationally compassionate, employing sociable pity because he appreciates pity’s role in maintaining social ties.

Wolmar serves as a model for individuals who privilege reason, logic, and order or who little feel persuaded by their hearts or passions. Wolmar’s strength comes in knowing his limitations and preferences and in his clear perspicuity in understanding people and situations.49 His perspective is so consistently accurate that Claire nearly concedes that “cold men who consult their eyes more than their heart gauge others’ passions better than turbulent and impetuous or vain people like me, who always begin by putting themselves in others’ places, and never manage to see anything but what they feel” (J 413). Claire’s insight inserts both a question and a tension into Rousseau’s analysis of pity. When and how is observation better than imagination? Certainly clear-sighted observation is essential in comprehending a situation or a person but recall that

49 Wolmar describes himself with the following: “Little sensible to pleasure and pain, I even experience but weakly that sentiment of interest and humanity that causes us to assimilate the affections of others. If I am pained when I see good people suffer, pity has nothing to do with it, for I feel none when I see the wicked suffer. My only active principle is a natural taste for order, and the right concurrence of the play of fortune and of men’s acts please me exactly like a beautiful symmetry in a tableau, or like well-contrived play in the theater. If I have any ruling passion it is that of observation. I like to read what is in men’s hearts; as my own little deludes me, as I observe composedly and disinterestedly, and as long as experience has given me some sagacity, I scarcely err in my judgments; and that is the whole compensation for self-love in my continual studies; for I do not like playing a role, but only seeing others perform” (J 402-03).
it is imagination that infuses ethics into judgment. Without imagination one’s observations might be myopic or, at the very least, ethically flawed. The result is another form of self-isolation that reason may or may not alleviate. And, as will be explored momentarily, it might simply be that an indifferent heart underestimates the strength and endurance of an impassioned heart much in the way that Wolmar misjudges Julie’s and St. Preux’s relationship.

Wolmar enhances his observational powers through practical “apprenticeships” in numerous occupations, high and low. Befriending Julie’s father uprooted Wolmar’s original belief that self-interest solely motivates human action, and he realized that virtue is nourished (as well as hindered) by relationships, sentiments, and actions. Wolmar comes to understand that while self-love characterizes humanity in general, social customs, laws, ranks, fortune, or personal events influence whether the self-love is good, bad, or indifferent. He determines to take on different positions in order to better learn the different perspectives – “we see nothing if we do nothing but look, that we must act ourselves to see men act, and I made of myself an actor in order to be a spectator” (J 403) – and finds that his love of order increases alongside his desire to contribute to it (J 404). His decision to act before observing might conjure Boyd’s (2004) “pitying spectator,” who revels in the sight of suffering, but Wolmar’s perception is distinguished by its intention, its execution, and its final result. Wolmar physically and mentally inserts himself into different occupations in order to see the full dimensions of living in a given situation and what needs are met or thwarted. It is not frivolous, superficial, manipulative, or voyeuristic; it is being wholly invested in examining the human condition in order to better ascertain and appreciate it.
Wolmar deduces that sociable pity preserves or augments social relations and, in doing so, he separates himself from “philosophers” who attempt to “snuff out natural pity in the heart and accustom it to insensibility” (J 441). Rather he reasons that pity and the social virtues it generates, here using the example of charity, offer people the opportunity to nourish humanistic sentiments and memories of usefulness and helpfulness. Like Julie, he seeks out his neighbors to ask about their conditions and situations, and he “helps them when needed with his purse and his advice” (J 330). He reasons his actions with the following:

We suffer, he says, and maintain at great expense multitudes of useless professions each of which serve only to corrupt and spoil morals. To consider the state of beggar merely as a trade, far from having anything of that sort to fear from it, we find in it only what fosters in us the sentiments of interest and humanity that should unite all men. If one chooses to consider it with relation to talent, why would I not reward the eloquence of this beggar who moves my heart and inclines me to come to his aid, as I pay a Comedian who makes me shed a few sterile tears? If the latter brings me to love another’s good deeds, the former induces me to perform some myself: everything one feels watching tragedy is forgotten the moment one exits; but remembering the wretched whom one has relieved gives a pleasure that is forever renewed. (J 441-42)

Wolmar formulates interesting distinctions. Given the various occupations that appear functionally useless to sustaining life yet also influence customs and mores – one thinks here of theatre and amusements, given Rousseau’s writings on them – begging itself becomes a trade; but it is a trade that contributes to the polity at large because it has the possibility of stimulating pity and, consequently, stirring up social and moral sentiments like charity, kindness, fraternity, or solidarity. Moreover, unlike the arts that generate a sterile pity, this trade nourishes a sociable pity. Rousseau suggests that this sociable pity is unlike its contrast: it can be remembered with fondness an infinite number of times. Sterile pity, however, is generated once and, if repeated, loops into its own cycle wherein the memory fortifies one’s heart against other-directed compassion.

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50 Morgenstern (1996) argues that pity can be subdivided into three types of judgment, which reveals that it is a rationally calculated emotion. Morgenstern’s criticisms, which blur a critical distinction between faculties of judgment and pity, better comport to sterile pity. Wolmar suggests that reason and pity, while distinct from each other, need not be incompatible.
Some critics\textsuperscript{51} dislike it when compassionate actions or judgments contain either self-interest or pleasure, seeing these two “motivations” as distortions of what should otherwise be “pure” motivations. Rousseau disagrees. First, self-interest is hard to remove from any situation pertaining to the self, not least because self-preservation is an essential aspect of \textit{amour de soi}. It is important, however, to keep Rousseau’s distinctions between \textit{amour de soi} and \textit{amour-propre} in mind. Insofar as self-interest is egocentric or it motivates actions against others that are harmful to their own preservation, equality, or freedom, then it takes on a degree of particularity that is detrimental to the whole. Second, pity itself is an innate principle that develops sociability and, as seen above, stimulates a variety of emotions that both support and challenge pity. Compassion is not easy. One may wrongly act or think and make a hard situation more difficult; one may choose to not act at all, thus retreating from social obligations that have the possibility of expanding the self; or one may act in a way that puts her own preservation at risk. But Rousseau is certain that pity is a response that also feeds magnanimity, strength of soul, and independence. Receiving pleasure from a good act fuels more good acts. That result, it might be agreed, is a good thing.

Finally, as Wolmar suggests, actions based in compassion are not based wholly on obligation. If there is a commitment, it is to the image or idea of oneself as a virtuous or honorable being. In other words, the promise is to one’s potential as a compassionate person, engaged with one’s peers and communities (J 442). An active reaction to suffering acknowledges that humanity itself suffers and surmises that none are secure from it, including oneself. When a particular person at a specific moment claims one’s attention, perhaps stimulating pity (perhaps not), it raises the question of suffering’s universality. It also creates an opportunity to respond actively.

\textsuperscript{51} Arendt, Boyd (2004), and Morgenstern (1996).
Yet rationalizing one’s way to compassion engenders a large difficulty echoed by critics: Wolmar’s “pity” looks suspiciously like paternalism, especially when he analogizes the relationship between the rich and poor to one between a father and his children. Perhaps this aspect of his pity is less problematic in an aristocratic monarchy, but it hardly resonates with democracies founded on the idea of equality regardless of class. In this way, Wolmar signifies the critique that pity as a form of *noblesse oblige*, while philanthropic, carries a strong sense of inequality and inferiority, a limitation on freedom, and a deprivation of agency among its recipients. There is no easy solution to this possibility other than to refer to the distortion of similar principles: pity is not singular in this regard. As the next chapter will explore, asymmetry need not be present in compassionate relations and activities.

Moreover, it is unlikely that Rousseau saw this form of paternalism negatively. For Rousseau the “ideal” family operates as a model for human relations, especially when the power dynamics involved in authority, obedience, or education cannot be avoided. The family, with its attendant division of roles and obligations (mother, father, child, or sibling) and its distribution of sentiments, offers a form of social organization that, at its best, functions such that particular interests conjoin to form a general interest: the health and happiness of the family. Rousseau consistently employs familial references in *Julie* when he discusses Clarens in order to emphasize that when household management is done well and in accordance to “nature,” Wolmar and Julie are able to lessen the feelings of mastery and servitude, superiority and inferiority, and commitment as indebtedness while maintaining the necessary authority to oversee Clarens’ operations. Wolmar and Julie cannot avoid acting as “master” but they can avoid degrading their employees and they can endeavor to make those relations as

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52 This claim, perhaps, is too facile given the United States’ own tenuous history with manifesting the principle of equality. For example, consider arguments concerning franchise and representation in the Federalist Papers, the constitutional degradation of people based on color, or the long route to women’s suffrage and rights. “Equality” has its own de facto discrepancies.

53 He even refers to it as the “prototype of political societies” in *The Social Contract* (SC 142).
gentle and sympathetic as possible. If, as Rousseau believes, we cannot wholly free ourselves from asymmetrical relations of dependence, then we can and should ensure that the relationships benefit the individuals, encourage social passions, and tie concerted efforts to the interest of the whole.

Another difficulty with Wolmar’s model is that a calm demeanor and strong reason does not guarantee one’s observations. Wolmar’s imagination – his transportation outside of himself, a significant aspect of sociable pity – is too quiescent, hindering a full comprehension of human motivations, pains, and desires. In other words he underestimates the extensive range of human suffering. His proposal for revising St. Preux’s and Julie’s relationship fails as a result. Wolmar believes that St. Preux loves his memory of Julie more than Julie herself, particularly an older Julie who acts as mother and wife: “The mistake that often deludes and troubles [St. Preux] is to confuse the time frames and often to reproach himself, as a present sentiment, for what is but the effect of a too tender memory…we needed to make him lose the memory of the times he must forget, by cleverly substituting other notions for those he cherishes” (J 417). Cousin Claire suggests that Julie and St. Preux go boating for this purpose. The plan backfires, however, when a storm forces the two to land near a place that St. Preux had formerly been “exiled” at the height of their love. St. Preux enjoins Julie to walk with him; here he recounts what occurred there:

“What! I said to Julie, looking at her with a tear in my eye, does your heart tell you nothing here, and do you not feel some secret emotion at the sight of a place so full of you? Then without waiting for her answer, I led her toward the cliff and showed her her initials carved in a thousand places…Seeing them again myself after such a long time, I experienced how powerfully the presence of objects can revive the violent sentiments with which one was formerly seized in their presence” (J 425).

Rather than securing new docile memories, Julie and St. Preux were gripped by past passions. It is a tribute to Julie’s virtue that she removed them from any additional temptations, but the trip left its mark: both were alert to their love for each other, their shared memories, and their pain at losing one another (J 427-28). Old memories were not
replaced nor were former passions dulled into a comfortable friendship (J 609). Wolmar was correct in believing that their love of virtue was strong enough to keep them from dishonoring each other or himself; yet he was remarkably ignorant of their love’s resilience.

We see that Wolmar provides an appealing model, particularly for people who privilege reason and discount sentiments, that argues sociable pity is itself logical, especially for encouraging social sentiments. This model has its tensions. It could facilitate paternalism and does little to encourage the development of an active imagination that comprehends suffering’s spectrum. Its resulting “solutions” for compassion-based problems might be ill conceived, wrong-headed, or poorly executed. Rousseau does not resolve these limitations but he does recognize them as shortcomings, a helpful and necessary first step. Julie suggests the balance: “Each of us is precisely what the other requires; [Wolmar] enlightens me and I enliven him; we are enhanced by being together, and it seems we are destined to constitute but a single soul between us of which he is the intellect and I the will” (J 307). At Julie’s behest, we might be mindful to pair a contemporary “Wolmar” with a “Julie” so that we find actions or policies that are balanced between reason and passion, observation and imagination.

3.2.3.4. St. Preux: Restraining Passions

St. Preux, Julie’s lover and confidante, dominates the pages of the novel. Of the three characters discussed here, he is the most spirited and passionate. He appears eager to please, is governed by his passions yet is remarkably intelligent, and is open about his heart’s commotions. Consequently, despite his role as Julie’s tutor, he is the one most tutored by Julie, friend and confidante Lord Edward, and Wolmar. Each admonishes, encourages, and influences St. Preux’s actions so that his virtue remains dominant, his passions are softened, and his reason and judgment sharpens. One primary means of developing St. Preux’s strength of soul is by sociable pity and activity.
St. Preux’s relationship with pity is complicated. His passionate exuberance is such that he easily transports himself to share his loved one’s experiences, yet he also seems unable to extend himself beyond a narrowly defined scope. His own independence is highly susceptible in that his needs are neither easily nor frequently met by his own skills. St. Preux’s education consists of two parts: first, restraining his passion’s enthusiasm and, second, broadening his sight so that he acknowledges how others’ interests intersect with his own. Finding a balance between passion and reason, between compassion and observation, is an extended endeavor, and it is questionable whether St. Preux actually succeeds. Additionally, Starobinski notes a problem of agency in St. Preux’s education: his friends’ are so diligent and attentive in their tutelage that it appears to subordinate his independence to his friends’ machinations.

That St. Preux’s passions overflow is most apparent in his letters to Julie. His transportations, whether initiated by Julie or the environment, are frequent, and he strikes the reader as sensitive, romantic, and expressive. As a result, pity would seem to be readily at hand. Consider the following passage found in a letter to Julie:

I opened the letter at the first turn in the road; I skimmed it, devoured it, and as soon as I reached the lines where you so well depict your heart’s pleasures at embracing that venerable father, I melted in tears, people stared at me, I entered an alley to escape observation; there, I shared your emotion; I embraced with transport that happy father I scarcely know, and the voice of nature reminding me of my own, I shed redoubled tears to his honored memory. (J 60)

St. Preux’s reaction – melting in tears or embracing a person he hardly knows – suggests that he is susceptible to compassion’s contagion, especially when triggered by Julie or other friends. But while this transportation might be “natural” it is not necessarily expansive, i.e. it does not extend St. Preux beyond a narrow scope of attention. Is his pity so easily engaged by strangers? In important aspects, it is not. His emotions are not yet

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54 The literature on pity and Rousseau himself directly link pity and suffering. Emotional transports like St. Preux’s does not seem to qualify as anything but a shared emotion. Yet, as I argue in Chapter One, shared emotions, or empathy, are key to pity.
attached to action; they are not yet engaged with strangers, indigents, or community. His pity might be limber but it is also slightly sterile.

Extending St. Preux’s pity plays a large role in decreasing St. Preux’s dependence on Julie. Julie, Claire, and Milord Edward attempt to quell St. Preux’s love for Julie, particularly when events force him and Julie to recognize that their love will not result in marriage. Lord Edward encourages compassionate acts to broaden St. Preux’s perspective. Such work reminds St. Preux that suffering is universal but also that joy can be found in actively working to alleviate suffering. Lord Edward, trying to encourage reason to a suicidal St. Preux, asks him to “let me teach you to love life” (J 323). Lord Edward counsels him to do at least one good deed each time he is tempted to commit suicide: “Then go find someone needy to assist, someone unfortunate to console, someone oppressed to defend. Reconcile me with the wretched who are too intimidated to approach me; do not fear to squander either my purse or my influence: help yourself; exhaust my fortune, make me rich” (ibid). Notice that while Lord Edward opens up his purse, he emphasizes work in action—assisting, consoling, defending, and advocating for those who cannot either because they lack the opportunity or the courage. These actions are similar to the ones undertaken by Emile. Insofar as St. Preux is acting on Lord Edward’s behalf, those efforts enrich Lord Edward as well. Lord Edward is “reconciled” with others; he is “enriched.” The positive effects of sociable pity need not be restricted to St. Preux.

But good works are not the only kinds of activity that Lord Edward proposes. Asserting that “[o]ne must rediscover the taste for life again in order to fulfill its duties” and acknowledging that the route to reason is not through reason, Lord Edward also pushes St. Preux to occupy himself (J 324). A “multitude of new and striking objects” will shift his attention away from his heart and towards his present occupation: “What is needed for you to become yourself again is for you to turn yourself outward, and it is only in the bustle of an active life that you can hope to recover peace of mind” (ibid).
Lord Edward’s advice echoes the tutor’s advice to Emile; when the passions are too intense, beware of excessive behaviors and engage in useful activities. Rousseau realizes that reason is little able to regain control over intense passions. Instead he wants pity, the foremost other-oriented innate principle and germinating impulse for social virtues, to operate alongside worldly activities. Such work re-establishes St. Preux in a world populated by people and concerns other than Julie and an ill-fated love. Eventually St. Preux heads out to sea as an Engineer for the English fleet.

St. Preux returns to his friends having matured his compassion, reigned in his passions, and sharpened his perception and judgment. Claire describes his changed appearance and temperament:

Instead of a slave’s submissiveness, he now has the respectfulness of a friend who knows how to honor what he esteems; he speaks honest thoughts with assurance; he has no fear that his maxims of virtue will go against his interests; he fears neither injustice to himself nor affront to me in praising praiseworthy things, and one can sense in everything he says the confidence of a righteous man who is sure of himself, who draws from his own heart the approbation he used to seek only in my eyes. (J 351)

Like Emile, St. Preux had to gain distance from love’s disorienting and dominating passions in order to hone his strength and faculties. Honesty, self-assurance, love of virtue and justice, and orderliness organized his innate strengths such that they are less susceptible to his passions. He can, at least, minimally reign in his passions either through his own efforts or with his friends’ support more easily when Julie, his memories, or the environment arouse his passions.

Whether St. Preux’s education can be deemed “successful” is uncertain given his flights of passion even after his sociable pity and judgment have been cultivated. But, in this way, St. Preux most resembles an ordinary person who maintains some balance between sentiment and reason but falters at particular events in her life. St. Preux’s pity continues to vacillate between being other-directed and self-directed, i.e. between sterility and sociability; his memories carry him away; he cycles in and out of being dominated by his sentiments or finding disinterested reason. In other words, St. Preux is
intensely fallible, continually working to be his “better” self while succumbing to the cycles of human emotion, memory, and relationships. Neither compassion nor reason is impervious. But rather than losing heart in St. Preux or his model’s education, I suggest that we consider this process of “becoming” (Starobinski 1988, 87) itself good and that companions and mentors are vital in encouraging that our best, not our basest, characteristics flourish.

3.2.3.5. Concerns with Sensual Ethics

The four character sketches offer different routes and models for cultivating sociable pity while engaging with friends, one’s environment, and one’s duties or desires. Of the four, Emile and Julie most explicitly interact with their environments, suggesting more of a connection between sensation, pity, and judgment. Yet Starobinski includes St. Preux in his analysis of Rousseau’s “sensual ethics,” claiming that both St. Preux and Julie are sensual. Transparency and intimacy result from Rousseau’s sensuality, argues Starobinski, but this sensuality also generates a loss of self and freedom while subordinating sensation to reason.

Starobinski offers three strong critiques against Rousseau’s sensual ethics. First, while sensuality may engender intimacy and transparency it does so at the expense of individuality and agency. Second, Starobinski argues that sensational education relies on the immediacy of sensations without the assistance of reflection. A contradiction results: sensational education is mediated by a person’s tutor, who consciously manipulates the environment and its subsequent sensational affects, or the person cannot control sensational affect without himself mediating sensations through reflection. Finally, sensational education itself is undermined by either Rousseau’s appeal to the “reflective man” or to a transcendent higher power. Whether Starobinski is correct that reason and sensation are contraries, rather than sensation being anterior to

55 Starobinski’s use of the term “sensuality” is unclear, referring in some portions to sensations and in other places to sensual love.
reason, will be considered. Starobinski’s criticisms also ignore what he terms a “process of becoming.” We are all in a process of becoming, but importantly, what process and who are we becoming? Starobinski hints at answers when he discusses the society at Clarens, but he ultimately undercuts that vision by concluding that sensation is sublimated to transcendence (1988, 120-121).

Starobinski argues that sensuality may engender intimacy and transparency but only by eschewing individuality and agency. Julie and the Dialogues suggest that the bucolic environments and people actually induce a “state of expansive emotion” that results in a loss of self (Starobinski 1988, 82). In this argument, part of Julie’s charm and power is her presence, loving in its transmission and rendering her friends around her practically helpless to its call. It is her “transparency of the heart” that resurrects nature’s brilliance and intensifies sensation. Her friends experience expansion and lose themselves within that state, increasing the degree of intimacy between them (Starobinski 1988, 84). This relationship can lead to personal revelations as well as acute witnessing of others (Starobinski 1988, 85).

Yet unlike the external environment, a person like Julie can be selective as to who gains admittance to the intimate circle. Wolmar, Claire, St. Preux, and the workers at Clarens overcome sets of personal difficulties, most often involving virtue, trust, and respect, in order to join to Julie’s intimate circle. While Starobinski does not talk much about the difficulties or the procedures that Julie’s friends undergo, he describes and points to a set of dispositions or practices that encourage the development of perspective in which a person is disclosed (1988, 84). We might say that it fosters the disclosure of who a person is, rather than what they are.

The sensations’ degree of immediacy determines the degree of transparency between people. Starobinski argues that sensational education requires an interaction between instinct and sensation such that reflection is no longer necessary; in fact, reflection is contrary to sensation’s purpose. “Rousseau proposes a dynamic pattern of
development in which reflection figures as an intermediate stage between immediate sensation (part of childhood) and the discovery of moral sentiment, which constitutes a synthesis, at a higher level of development, of instinct with spiritual wants awakened by reflection” (1988, 206). This merger of instinct and desire via the sensations leads to “sensuous ethics.” Yet Rousseau fails to see a major flaw in this schema. As Starobinski points out, “It is one thing to submit to the influence of an environment, another thing to analyze the moral effects of sensory experience and shape the objects around us in such a way that their influence is beneficial” (1988, 212). Rousseau’s ethics only succeed if sensation can precede reflection in order to direct virtue, thereby eliminating the need for reflection (1988, 213). Such a process is difficult, if not impossible, because it requires a “masterpiece of artifice to arrange the world” and effectively compromises freedom because a person responds, acts, and feels in pre-determined and arranged ways (1988, 214). Moreover, this loss of agency is intensified by the subjugation of reflection to sensation. Thoughtful action and sensuous ethics are in tension with each other.

Yet the notions that sensation can do anything but precede reflection or that a person does not have influence upon her environment are themselves arguable. The education Rousseau outlines in Emile is but an explication of the relationships between sensations, reason, and passions. Sensation informs reason – without sensation, a person has neither information about nor “sense” of world. But while sensations can operate as ethical “signs or images” (OL 53) they are not the sole determinant of human action, reflection, or sentiment nor does their education result in an amalgamation of instinct and desire. Rousseau is explicit that he educates the senses in order to prevent them from growing imperial, imperious, and impervious (E 314); it is a way of heeding “nature” despite the matrix of a complex socio-economic and political environment that multiplies and confuses the senses. Its purpose is not to forego reflection, moving straight from sensation to instinct, but to create a physiological, mental, and emotional dell in which reason can flourish alongside sweet social sentiments like pity. There is no
role for integrity, virtue, or even “natural goodness” in Starobinski’s account; each of
these is a theme in Rousseau’s writings and a reason for personal struggle as he
documents with his characters. Reflection is both necessary and strengthened by
sensation because the person actualizes her agency and affirms her love of virtue.

The careful “manipulation” of Emile’s education, constructed so that the people
and the environments provide “right” instructions, demonstrates the immense gap
between a “natural” education and the one generally employed by Rousseau’s
contemporaries. Social and educational institutions influence the characters, actions, and
ethics of the people involved in them for a variety of reasons, one of which is
sensational. Yet Rousseau does not intend to circumvent human possibility for
intervention and change; he intends to show just how agency works within and against
the larger environmental construct (and just how many demands are placed upon the
human person, rendering virtue and integrity both more difficult and more rare).
Certainly people alter their environments in order to elicit favorable circumstances
without such an intensive education. To use a simple example, if a person has difficulty
sleeping at night, she can easily hang blackout curtains to darken her room, add a
soothing fragrance like lavender, or play sounds of ocean waves or white noise to calm
her senses. These environmental changes are small yet beneficial. Similarly, if a person
finds herself in a public space that is sensationallly intense and demanding – amongst a
crowd at the fair, for example, where the press of bodies, the noise levels, smells, and
sights are frenetic – and she grows confused, agitated, and more emotional generally,
then she might notice the subtle shifts in her mind and body and alight to a calmer
section of the fair, some quiet corner, before making a large decision. Emile is able to
both recognize and respond to sensational influence as a result of his unique education,
an education that engaged and developed sense perception, but he is not wholly
singular in this regard. Julie attributes the church environment to awakening her love of
virtue and love for Wolmar; she withstands and removes herself from St. Preux’s natural
homage to their love once she recognizes just how easily it could topple them both into temptation and dishonor. It is not that humans have little to no control over their environment; it is a question of realizing when and how those environments are modifying their feelings and actions.

Rousseau better illustrates this interaction in his more “political” texts – the Letter to D’Alembert, Second Discourse, and Social Contract each have sections devoted to accounting for particular environmental or sensational effects in policy recommendations. “Climates, seasons, sounds, colors, darkness, light, the elements, food, noise, silence, motion, rest, all act on our machine and consequently in our soul;” details Rousseau, “all offer us a thousand almost guaranteed holds for governing in their origin the feelings by which we let ourselves be dominated” (C 343). What affects the individual affects the body politic. “In a word, aside from the maxims common to all, each people has within itself some cause that organizes them in a particular way and renders its legislation proper for it alone,” writes Rousseau (SC 171). Differences in climates and seasons, “lifestyles” generally, generated the differences and “difficulties” between nation-states and their respective citizens in Rousseau’s natural history (DI 61). He continues this storyline in the Social Contract. Chapters Eight through Eleven in Book Two and Chapter Eight of Book Three trace how the people, the size of the body politic and the region generally, the location, labor and its products, climate and its fertility, and human consumption affect both the legislation and the form of government. Rousseau concludes that, despite the general maxims he outlines, particularity cannot be avoided and, in fact, should be factored into equations and ratios for governance. Unfortunately, neither the Social Contract nor the Second Discourse explicitly link sensation, environment, and mores together. Rousseau hints at the public peace and concord that is attainable by offering Geneva and a small town near Neufchatel as examples in the Second Discourse and The Letter to D’Alembert, respectively. They both
indicate that a beneficial “constitution” – governance, social sentiments and economy, geographic location and resources – are attainable and laudable.

It is here that an answer can be found as to what lies at the heart of Starobinski’s concern: that Rousseau’s sensation seriously limits the agency and freedom of people involved. Whether they are engaged in an intimate relationship that liberates the soul and stirs personal tranquility or attempting to develop a sensuous ethics, people’s agency is secondary to a set of external, unmanageable forces. Starobinski argues that the dichotomies of characters in Julie – Wolmar and St. Preux, in particular – show that the reflective man rules the sensuous one (1988, 216). St. Preux’s tutelage under Wolmar and Lord Andrew might have helped him grow but not by his own means. Should we advocate this as a political or civic option? What citizens would we create if they serve as duplicates of St. Preux, given to whim and passion despite a strong devotion to virtue and requiring the presence and foresight of an older, experienced person to guide them?

If we value Rousseau’s definition of freedom as a balance between personal wants and individual strength, or between strength of soul and an independent dependence, then we see how Rousseau’s political advice intends to generate a set of conditions that inculcate strength and independence in a particular state. He crafts a general analysis of governance that responds to the particularities of specific polities, enhancing equality and liberty simultaneously. Rousseau again tries to balance generality with particularity. He offers a set of general laws that are distinct from the particular causes that modify their effects (SC 188). If a person wishes to employ a general law, she must first examine “the thing in all its relationships” to understand how to apply that principle to its specific object. Consequently, a state’s legislation and constitution are modified according to its distinct people, geography, size, and wealth (SC 171, 188).

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56 This criticism also enfolds Emile, who continues to rely on his tutor despite maturation or marriage.
Rousseau applies a similar method to his characters. In understanding their dispositions and how they interact with environments and people, i.e. how they perceive objective and subjective relationships, Rousseau counsels particular and deliberate conditions that enhance sociable pity and judgment while cultivating strength of soul. The pairings found in Julie need not be nefarious because they enable the individuals to create an internal balance within their own idiosyncracies and they are largely self-sought and self-created. In the Emile he explains,

Those who never deal with anything other than their own affairs are too passionate to judge things soundly. Relating everything to themselves alone and regulating their ideas of good and bad according to their own interest, they fill their minds with countless ridiculous prejudices, and in everything that hampers their slightest advantage, they immediately see the overturning of the whole universe. (E 252)

Julie’s romantic passion for St. Preux is tempered by Claire’s pragmatic reasoning while Julie’s internal ethical compassion lends Claire sentimental and moral intonation. (Julie, after all, is regarded sweetly as Claire’s “little preacher.”) Julie enlivens Wolmar while Wolmar provides steadiness and structure to Julie. St. Preux’s relationships are more complex. Lord Edward befriends St. Preux in the midst of romantic love’s turmoil, serving as the sentimental confidante that Wolmar cannot be and as the moderator for St. Preux’s exuberant passions. After that perilous day in the

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57 Arendt and Rousseau agree that friendship is important in shaping ethics and action, yet Arendt goes further than Rousseau in asserting that friendship is the best motivator for solidarity and action. Rousseau’s analyses reveal some concerns about friendship: How well does Arendt’s friendship help us check habits or practices that foster amour-propre? When might those friendships be too similar and, consequently, eliminate the desire or need for relationships that bridge diversity? Rousseau does not assume that a friendship can only be felt among like-minded people. He describes his friendship with Ignacio Emanuel de Altuna: “What treasures of enlightenment and virtues did I finding that strong soul! I felt that he was the friend I needed; we became intimate. Our tastes were not the same: we always disputed. Since we were both stubborn, we never agreed about anything. Even so we could not separate, and while we contradicted each other ceaselessly, neither of us would have wanted the other to act differently” (C 275).

58 Julie and Claire’s friendship suggest that happiness is not exclusive nor induces jealousy; if anything, their relationship is constructive and educative: “The warm and tender friendship that united us almost from the cradle has, in a manner of speaking, enlightened our hearts early on about every passion. We know their signs and their effects rather well; we lack only the art of repressing them” (J 36). Consider, too, Claire’s description of her reaction to Julie: “It even seems to me that I am more proud than jealous over it; for after all the charms of your face, no being those which would suit mine, do not diminish those I have, and I feel the more beautiful with your beauty, suave with your graces, adorned with your talents; I deck myself in all your perfections, and it is in you that I make the best possible investment of my vanity” (J 168). Friendship educates the passions, encourages growth, and facilitates joy. Rather than imagining the other person as a competitor or “enemy,” friendship configures her as a co-conspirator in “becoming” and as a reflection of one’s happiness. Compassion guides these imaginative and sentimental bonds.
boat with Julie, St. Preux reveals to Lord Edward: “Without you, I was lost, perhaps. A hundred times during this perilous day the memory of your virtue gave me back my own” (J 428). Wolmar enters after St. Preux has restrained his dominant passions with the purpose of guiding St. Preux back into his former occupation as a tutor. Because Wolmar underestimates the depth of St. Preux’s love, a fundamental aspect of St. Preux is opaque.

Without their pairs, the characters of Julie would have been caught in either the bedlam of their passions or the isolation of their reason. Judgment is profoundly interpersonal, or at least its development is, especially when matters concern the self. Shklar explains that “[o]ne must know at least one other man in order to have some basis for comparison” (1969, 42). Judgment’s perspicuity comes in expanding perception beyond the realm of one’s self, in perceiving both objective and subjective elements of relationships. Rousseau believes it impossible to individually consider a person in all her relationships. In response he widens the point of view through relationship. Julie may not be able to see all dimensions of Wolmar or St. Preux, for example, but her perspective enlarges when Claire offers hers.

The concern that individual freedom is inhibited through either relationships or environments remains. Yet this concern is hardly limited to Rousseau nor is it necessarily a liability for him. Theorists have long struggled with the influence of people and environments on individuals. The more benign word for it is “socialization;” Foucault called it “discipline” and placed its operations in governmentality. If we acknowledge that the world is, in effect, a tourniquet on our freedom and that it shapes us regardless of how we will or wish it, then Rousseau’s political and moral projects of consciously working the environment in order to produce the most “beneficial” human results seems less like a danger and more like a pro-active means of working with this fact. Social and political institutions are unavoidable. The question we need to ask, then,
is what kind of person or community we wish those institutions to support, for “one must use a great deal of art to prevent social man from being totally artificial” (E 317).

3.3. Pity and Politics

How are we, Rousseau’s readers, to understand pity’s relationship to politics? Pity receives not a mention in the Social Contract, which is widely believed to be Rousseau’s most political text. Shklar argues that Rousseau’s sensationalist psychology is a “science of feeling and suffering” (1969, 39) and a “method of social criticism…more suited to account for error and misery than to offer remedies” (1969, 83). Even its tie to the “aesthetic energy within us that is awakened by physical sensations” (ibid), and as a result its relationship to ethics, fails to provide political or social solutions. At best, Rousseau points to suffering, its “equalizing” capacity in that all humans encounter suffering in some form, and its ability to bind people around shared or like suffering (Shklar 1969, 54). Yet this bond too is unable to establish meaningful institutions (Orwin 1997a, Arendt). Whether pity is sterile or sociable, it seems doomed to remain as a social sentiment without political consequences.

Yet I want to challenge two assumptions about politics in Rousseau. First is the assumption that the Social Contract and like-minded treatises are political over and against Rousseau’s more fictitious works like the Emile and Julie. This assumption forgets that Rousseau’s craft is in tailoring his message(s) to the reader, discriminately but variously, so that it has opportunity to establish itself. Second is the presumption that the Social Contract itself is somehow a more useful project or provides a more attainable politics than his other texts. Questioning its practicality is not the same as questioning its importance. Rather I wish to highlight that its rhetoric is colorless and its substance is as susceptible to claims of being “utopic” as his “non-political” works.

Rousseau believes that human sentiments and, consequently, ideas are susceptible to a number of influences – sensations and environments, relationships with
others, temperament, <em>amour de soi</em> and <em>amour-propre</em>, and, more importantly for this point, language. He urges his readers to consider the preparation for and the context in which one delivers a message as much as its substance: “What one says means nothing if one has not prepared the moment for saying it,” he counsels (E 319), “How can one think that the same sermon is suitable to so many auditors of such diverse dispositions, so different in mind, humor, age, sex, station, and opinion?” The novel offers an ideal vehicle for combining particularity within generality: Rousseau can offer general guiding principles and maxims but place them in a specific context, using <i>this</i> character type or <i>that</i> kind of social encounter. In so doing, he can also adorn those encounters sensually – they come to life as the imagination reconstructs the sensations, sentiments, and psychologies of a given situation. As Rousseau reminds his readers,

> One of the errors of our age is to use reason in too unadorned a form, as if men were all mind. In neglecting the language of signs that speak to the imagination, the most energetic of languages has been lost. The impression of the word is always weak, and one speaks to the heart far better through the eyes than through the ears…Reason alone is not active. It sometimes restrains, it arouses rarely, and it has never done anything great. (E 321)

The rhetoric and style of Rousseau’s novels intentionally draws the reader in through enchantment, and instruction occurs en-route. The flatness of the <i>Social Contract</i> in contrast to the vibrancy of either <i>Emile</i> or <i>Julie</i> speaks to reason’s inabilities and imagination’s role.

Adding to the complexity of dividing Rousseau’s political from his non-political texts is his habit of repetition. In the <i>Confessions</i> he reveals, “Everything that is bold in <i>The Social Contract</i> was previously in the <i>Discourse on Inequality</i>; everything that was bold in <i>Emile</i> was previously in <i>Julie</i>” (342). It should be added that what is found in <i>The Social Contract</i> and the <i>Discourse on Political Economy</i> is also found in <i>Emile</i>, and, by extension, <i>Julie</i>. Book Five of the <i>Emile</i>, in which an adult Emile meets, courts, and merits his Sophie, includes a large diagnosis of the “best” political system that parallels what Rousseau provides in the aforementioned “political” texts. Emile is sent to travel the world to discern the best possible political governance but discovers it closer than he
imagines: Sophie’s hearth. Her parents rule their abode well; under Emile and Sophie’s direction it will flourish. “I believe I see the people multiplying, the fields being fertilized, the earth taking on a new adornment” (E 474). Given the love with which Rousseau also describes Clarens’ management, it is not a poor conjecture to believe that Clarens and Sophie’s estate are analogous. Rousseau intends for Julie, and Clarens particularly, to serve as a revelation of public accord. He shares, “Aside from this object of morals and conjugal decency, which is radically connected to the whole social order, I made myself a more secret one of concord and public peace, which is perhaps a greater and more important object in itself” (emphasis added, C 366).

The Social Contract, written with a similar goal, speaks in a different voice. The Social Contract is written in what Rousseau believes is the least “energetic” and, subsequently, least convincing language – that of reason – in order to demonstrate what must be done. “I repeat,” he says, “cold arguments can determine our opinions, but not our actions. They make us believe and not act. They demonstrate what must be done” (emphasis added, E 323). The contrast of being able to believe without acting mirrors the distinction Rousseau makes between sterile and sociable pity: one can have an intellectual (even emotional) comprehension of a situation without associating it with action. Reason might persuade but it cannot compel.

In addition, Rousseau’s project admits its fragility. Death is inevitable – a matter of whether it occurs “naturally” or because of shifts in power – and birth is circumstantial. Consider all of the improbable convergences that Rousseau outlines for a government’s instantiation: a legislator with a “great soul” must be found; the people, the land and its resources, and the sovereign must fit one another; a civil religion must circulate. Rousseau acknowledges the difficulty of finding the right combination of conditions (SC 170). He also likens the body politic to the human body, both of which “[begin] to die from the very moment of its birth, and carries within itself the causes of its destruction” (SC 194). Several elements can hasten its death. Interest groups and
factions might arise, weakening social bonds and causing particular interests to oppose and outweigh the general will. The government may shrink, moving from an aristocracy to a monarchy. Or the state might dissolve because either the sovereign seizes more power or certain members usurp power and alter the government’s form. Increasing the likelihood of disruption and dissolution are aspects of social and political life like opinion, mores, and individual desires for power, favor, or esteem.

Setting aside these concerns and taking Rousseau at his word that this project is serious and necessary, the Social Contract still appears to support the critics’ claim that pity’s absence is telling: if pity cannot be found here, it can be neither institutional nor political. But this examination might be misdirected. What if, instead of asking where in the text do we find terms like pity, we look instead at what lies in-between and beneath the text? This question aims at the “great question of the best possible Government” for Rousseau, mainly: “What is the nature of Government suited to forming a people that was the most virtuous, most enlightened, most wise, in sum, the best, taking this word in its most extended sense” (C 340). Murmuring below the text are women and men, tastes, opinions, mores, sentiments, economic and social interactions, inequalities and equalities, individual interests and the “common” – in short, the lifeblood of a polity that determines whether and how well a government functions. Sociable pity, itself not a political term, is a political practice that sustains the polity at large.

There is an aspect of the Social Contract that suggests itself for political pity: the general will. I am leery of simply equating it to sociable pity – the general will seems more a blend of natural pity, amour de soi, and conscience with a strong sense of justice – but it relies upon pity to achieve the common and moderate particular interests. “Pity is what, in the state of nature, takes the place of laws, mores, and virtue, with the advantage that no one is tempted to disobey its sweet voice” (DI 55). Within a more complex society and governance, sociable and political pity is what works in concert with laws, grounds mores, and nourishes virtues so that civic culture can thrive. Each
sees oneself in the other; each sees how the general will is bound up and derived from particularity; each participates in the active, sympathetic support of the other. As argued above, natural and sociable pity is a primary social mechanism for comprehending and acting in a highly interdependent society – it restrains *amour-propre*, harnesses the passions, and stimulates good acts towards and with one’s community members.

Shklar calls the general will a regulative, psychological power that refers people to equality (1969, 185-86). The general will thrives in a compassionate community because, as noted above, pity attends to those ineradicable, equalizing strands of the human condition – mortality and suffering. Political structures often exacerbate or create inequalities among its members, shifting the burden of suffering and death onto the poor or the disenfranchised. And as Rousseau suggests, even forewarning of their death at the moment of the body politics’ birth, the institutions’ longevity and structure makes them both more susceptible to disease or decay and less responsive to shifting community needs. Political practices are more reflexive, capable of both spontaneity and cultivation, and adapt to an ever-changing socio-economic and political climate. The general will, while institutionalized and adjudicated regularly, acts more like a disposition and practice that continually re-gathers people around the common.

Rousseau first defines the general will as an identification of self and other. “*Each of us places his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will; and as one we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole*” (SC 148). More than merely yoking individuals together in a compact, the general will establishes a psychological experience in which the self perceives discrete and distinct others as a part

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59 He elaborates how it functions: “The constant will of all the members of the state is the general will; through it they are citizens and free. When a law is proposed in the people’s assembly, what is asked of them is not precisely whether they approve or reject, but whether or not it conforms to the general will that is theirs. Each man, in giving his vote, states his opinion on this matter, and the declaration of the general will is drawn from the counting of votes. When, therefore, the opinion contrary to mine prevails, this proves merely that I was in error, and that what I took to be the general will was not so. If my private opinion had prevailed, I would have done something other than what I had wanted. In that case I would not have been free” (SC 206).
of one’s self. This is not as a replication of the self but as a multiplication of the self (Strong 2000, 82). “The general will is then the expression of my common self, that is, of
the self that I find, as the same self, in myself and in others,” argues Strong, “Far from
being the expression of a single, unitary overarching collective consciousness, the
general will is in fact the expression of the multiplicity and mutability of my being”
(ibid). Arendt is wrong to worry that Rousseau replaces consent with will and
encourages the assimilation of a multitude into a single entity guided by single opinions
and beliefs. Rousseau is not seeking sameness but he is constructing a political
composite where self and other find commonality outside of and beyond shared political
interests. What results because of the general will while also enabling it to flourish is the
capacity to viscerally and imaginatively conceive how the self is other and the other is
self. Strong implies as much when he argues, “It is the ability to experience as others
experience that creates the common” (emphasis added, 2000, 123). Pity is precisely this
power. Pity transports the self, safeguards the self, and multiplies the self in and
through others, so to speak, without endangering the self.

The twin aims of the general will – the common preservation and the well-being
of “the whole and of each part” (DP 114, SC 203) – echo the dual functions of pity and
self-love in Rousseau’s natural state: tempering isolation and self-sufficiency.
Conceiving of the body politic as “moral,” not as a “being of reason” but as an artificial
body that imbues its citizens with “duties” (SC 150), Rousseau wraps the general will
into a care for the polity at large and the individuals within it. He writes in the Discourse
on Political Economy, in which the general will also figures, “Individual welfare is so
closely linked to the public confederation that, were it not for the attention one should
pay to human frailty, this convention would be dissolved by right if just one citizen were
to perish who could have been saved” (DP 122). The fact of its generality does not create
a mass uniformity, as Arendt fears; rather, it creates a heightened interest in how
abstract principles like equality or justice are felt by individuals precisely because its
constituents are so interdependent. What affects one, affects all and vice versa. The ends of the particular and the individual are not divided from those of the general; in fact, they constitute them. Yet without an undercurrent of sociable pity to do the actual work of perceiving commonality and suffering, the overall health of the civic culture and of the general will falters.

Like the general will, sociable pity is inconstant and impermanent. Unlike the general will, sociable pity is not itself institutionalized. Arendt and Orwin are correct that pity cannot build long-standing institutions by itself but I disagree that this inability is negative. Rousseau’s pity acts as a disposition and a practice, a potential that responds to the fact of interdependence in its ability to move a person both “against her wishes” and in accordance with her desires, choices, and habits. Moreover, if pity nourishes the general will, then the general will also directs pity’s effects. Particularity cultivates sociable pity, endowing the public with sympathetic if distinct individuals, but interdependence awakens it. Concerns about whether pity is “too much” or “too little,” whether it inspires demagogic rhetoric that hinders policy debate, or whether it attempts to replace virtue, are calmed. The general will shifts the focus – its generality means that it cannot act particularly. It cannot “render a decision on either a man or a state of affairs” (SC 157). Rather allowing this or that incident to spark worry and then policy, which may strike at the head and not the root of the problem, the general will looks first to the conditions underlying the incident and asks whether those conditions are equitable, sustainable, or right. Sympathy moves the people towards the roots of institutions prior to evaluating its specific policies or laws.

Yet Orwin remains disinclined to preach pity’s power or its universality. Rather Orwin finds compassion to be a feminine trait, and he argues that Emile’s pity entails a radical shift in what comprises masculinity. Gone is “male excellence,” uplifted is a

60 Clark’s (1997) research suggests a similar trend – compassion is seen as “feminine” – but Clark believes this characterization is due to socialization around gender stereotypes.
“feminine notion of masculinity,” and the result is a poor androgyny (1997a, 7-8). Given the overall tone of his argument, it is tempting to reconsider Orwin’s critique of paternalism via a “nanny state” as a critique of “maternalism” (2000). The feminine, he implies in both articles, is not only weak itself but it weakens those who participate in stereotypically “feminine” enterprises and virtues. And coupling it with “masculine” traits does not create a complement but, rather, distorts the latter.

Rousseau does not allocate pity to a single sex. He establishes its universality in the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* and cultivates it equally within his characters, accounting for their particular temperaments. It is true that Julie is the only one characterized as “naturally” compassionate and that Sophie also displays sympathy. However, these assets emerge alongside what Rousseau does ascribe to women – gentleness and the arbitration of mores, taste, and opinions. Given his careful attention to pity with Emile, St. Preux, and Wolmar – to men of differing talents and perspectives, each with a different relationship to sentiments – and to assigning and segregating the genders to different activities, inclinations, and powers, it is unlikely that Rousseau finds pity to be solely “feminine.”

Were we to categorize pity as a feminine practice, counter to Rousseau, then it still offers more to contemporary society than either a bland feebleness or a muddied androgyny. Rousseau is clear that the feminine and the masculine are complementary, establishing a partnership that “produces a moral person of which the woman is the eye and the man is the arm…Each follows the prompting of the other; each obeys, and both are masters” (E 377). A self-containment of the dual natures of genders as they are stereotypically portrayed and socialized – finding a balance between sensitivity and rationality, if I can refer to that traditional formulation – offers an interesting political practice in a “post-gender” world. This latter possibility is taking Rousseau beyond

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61 See Book Five in *Emile*, pp. 377-90, for example.
himself since he urges for each gender to flourish in what is “naturally” theirs, but it is not beyond the potential of a political, sociable pity that, instead of focusing on gender expectations, considers an individual’s own propensities and potential in order to encourage self-“perfectibility.”

Compassion as a civic virtue plays to an essential ambiguity in polities – that strange overlap of the personal, social, and political (even to the reconfiguration of gender roles and virtues). Arendt worries that the social encroaches on and endangers its neighboring realms; yet, rather than erecting strong boundaries between them, it might be useful to continue exploring the borderlands. Compassion, nudging a person to sense others’ sufferings and joys prior to judging how to act towards or with them, facilitates a civic demeanor that may prove critical in diverse polities. This sociable pity does not require a single disposition or a single set of practices that are universal. Rather it can appear in a variety of dispositions and be cultivated according to their particular strengths and weaknesses.

Tracking pity in Rousseau is more complicated than at first appears. Natural pity, transfigured through time and human perfection, reveals itself as either sterile or sociable in contemporary polities. Sterile pity isolates a person, hinges on amour-propre, and operates alongside a host of uncivil sentiments like competition, jealousy, superiority, or apathy. In contrast, sociable pity is both other-oriented and active. It encourages relational perception as a component of judgment and action. This form of pity locates what Strong sees as “the stuff of politics” in “the human…from the way in which I am you and the way in which you are me” (Strong xxii).

Certainly Rousseau’s forms of pity and its relationship to sensation, sentiment, and reason have their weaknesses, not least of which is the mining of his texts to uncover their dimensions. But Rousseau does point to possibilities that are latent in compassion were we to work more with its nuance, expand our perspective on what influences our reactions, and how we might shape its emergence. These endeavors are
politically viable and, if we take seriously Rousseau’s sense that compassion sustains all other social and civic virtues, vital.
4. Merleau-Ponty and a Phenomenological Compassion

The critiques of compassion found in previous chapters have considered it primarily as a sentimental principle that stands on its own. Rousseau established the possibility that compassion underlies social attitudes and actions that strengthen the body polity as well as individual faculties. This chapter continues in that path, turning to Maurice Merleau-Ponty1 to explore how compassion interacts with a dynamic political environment where conflict is inevitable and the manifestations of political principles are variable. Could it be that a modern and politically powerful ethos embraces compassion as a means of navigating tenuous and tense situations? Could it be that this ethos might also define a heroic ethic insofar as it interacts with a certain form of vulnerability, courage, and engagement with otherness? Could it be that politics is not just the contestation of wills and interests but, like principles of equality, liberty, or justice, is related to and cultivated by compassion? This chapter explores the possibility of an ethos and ethic that draws on compassion’s own capacity to be both an active choice and a sustaining orientation while the concluding chapter will consider its relationship to political principles and the political arena. This study of compassion is of its discursive character - a consideration of what it is, can do, and can become given the individuals, situations, and contexts involved.

Arendt provides a critical voice of compassion. Doubtful of its ability to operate either as a principle or as a part of enduring political institutions and outlooks, she makes a series of claims that intend to discredit its political capacities. She evaluates the French Revolution, which conspired to make compassion for the poor its driving force for liberty and equality, as well as compassion’s role in framing the mindset of dispossessed groups who, in turning inward for compassion’s “warmth,” resign

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1 The following abbreviations refer to his works, respectively: AD: The Adventures of the Dialectic; HT: Humanism and Terror; PoP: Phenomenology of Perception; PP: The Primacy of Perception; SN: Sense and Nonsense; S: Signs; SB: The Structure of Behavior; VI: The Visible and the Invisible.
themselves to exclusion from meaningful politically activity. In Arendt’s depiction, compassion weakens political capacities, transforms individuality into mob mentality, and collapses the spaces in which political agency thrives and out of which solidarity is forged. Arendt’s configuration of compassion is mesmerizing: so strikingly does she depict compassion’s weaknesses and so starkly does she outline its characteristics that it is easy to overlook just how problematic her depiction is. Her compassion, operating in a world dominated by one-dimensional dichotomies, is itself lightweight; she leaves little room for compassion’s other dimensions and possibilities to appear, let alone challenge her own image.

Rousseau emerges in Arendt’s dispute with compassion – it is on him that she pins the Revolution’s turn towards pity – but he is also considered a primary advocate of compassion. Rousseau’s sense of compassion provides more possibility even though he sees it as fragile in itself. Rousseau’s compassion is a natural faculty, originating all other social virtues, that is weakened by the onset of additional passions, an increasingly complex social and political network, and a dominant ego, all of which threaten to produce self-isolation. He shares Lauren Berlant’s critique that a sterile pity engenders spectatorship and hypocrisy because it strengthens self-centeredness. But his more nuanced account – one that distinguishes compassion’s sterility from its fecundity – also finds greater productivity in compassion than Arendt does: compassion tames unruly passions and focuses individual attention on the quality of life within the community at large. As a result, the better political system rests atop a vibrant, compassionate community in which particular interests are joined to a general will.

Yet some concerns remain: Does compassion collapse political space? Does it forsake individuality in the name of a bland but dangerous group mentality? What about the line between compassion and cruelty – will compassion devolve to pity and encourage self-righteous violence? Can compassion form political institutions without devolving into paternalism? What of compassion’s egalitarianism: is it, as Nussbaum
suggests, bad to have compassion for people who seemingly do not deserve it? What if this quality makes compassion more valuable for politics? The political potential of compassion’s initial upsurge, which may not comport with reason immediately, is largely unexplored by either its supporters or its critics. Yet it seems key to generating a polity that can withstand intense contestation over how principles like equality or justice are substantiated. In other words, juridical and rational political principles are inadequate in themselves to check strong antagonism and keep a polity bound together. They cannot wholly establish or maintain the “e pluribus unum.” To get beyond sectarian politics we must turn to the compassionate capillaries of a body politic out of which a common good can be forged.

The term capillary is deliberate for we must face the fact of corporeity in politics, which mediates how reason and emotions function. Nussbaum, like Arendt, sees reason as a primary faculty that restrains and directs compassion. Yet her faith in its necessity borrows from Rousseau’s considerations. Neither Nussbaum nor Arendt can provide a way through the antinomy of reason to emotion, of judgment to compassion. And, as commented in Chapter One, Nussbaum’s compassion creates an artificial temporal split wherein compassion’s initial appearance is transfigured and made “right” by a secondary judgment. This split is helpful in addressing Arendt’s concern about being emotionally overwhelmed but it is contrary, even strange, to one’s experience of compassion where reason, emotion, and action can appear singly, simultaneously, or in an unexpected order. It also ignores recent research suggesting that reason relies on emotional and physiological processes. Emotional systems that unconsciously survey the environment and select which information will appear to the thinking “I” are essential to conscious, meaning-making life.

The conflux of emotion, reason, and action – the ways in which they undulate, vary in pitch or focus, or appear simultaneously in the body – suggests that there is a point at which dichotomies are more obfuscating than helpful. How does one reconcile
bodily synchrony with analytic segregation, work that assigns value in the act of segmenting a complex process? Life incarnate is messy, contradictory, and puzzling, suggesting paradox rather than dichotomy. Situating compassion in corporeity is to recognize that one cannot get beyond one’s body as both the background and the vehicle of human experience.

In this investigation, Maurice Merleau-Ponty becomes a valuable conversation partner. His political and philosophical works take the fact of corporeity seriously in order to think through an alternative vision of the human condition, one inextricably complex, inconsistent, and contradictory. He also counters the theoretical tendency to conceive of the world in dichotomies like compassion/politics, public/private, subject/object, or emotion/reason. My consideration of Merleau-Ponty is selective and instrumental – it is limited to the ways in which it illuminates compassion for a contemporary politics, and it should not be considered a full analysis of his works. Compassion, seen in the light of a corporeal human condition, shows a robust side of itself that meets Arendt’s concerns, strengthens Rousseau’s conception, and presents political possibilities not yet articulated.

I turn first to Merleau-Ponty’s work on perception in order provide an alternative rendering of the subject. Compassion can be dispositional, but as Rousseau illustrates, it is also a form of agency that emerges according to one’s unconscious, sensational interpretations of the environment. I noted in Chapter Two that Arendt’s description of sentiments resembles her assumptions about sensations – both are inchoate, uncontrollable urges that threaten to overrun the mind. Consequently, she encourages segregation as a means of directing and harnessing the sensations: she segregates cognitive faculties from emotional urges so that the former might shape the latter and she installs strong boundaries between private, public, and social spheres so that the public remains calm, free from passion and relatively sensationally-neutral. Compassion’s unruliness is rejected from the public sphere so that reason can rule.
While Rousseau shares some of the same assumptions about sensations and sentiments – they do require some kind of organization in the body and in the environment at large – he offers a more optimistic diagnosis for compassion. But I also highlighted the tentativeness of my claims. Rousseau’s “wise man’s materialism” requires careful reading of and excavation in his “non-political” works, opening my arguments to skepticism.

Merleau-Ponty likewise sees sense perceptions as affecting our person and our capacities, behaviors, and actions. But unlike Rousseau and Arendt, Merleau-Ponty sees perception as a mutually constituting communication between the “object” sensed and the “subject” sensing. This is possible because of how an embodied person is situated in the world – a locus of receptivity and constructions, partially established by other subjects while also escaping their full determination, invested in situations while also exceeding them, expansive, energetic, and idiosyncratic. Compassion gains more fluidity and ambiguity in such a subject: it is the (sometimes unconscious) articulation of emotional, psychological, or visceral congruity between self and other.

This sense of self is carried into human relations and politics where we find interdependence is inter-corporeity. Individual selves retain their distinctiveness while being highly bound up with others. Neurologically, empathy facilitates awareness and behavior between two sentient beings. While empathy is not compassion, as made clear in the first chapter, it establishes the conditions for both compassion and comprehension. Compassion can be an ethical decision – one as likely to be made “intuitively” in the bodily processes as it is to be made cognitively – to abstain from violating the other person. In this way, compassion is both an orientation and an action. We retain Rousseau’s sense of a compassionate temperament while strengthening individual agency and choice, and consequently, distinction, in compassionate display. In discussing inter-corporeity and compassion, I will also consider the theoretical frameworks by which we analyze and understand conflict. This analysis leads into a
discussion on the relationship between compassion and violence, which gets to the heart of Arendt’s concerns. I look at Merleau-Ponty’s more political texts in which he traces a fine line between transgression and affiliation, which suggests that while (compassionate) ethics and politics might operate out of corporeal paradoxes, ethical dichotomies draw critical lines that protect and sustain humanity.

As an embodied phenomenon its alacrity and dexterity come to the fore: compassion is a responsive and collaborative engagement with another person whose manifestation depends upon its context. Compassion catches glimpse of another’s basic humanity, which requires perceiving beyond the particular visage that presents itself and acknowledging the innumerable dimensions and relations that lie behind and around one’s limited perspective of another. The resulting perception contains more depth, height, and “space” than Arendt’s sense, easing her worries about compassion’s form of suffocating “intimacy” between people that eradicates political agency or individuality. It also retains singularity of the individual while its intercorporeality enables it to be simultaneously general. It is active in shaping action and judgment and, consequently, of gathering together a different form of solidarity, which will be explored more fully in the concluding chapter.

Like Arendt, I turn to literature for examples that illuminate compassion’s multiple dimensions. Specifically I turn to The Iliad, recognized as a poem about life, death, and the contestation for distinction within. If we can find a form of compassion circulating in The Iliad, then it is possible to argue for compassion in the polity, which Arendt sees as an arena for vibrant contestation. The compassion that emerges in this

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2 For purposes of the dissertation, I am concentrating on compassion towards humans. This is not to say that we cannot or do not feel compassion towards other sentient beings like animals and that a politics around animal rights, for example, is unimportant. My definition of compassion can be modified easily, moving from “humanity” towards “sentient being” similar to how Rousseau understands it.
chapter is contrary to expectation. Here it is not always an easy and spontaneous sentiment but it can retain a plasticity that corresponds with the contingency and fragility of human action while asking that the agents involved are mindful. It is work—not the work of restraining it to cognitive judgments about compassion’s “right” deployment, but the work involved in perceiving and maintaining what is “humanly valuable” about others. It can emerge in a tenuous relationship, it can operate in tense situations, and it can create provisional actions. This kind of compassion is political, politically viable, and politically valuable because it functions in relationship to the difficulty of living an “ethical” life in a world populated by people with whom we clash.

4.1. Corporeity and Intercorporeity

Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological approach to perception offers a resource for politics and ethics, generally, and compassion, specifically, by offering a means of comprehending a situation through its corporeal ligaments. I begin the discussion about compassion by situating it in Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the human experience. This phenomenological description differs from common presumptions about the world, especially those documented in social contract theories that see individuals as discrete and autonomous, predominantly rational, and “naturally” competitive with others for resources and power. That Merleau-Ponty understands humans as interdependent, inter-corporeal, and perceptual does not mean that he or his phenomenology excludes violence or competition nor does it mean that he guarantees either an ethical or a compassionate response to others. Choice, responsibility, and action in a complicated inter-corporeal network remain critical elements of human freedom and human life, as will be explored in more detail in the next section. Yet insofar as political theory is a

3 But it is not unexpected or undocumented. Consider Candace Clark’s definition of it, which was more fully discussed in Chapter One: compassion is the physical, emotional, or cognitive “reaching out” to another, a “fellow-feeling” that has a three-stage process in which a person experiences compassion: first, she empathizes, or imagines the other person’s situation; second, she experiences sympathy sentiment, or recognizes compassion has emerged; and, finally, she displays those sentiments (1997, 27).
story about human individuals, then its inclusion of phenomenology is the inclusion of
the work we do on ourselves and on the world. Merleau-Ponty’s reflections plunge us
into the tissue of the inter-corporeal human condition in order to provide a richer sense
of who we are and who we might be. (Arendt’s depiction of the human condition, while
brilliant, is more cognitive, seeing individuals as separate beings with little to no
corporeally public ties.)

Phenomenology for Merleau-Ponty is a practice, a “manner or style of thinking”
(Phenomenology of Perception (PoP) viii), that describes and reconstructs our “effective
involvement” in the world (PoP xvi). Phenomenology is an expressive moment as much
as it is a creative one. How we choose to act upon a moment’s revelation, both as it
unfolds itself in an ever-receding present and as it reads historically, partly depends
upon our appraisal of it, recognizing that habits, temperament, and the given immediate
demands of that situation simultaneously affect our comprehension. “The world is not
what I think, but what I live through,” he explains, “I am open to the world, I have no
doubt that I am in communication with it, but I do not possess it; it is inexhaustible”
(PoP xviii-xix). Perception and subjectivity are embedded in and interacting with the
world. Perception is not a “science,” an “act,” or a “deliberate taking up of a position”
but the “background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them” (PoP
xi). A perceiving subject is as much the “exterior” presented to others as the “interior”
so richly present to herself, and she fills with “wonder” at the world (PoP xv).
Phenomenology is a way of elaborating the human condition that also influences the
fields it describes: it is not just that a slight pause halts political violence, for instance,

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4 Merleau-Ponty refers to the person’s full perceptual apparatus – sight, touch, smell, taste, and
hearing – not just vision.
5 As he explains in regards to reason’s place, “Rationality is not a problem. There is behind it no
unknown quantity which has to be determined by deduction, or, beginning with it, demonstrated
inductively. We witness every minute the miracle of related experience, and yet nobody knows
better than we do how this miracle is worked, for we are ourselves this network of
relationships… Phenomenology, as a disclosure of the world, rests on itself, or rather provides its
own foundation” (PoP xxiii).
but also that it can shift apperception of self and other in ways that modify old habits, add novel meanings, and influence one’s style.

Yet the ever-present phenomenological possibility of reworking one’s self and the world contains violence. “We take our fate in our hands, we become responsible for our history through reflection, but equally by a decision on which we stake our life, and in both cases what is involved is a violent act which is validated by being performed” (PoP xxiii). For Merleau-Ponty a certain degree of violence is unavoidable in interacting with the world and others – taking up the world in order to construct personal meaning requires that I comprehend another person, for instance, thereby subjecting them to my perception even as they capitulate and resist, remaining outside complete domination; transgression and affiliation remain opposing but complementary forces that bind as much as sever relationships and political possibility. Acknowledging that violence is critical to both politics and ethics, as will be detailed later. Here I first trace how Merleau-Ponty conceives perception and the human body with attention to a person’s perception is bodily. Sensations “intercommunicate by opening on to the structure of the thing” (PoP 266), and information and reflection occur through perceptual synthesis. Merleau-Ponty echoes Rousseau when he warns that we have forgotten how to perceive: “Synaesthetic perception is the rule, and we are unaware of it only because scientific knowledge shifts the centre of gravity of experience, so that we have unlearned how to see, hear, and generally speaking, feel, in order to deduce, from our bodily organization and the world as the physicist conceives it, what we are to see, hear and feel” (PoP 266). It is worth quoting Merleau-Ponty at length: “It is not the epistemological subject who brings about the synthesis, but the body, when it escapes from dispersion, pulls itself together and tends by all means in its power towards one single goal of its activity, and when one single intention is formed in it through the phenomenon of synergy. We withdraw this synthesis from the objective body only to transfer it to the phenomenal body, the body, that is, in so far as it projects a certain ‘setting’ round itself, in so far as its ‘parts’ are dynamically acquainted with each other, and its receptors are so arranged as to make possible, through their synergy, the perception of the objects” (PoP 270). This phenomenal power of synthesis is an element of human comprehension of and interaction with the environment. While it has compassionate possibilities, it is not wholly equivocal to compassion.

Furthermore, I place this section in a footnote because, while compassion may occur physically in the sensing’s body or be triggered by the physical appearance of the sensed, I do not wish to emphasize the body’s role. Neither should one discount this definition of compassion because of instances of empathetic imagination where a person feels compassion for someone physically distant from herself nor declare that compassion is limited only to those situations where a person is immediate. The body plays an important role in any perceptual encounter because it is the site and background of cognition and action. However, compassion itself is not limited to bodily encounters.

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constructive capacities. I then remark on how compassion gains a new inflection in this depiction.

Merleau-Ponty actually defines sensation as “co-existence or communion” (PoP 248) in which each sense is a bodily “thought subordinated to a certain field” (PoP 252) and “one of our surfaces of contact with being, a structure of consciousness” (emphasis added, PoP 257). The words “field” and “surfaces” signify that there are multiple planes on which and through which a person engages singular objects and people in the world at large, and that sensations are better thought of as sheets of interaction and communication that create consciousness. In fact, Merleau-Ponty says, “I am a field, an experience” (PoP 473). Defining a person as a field a priori to an ego cogito establishes a general and anonymous base that facilitates communication and understanding between people and out of which individuality takes form. It is also a spatial reorganization of the person’s standing – to consist of perceptual planes is to lie horizontally in the world, a kind of permeation instead of standing upright and astride it. Merleau-Ponty already shifts the person towards more symbiotic openness with the world at large.

Sensation is invitation. Merleau-Ponty argues that sensible qualities radiate a “certain mode of existence” that enchant a person and establish a “sacramental value” with him (PoP 248). In this way, sensation has an intentionality that enables a co-functioning of the sensed (object) with the sensing (subject). A person enters into a “sympathetic relation” with what is sensed, makes it “my own,” and finds in it a “momentary law” to which he either opens up or rejects (ibid). As a result, sensations “impinge within me upon a certain general setting through which I come to terms with the world…they suggest to me a new manner of evaluating...Blue is that which prompts

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7 This definition is distinct from idealism’s sensation, in which a rational “I” reflects upon and organizes the myriad of sensations that chaotically hit it, and materialism’s sensation, in which sensations act as a thousand points of contact with the world that govern an individual’s actions and responses. Sensation for Merleau-Ponty is reciprocal, instantaneous, bodily, and synthetic: we are already always in contact with the world in a call and response relationship.
me to look in a certain way, that which allows my gaze to run over it in a specific manner. It is a certain field or atmosphere presented to the power of my eyes and of my whole body” (PoP 244). That Merleau-Ponty describes this relationship as akin to sacrament is helpful. Sacrament is an established and regular ritual in which a piece of bread and chalice of wine hold symbolic and transformative power. We are invited to ingest, literally and metaphorically, Jesus Christ’s body not to overpower, negate, or rule Christ but to respect, celebrate, and establish relationship with Christ. Like sacrament, sensation is a nearly magical practice that communicates a particular and vital form of co-habitation, or communion, between people or objects. Sensation is reciprocal, has the power to shape actions and perspectives, and is a constant, working relationship of which a person may or may not be conscious. In this latter aspect, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology echoes Rousseau’s sense of sensation and environment.

The personal process of perception is inherently solipsistic and narcissistic: I perceive this shade of red, place it within a field of reds based on other experiences with red, and define its redness within and against my own history. In this way I infuse the object – that quale of red – with a personal meaning and significance. We read ourselves into situations and objects, bridging gaps by creating personal significance while simultaneously being unable to overleap that distance. “At each instant, in love, in political life, in perception’s silent life, we adhere to something, make it our own, and yet withdraw from it and hold it at a distance, without which we would know nothing about it,” he argues, “…We are equally incapable of dwelling in ourselves and in things, and are referred from them to ourselves and from ourselves to them” (S 199). This distance between things enables restraint from violence at the same time that it offers reciprocity.

Besides the physical and geometrical distance which stands between myself and all things, a ‘lived’ distance binds me to things which count and exist for me, and links them to each other. This distance measures the ‘scope’ of my life at every moment.
Sometimes between myself and the events there is a certain amount of play (*Spielraum*), which ensures that my freedom is preserved while the events do not cease to concern me. (*PoP 333*)

Narcissism is undercut by the fact that I never wholly possess the meaning and I gain meaning in tandem with shared cultural structures. The perceived object withdraws from my perception while transcending my perception. Perceived things are “open, inexhaustible systems which we recognize through a certain style of development, although we are never able, in principle, to explore them entirely, and even though they never give us more than profiles and perspectival views of themselves” (*PP 5-6*). There is always an aspect that recedes even as I move towards it.

Additionally, I am born into a shared world through language, shared perceptual fields, and the presence of other cultural objects, of which the human body is the first (*PoP 406*). Through this shared world I learn to define and create meaning. And, as discussed above, the anonymity and generality of sensation is the means by which I gain access to an object. As a result, any personal significance and perception occurs through a reciprocal immanence in the world with what is sensed. As with Arendt there is an element of natality involved, the critical difference being that Arendt sees it as occurring through action rather than perception. Merleau-Ponty’s perceiving subject is “not this absolute thinker” but establishes a “natal pact between our body and the world, between ourselves and our body” (*PP 6*). New situations stimulate a “continual birth” of the perceiving subject, out of which the “very productivity or freedom of human life” gains expression (*ibid*).

A person possesses a “universal setting” (*PoP 381*) through which she communicates her “style,” or her unique mannerisms, attitudes, and self-expressions. At “grips with this world,” the body is “permanently stationed before things in order to

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8 His critics often overlook this element of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology.
perceive them and, conversely, appearances are always enveloped for me in a certain bodily attitude” (PoP 352-53). Merleau-Ponty provides the example of the organist whose movements are “consecratory gestures: they draw affective vectors, discover emotional sources, and create a space of expressiveness as the movements of the augur delimit the templum” (PoP 168). The body itself inter-involves a person in an environment, serves as the visible expression of intentions (PoP 94), and (even her “most secret affective movements” helps (PP 5)) shapes her perceptions. In turn, a person’s body is “read” and comprehended by another person, facilitating communication between the two.

Because the body acts as the “general medium for having a world” (PoP 169), it is capable of receiving and forming new habits, or new patterns of meaning that Merleau-Ponty terms “cores of new significance” (ibid). Habits are a form of the fundamental power of spontaneity that are endowed with “renewable action and “independent existence” (ibid). Merleau-Ponty further defines the body as a “grouping of lived-through meanings which moves towards its equilibrium” (PoP 177). Whether events and interactions are located in the center or the periphery of our lived and practical fields, they may reshuffle the “elements of our equilibrium and [fulfill] our blind expectation” or integrate into a separate event in order to enrich that event’s meaning (PoP 177). Out of such encounters we gain new habits and new meanings. In other words, our interactions with people and the events that we participate in shape our habits, either solidifying old ones or generating new ones. This means that acting compassionately or mindfully can be a choice, replete with practices that cultivate our ability to see what is valuable and to act accordingly.

Such possibilities are not guarantees. In other words, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological account of perception and the self can manifest themselves in ethical action but that substantiation requires some form of agency, conscious or not. Merleau-Ponty’s sense of self is a convergence of several capacities – perceptually she stretches
into the horizon on multiple planes, through multiple points of contact, as others in those fields simultaneously saturate her. Her investment in the world is narcissistic and solipsistic while also heavily relying on shared, inter-dependent objects, language, fields, and opportunities. She is both distinctly “I” and profoundly an anonymous “other” (not-I), as a result. This way of situating a person in the world actually safeguards vital portions of the self while exposing her to otherness. Compassion, in such a person, is more fluid. It can emerge in the congruence of intentions or in the reworking of habits.

To get to it, we need a better sense of inter-corporeity, which Merleau-Ponty terms a “communion.” Communion offers a different sense of proximity and space, or what lies “between,” people that alleviates Arendt’s concerns about suffocating sentiments and collapsed political space. We gain an alternative perspective of the self-other relationship that is not predicated on a competitive, conflict-ridden view of the world wherein one person “gains” only at another person’s “loss.” Rather, a person is already immanent in another’s experience, and vice versa, in a way that transcends that person’s grasp while casting deep roots in her experience and understanding. This paradoxical “hollowing out” of perception, or chiasm, creates the possibility for an ethical response like compassion. New dimensions of agency that are “corporeal, contingent, and operative beneath the level of consciousness (not as in psychological qualities of an unconscious but as somatic processes that structure and respond to materially meaningful fields of forces),” explains Coole, “emergent agentic capacities are now investigated in their own right, without presupposing in advance who or what will bear them” (1997, 176). Merleau-Ponty’s inter-corporeity discloses compassion’s capacity to serve as an ethical, if sometimes visceral and somatic, “decision” to forego violating another person, especially in times of rivalry. It also reworks the theoretical frameworks by which struggle is comprehended.
Merleau-Ponty refers to a “communion” in describing inter-subjectivity. Communion is a pre-cognitive, perception-based way of relating to an environment and other people; remember, sensation is also defined as “communion” or “co-existence.” In its most general form communion refers to the predominantly horizontal interplay of perceptions – to the sheaths of being that cut across perceptual fields in order to constitute “self” and “other.” Yet communion’s definition shifts across Merleau-Ponty’s works in order to emphasize specific perceptual and corporeal interactions. In his political writings, communion refers to a particular moment of conscious recognition that the self is other and likewise. In his working notes, published posthumously, Merleau-Ponty reconfigures his terms in an attempt to undercut strong dichotomies between subject/object or self/other. “Communion” gives way to “flesh” and “chiasm.”

“Flesh” refers to the “tissue” that lines, sustains, and nourishes what is visible; it is “not a thing, but a possibility, a latency, and flesh of things” (VI 133). Merleau-Ponty further emphasizes that flesh is not matter; it is not a tangible or visible obstacle between things, it is not mind, and it is not substance, adding that,

To designate it, we should need the old term ‘element,’ in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire, that is, in the sense of a general thing, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being…the inauguration of the where and the when, the possibility and exigency for the fact; in a word: facticity, what makes the fact be a fact. (VI 139-40)

In flesh perception is incarnate. The flesh between things enables communication between them. More importantly for Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical project, it further establishes a self-other relationship and validity prior to and as the necessary

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9 Sensation gains another modality because Merleau-Ponty deliberately refuses the terms “subject” and “object:” a person is a sensible sentient who opens onto and is enveloped by the leaves of the world and vice versa. “If one wants metaphors, it would be better to say that the body sensed and the body sentient are as the obverse and the reverse, or again, as two segments of one sole circular course which goes above from left to right and below from right to left, but which is but one sole movement in its two phases” (VI 138).
background of conscious or rational thought. The flesh exists between me and the
world, acting as a kind of intermediary that enables me to immediately and
unquestionably grasp the world while holding that world at a critical, paradoxical
distance. Because Merleau-Ponty himself grapples for language appropriate to his
endeavors, his terminology opens itself up to confusions. A close political
approximation is Arendt’s configuration of “inter-est” – that “in-between,” which is
simultaneously physical and intangible, in which deeds and words, Arendt’s
fundaments of political relations, take on appearance and significance (1998, 183).
Merleau-Ponty’s flesh is more elemental. It establishes facticity by giving it concrete
form, a style of being that is situated in a specific time and location.

His term, “chiasm,” intends to clarify the self-other relationship. He writes,
“Chiasm, instead of the For the Other, that means that there is not only a me-other
rivalry, but a co-functioning. We function as one unique body” (VI 215). He later
describes the chiasm as the “the cleavage, in what regards the essential, is not for itself for
the Other, (subject-object) it is more exactly that between someone who goes unto the
world and who, from the exterior, seems to remain in his own ‘dream.’” (VI 214-15). The
chiasm makes a shared and unified world, “a world which is not projective, but forms
its unity across incompossibilities such as that – of my world and the world of the other”
(ibid). The other person does not present herself as a problem to be solved by the mind
but as a vital contributor and partner in establishing both my world and myself, in part

10 In this way, Merleau-Ponty is responding to Cartesian doubt that the other can or does exist: “If
we can show that the flesh is an ultimate notion, that it is not the union or compound of two
substances, but thinkable by itself, if there is a relation of the visible with itself that traverses me
and constitutes me as a seer, this circle which I do not form, which forms me, this coiling over of
the visible upon the invisible, can traverse, animate other bodies as well as my own. And if I was
able to understand how this wave arises within me, how the visible which is yonder is
simultaneously my landscape, I can understand a fortiori that elsewhere it also closes upon itself
and that there are other landscapes besides my own. If it lets itself be captivated by one of its
fragments, the principle of captation is established, the field open for other Narcissus, for an
‘intercorporeity’” (VI 140-41). “There is here no problem of the alter-ego because it is not I who
sees, not he who sees, because an anonymous visibility inhabits both of us, a vision in general, in
virtue of that primordial property that belongs to the flesh, being here and now, of radiating
everywhere and forever, being an individual, of being also a dimension and a universal” (VI 142).
because of the imperceptible but understood cleavage and the thickness that stand as communicating intermediaries between us. “The other is no longer so much a freedom seen from without as destiny and fatality, a rival subject for a subject, but he is caught up in a circuit that connects him to the world, as we ourselves are, and consequently also in a circuit that connects him to us – And this world is common to us, is intermundane space” (VI 269).

Some feminists argue that the kind of anonymity underlying sensation and personal interactions flattens another person’s multidimensionality under the totalitarian spell of the person perceiving her. Numerous responses have been made in defending Merleau-Ponty and encouraging greater interaction between his phenomenology and feminist ethics. Even Merleau-Ponty offers his defense, writing, “It was never my intention to posit the other except as an ethical subject” (PP 30). Missing in most accounts – both critical and supportive – is how depth and immanence help

11 Left unaddressed in the debate about Merleau-Ponty’s “anonymity” is an actual definition of the term for either side. Most feminists presume that Merleau-Ponty’s anonymity functions as a kind of generalizing phenomenon that actively erases difference in praise of a “masculine,” “anonymous” subject. Merleau-Ponty’s term is more of a reference to a kind of basic, primordial order of being to which humans belong that then enables communication between subjects. “This paradox is that of all being in the world: when I move towards a world I bury my perceptual and practical intentions in objects which ultimately appear prior to and external to those intentions, and which nevertheless exist for me only in so far as they arouse in me thoughts or volitions…Correspondingly, my body must be apprehended not only in an experience which is instantaneous, peculiar to itself and complete in itself, but also in some general aspect and in the light of an impersonal being” (PoP 95). It is a term and a mode of being that addresses the philosophical debate about how it is a person can both perceive and communicate with an alter ego. Primordial is not originary but “reveals to us the permanent data which culture attempts to resolve” (PP 25).

12 Another area of critique concerns Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis on vision. Fails to note the following elements of his sense of vision: Everything depends, that is, upon the fact that our glances are not ‘acts of consciousness,’ each of which claims an invariable priority, but openings of our flesh which are immediately filled by the universal flesh of the world. All depends, in short, upon the fact that it is the lot of living bodies to close upon the world and become seeing, touching bodies which (since we could not possibly touch or see without being capable of touching and seeing ourselves) are a fortiori perceptible to themselves” (S 16). “In the beginning is not play but need. We do not keep the world at the length of our gaze like a spectacle; we intermingle with them, drinking them in through all our pores” (S 28). Language opens an encounter to a third person, but vision “produces what reflection will never understand – a combat which at times has no victor, and a thought for which there is from now on no titular incumbent” (S 17). This is a fascination or desire: “mutually enfolding glances,” seeking a “fulfillment which will be identically the same for the two of them” (S 17).

13 See Dorothea Olkowski and Gail Weiss, eds. Feminist Interpretations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.
“ground” any transcendental upsurge. The verticality that lends itself to totalitarian dominance and power asymmetries is not present in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological\textsuperscript{14} work, especially since he continually defines the interaction between self and world as occurring within a series of horizons in which “reversibility” is always immanent but never achieved and from which the individual significance of the object or subject being perceived is out of reach. Merleau-Ponty terms the former event “reversibility” and the latter “invisibles.” Both work to maintain the other’s radical alterity as well as to initiate and translate what is meaningful or known about her. Understanding immanence, depth, reversibility, and what is invisible is necessary to grasping fully the paradoxes that make up perception and safeguard individuality and action.

The earlier discussion on sensation noted that a person is already immanent in the world, defined not as a law-making cogito but as a field of experiences that interacts perceptually with the folds of the world. Being so situated enables the person to experience both transcendence and depth when she encounters another self or object. Or, in Merleau-Ponty’s succinct terms, “[i]mmanence because the perceived object cannot be foreign to him who perceives; transcendence, because it always contains something more than what is actually given” (PP 16). In describing the relationship between immanence and transcendence, Merleau-Ponty explains that “my experience breaks forth into things and transcends itself in them” because my experience occurs in my body, which is a “certain setting in relation to the world” (Pop 353). Just as I greet another and perceive another through this kind of immanent transcendence, so does that other person: it is mutual. Consequently, the other subject experiences the same kind of

\textsuperscript{14} This distinction is important for, as we will see, Merleau-Ponty does allow for metaphysical domination, and violence is unavoidable in both aspects of the human experience.
verticality that I do. This fundamental, perceptual and metaphysical reciprocity establishes the opportunity for ethics.\textsuperscript{15}

Depth\textsuperscript{16} is more than height or breadth or a relation between things; it is the “dimension in which things envelop each other” that is achieved through implying one thing in another and contacting “into one perceptual act of a whole possible process” (PoP 308). With depth, Merleau-Ponty finds distinction – things remain what they are even as they are not just what I look at presently. Consequently he terms it the “dimension of the simultaneous” (VI 219). Depth emerges out of being situated. I understand an object as small or large by placing it in a particular landscape, “in relation to a certain ‘scope’ of our gestures, a certain ‘hold’ of the phenomenal body on its surroundings” (PoP 311).

Reversibility can generate perceptual reciprocity and, in so doing, disturbs traditional notions of power. Merleau-Ponty makes the astounding statement that “never does the perception grasp the body in the act of perceiving,” and explains, “If my left hand is touching my right hand, and if I should suddenly wish to apprehend with my right hand the work of my left and as it touches, this reflection of the body upon itself always miscarries at the last moment: the moment I feel my left hand with my right hand, I correspondingly cease touching my right hand with my left hand” (VI 9). Reversibility is always immanent but never coincides: the moment the left attempts to touch the right, it is referred to the right; “the coincidence eclipses at the moment of

\textsuperscript{15} Out of this reciprocity mutual actions, projects, and ethics are born. “My set of experiences is presented as a concordant whole, and the synthesis takes place not in so far as they all express a certain invariant, and in the identity of the object, but in that they are all collected together, by the last of their number, in the ipseity of the thing. The ipseity is, of course, never reached: each aspect of the thing which falls to our perception is still only an invitation to perceive beyond it, still only a momentary halt in the perceptual process...What makes the ‘reality’ of the thing is therefore precisely what snatches it from our grasp. The aseity of the thing, its unchallengeable presence and the perpetual absence into which it withdraws, are two inseparable aspects of transcendence” (PoP 271).

\textsuperscript{16} For further explanation of how Merleau-Ponty uses depth, consider Romand Coles’ Self/Power/Other.
realization” (VI 147). The perceiver is thrown back onto herself.\textsuperscript{17} This sense of interaction – of eclipsing coincidence at the moment of realization – suggests that power also contains slippages. For who is acting upon whom if perception, or touch, cannot realize its full authority at the very moment it seeks to enact it? This is not to belittle the actual experience of power, particularly when it takes the very physical form of harming another’s self or body, but to suggest that power can and should be examined in its different forms. While a full exploration is beyond the scope of this project, some distinctions are readily apparent. Arendt locates (political) power in the capacity to act together and distinguishes it from strength or force, neither of which requires a strong, collaborative solidarity. Rousseau ties individual will to the capacity to carry out that will and applies it to the political arena in order to capture a form of power. Merleau-Ponty fineses it more by specifying perceptual powers that are extensive and co-constructive from applied power by which individual and historical meaning is generated and violence, oppression, or cooperation is established. As we will see later, however, co-functioning with another person displays similar characteristics to perceptual power: it is primarily a transversal, crisscrossing movement whose “grip” is never fully realized. Power’s constitution closely resembles Arendt’s in its emphasis on joint action and its restraint in deploying brutality.

Merleau-Ponty introduces the notion of the “invisible” as a necessary element of what is “visible” but, like most of his terms, Merleau-Ponty denies common assumptions about what it entails. In his working notes is written this “[p]rinciple: not to

\textsuperscript{17} Merleau-Ponty also explains, “If one wants metaphors, it would be better to say that the body sensed and the body sentient are as the obverse and the reverse, or again, as two segments of one sole circular course which goes above from left to right and below from right to left, but which is but one sole movement in its two phases” (VI 138). Another way of understanding reversibility is to consider seriously the experience of being pregnant, especially at those moments that the baby kicks its mother. The strong demarcation between self and other that operates in general is highly permeable during pregnancy since a kick comes from within to without, simultaneously the mother’s body and another’s body wherein only a strong sense of attention to one aspect of the experience – who is kicking versus whose body is moving, for example – and the conscious effort to label the baby separate from the mother delineates movement, activity, and boundaries.
consider the invisible as an other visible ‘possible,’ or a ‘possible’ visible for an other: that would be to destroy the inner framework that joins us to it…The invisible is there without being an object, it is pure transcendence, without an ontic mask” (VI 229). The invisible is “the outline and depth of the visible” (S 20); it is the “opening of a dimension of the visible” (S 21). Elsewhere he elaborates that the invisible is an “idea” that stands behind an entity, which is its “other side” that presents “what is absent from all flesh; it is a furrow that traces itself out magically under our eyes without a tracer, a certain hollow, a certain absence, a negativity that is not nothing (VI 150-51). He continues:

With the first vision, the first contact, the first picture, there is initiation, that is, not the positing of a content, but the opening of a dimension that can never again be closed, the establishment of a level in terms of which every other experience will henceforth be situated. The idea is this level, this dimension. It is therefore not a de facto invisible, like an object hidden behind another, and not an absolute invisible, which would have nothing to do with the visible. Rather it is the invisible of this world, that which inhabits this world, sustains it, and renders it visible, its own and interior possibility, the Being of this being. (ibid).

The invisible is an imperceptible but immediately comprehended aspect of an object or person that enables it to be both sensed and understood. That it remains an open dimension, an interiority, suggests that there are contours and crevices in a person that remain beyond grasp: perception traces out one dimension of her being and, in so doing, gestures towards a myriad of others that lie beneath and around. Arendt worries that force and compassion both generate an intimate proximity that abolishes self and other. Merleau-Ponty’s invisible reminds us that, despite the situations in which force is too personal, too close, and purposely threatens to eclipse an individual, she transcends that situation. She is never entirely grasped or dominated.

The other person contains the key to one’s own full freedom. He explains, “By myself I cannot be free, nor can I be a consciousness or a man; and that other whom I
first saw as my rival is a rival only because he is myself” (SN 68). It is puzzling, this notion that other-rivalry is self-rivalry. Merleau-Ponty’s own words are worth repeating at length:

It is in the same moment that I am about to be afraid that I make others afraid; it is the same aggression that I repel and send back upon others; it is the same terror which threatens me that I spread abroad – I live my fear in the fear I inspire. But by a counter-shock, the suffering that I cause rends me along with my victim; and so cruelty is no solution but must always be begun again. There is a circuit between the self and others, a Communion of Black Saints. The evil that I do I do to myself, and in struggling against others I struggle equally against myself. After all, a face is only shadows, lights, and colors; yet suddenly the executioner, because this face has grimaced in a certain way, mysteriously experiences a slackening – another anguish has relayed his own…And yet when the victim admits defeat, the cruel man perceives another life beating through those words; he finds himself before another himself. We are far from the relationships of sheer force that hold between objects. (S 212)

A shift in light, a slip in movement, a momentary pause – each can trigger the recognition that one and another are not only entwined with each other, but also that other person is one’s own self. The distance between self and other is neither so large nor so strange as the mind depicts it. And whether one acts in self-interest, in the desire not to harm oneself, for instance, or acts for the other, or to not harm that person matters less than the actual activity of restraining from harm. As Merleau-Ponty suggests, there is more than sheer force or power holding people together.

Perceiving the “other founds morality by realizing the paradox of an alter ego, of a common situation, by placing my perspectives and my incommunicable solitude in the visual field of another and all the others” (PP 26). Other people not only appear in one’s perceptual field, they constitute that field by both presenting an alter ego and an alternative vantage point by which to see one’s self. Individual solitude is disrupted by the common situation expressed in inter-subjectivity. As Merleau-Ponty explains, “...all of our actions have several meanings, especially as seen from the outside by others, and all these meanings are assumed in our actions because others are the permanent coordinates of our lives. Once we are aware of the existence of others, we commit ourselves to being, among other things, what they think of us, since we recognize in
them the exorbitant power to see us” (SN 37). Merleau-Ponty constellates individual actions in time and space so that they serve as emblems of our characters. Appearance, laden with both negative and positive meaning, is already an affective, perceptual, and gestural conversation that immediately situates “us” and “them” as a “we” irrespective of ideological, disciplinary, or cognitive disassociations and barriers that individual selves might erect.

4.2. Compassion

Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology reveals a perceptual landscape in and out of which the self does more than greet others: it is the field for self-definition as much as for revelation of others. Yet, given the sets of relations that Merleau-Ponty uncovers in immanence, depth, reversibility, and invisibility, the perceptual and intercorporeal entwinement of self and other does not necessarily threaten individual autonomy, distinction, or space. Neither does it guarantee individual safety, cooperation, or even respect. Rather, it offers a potential to recognize another and to interact with her in ways that respect her, resist her, and require her. Compassion can emerge from this recognition and, as a result, it can reflect those perceptual structures that maintain another’s integrity and distance while simultaneously ushering in a responsive, sometimes intimate, engagement. The following considers compassion as an element of the human experience, as of yet un-tethered to either ethics or politics. Its political and ethical possibilities will be explored in the next section when I analyze how it relates to violence. It should be noted from the outset that the following discussion does not assert that compassion necessarily results from an intercorporeal communion or eliminates the possibility of violence.

In Chapter One I argued for the use of Candace Clark’s definition of compassion because it seems both more true to its etymology of and to its development in an individual active in the world. Clark’s research establishes compassion as the physical,
emotional, or cognitive “reaching out” to another, a “fellow-feeling” that has a three-stage process in which a person experiences compassion: first, she empathizes, or imagines the other person’s situation; second, she experiences sympathy sentiment, or recognizes compassion has emerged; and, finally, she displays those sentiments (1997, 27). A person retains the capacity to stop the process at one of its stages or to complete its full movement. This sense of compassion is both preserved and modified in a phenomenological understanding of perception, corporeity, and inter-corporeity.

I offer the following refinement. Compassion is a psycho-visceral and emotional imagining of how it is be to embodied as someone distinct from another, a person whose radical difference actively shapes and configures her abilities to be a vibrant contributor to political and public discourse, events, and action. Waking up and tending to the rich possibilities for practicing politics that emerge from a set of sensible relationships could entail literally feeling or perceiving how it is to be another person, or at least expanding one’s imaginative and compassionate capacity for seeing the world through her perspective. This other-centric perception occurs simultaneously with the construction of one’s own metaphysical struggles, habits, and style so that one’s self is neither occluded nor forgotten in the interaction with another. Compassion works within and can result from this tension.18

While Merleau-Ponty rarely mentions compassion explicitly, it is not entirely absent. On one hand, he appears to make a strong claim for compassion when he writes, “Likewise, when I say that I see someone, it means that I am moved by sympathy for this behavior of which I am a witness and which holds my own intentions furnishing them with a visible realization” (SN 93). This sense of perceptual congruence is

18 As we will see later, Merleau-Ponty’s metaphysics add the difficult element of conflict into human relations. Critics of compassion often worry about how it cloaks negative affects and actions like condescension, paternalism, or privilege; in other words, they worry about how compassion intersects with the desire to over-power another person. Certainly this possibility remains in any endeavor involving humans, as has been noted throughout this dissertation. Hence, work must be made to ensure that our activities are ethical. Compassion is also work in this way.
reminiscent of Clark’s empathetic imagining of another, which occurs in the physical, cognitive, and affective registers. This initial empathetic responsiveness enables communication and identification: 19 “There is mutual confirmation between myself and others” (PoP 214-15). The gesture of one person coincides with the inner possibilities of another in such a way that the latter can understands it:

It is as if the other person’s intention 20 inhabited my body and mine his. The gesture which I witness outlines an intentional object. This object is genuinely present and fully comprehended when the powers of my body adjust themselves to it and overlap it. The gesture presents itself to me as a question, bringing certain perceptible bits of the world to my notice, and inviting my concurrence in them. (PoP 214-15)

Here Merleau-Ponty seems to root comprehension of another person’s style and behavior in one’s own empathetic capacities. Without sympathy there is no way to be “moved” and, reciprocally, no way to have one’s intentions held and made visible. “The gesture does not make me think of anger it is anger itself” (PoP 214). When communication begins, it is already situated in a cultural and corporeal context and it perceptually “speaks,” so to speak, in reference to pre-established comprehensions. That angry, grief-filled, or joyful gesture reverberates on several personal and cultural levels in a way that facilitates understanding. As such, it seems more an aspect of perception that can then take on compassionate or uncompassionate forms. An empathetic orientation is the

19 Merleau-Ponty is aware of cultural differences in understanding behavior; see PoP 219-20.
20 “Intentionality” has a specific function in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, and he releases from it any sense of power, propriety, or rational determination. Intentionality partly captures sensation’s invitation – I am called to something by a power not entirely my own – and it depicts my own style that, in turn, calls others to me. “What is meant by saying that this intentionality is not a thought is that it does not come into being through the transparency of any consciousness, but takes for granted all the latent knowledge of itself that my body possesses” (PoP 270). Like the organist, my body, gestures, speech, and style draws “affective vectors” that invite reciprocity and communication; and this work is done implicitly (PoP 406). What is known about a given situation – a setting – draws upon a well of information imperceptibly gained through sensation and synthesized by the body. This account might explain the “gut feeling” that we sometimes get about people or events or the role of environments on subtle shifts in emotions, ease of thinking, or reactions.
condition for comprehension and compassionate, and it offers support for Rousseau’s claim that compassion can be both a temperament and an action.

These entwinements of perception, gesture, and corporeity also contain the possibility for misunderstanding, miscommunication, inequality, and oppression. Misunderstanding another person’s gestures threatens easy translation since it first occurs non-cognitively and remains incomplete. Like “traits of his physiognomy and of our own,” another person’s gestures are “less understood than welcomed or spurned in love or hatred” (VI 12). If the person registers disgust, love, or anger pre-consciously or viscerally, then he will likely place his own ascriptions and depictions on that other person. That empathy contains this dualism is the primary reason it has detractors, as seen in Chapter One. But empathy serves as the neurological, emotional, and perceptual foundation for sociality and, for our purposes, compassion. To act compassionately in response to a situation’s summons is to determine, pre-reflectively or not, that one’s perceptual “partner” is valuable in herself. It is an intercorporeal response to interdependence that, unlike overt violence, recognizes the other as another self.

A more reserved position looks to the way that his phenomenology opens up the possibility for affective understanding of other people. This claim considers the degrees of difference by which people are affected by events and situations. “The grief and anger of another have never quite the same significance for him as they have for me,” Merleau-Ponty explains, “For him these situations are lived through, for me they are displayed. Or in so far as I can, by some friendly gesture, become part of that grief or that anger, they still remain the grief and anger of my friend Paul” (PoP 415). Here the radical solipsism cannot be eclipsed through compassion because “situations cannot be superimposed on each other” (ibid). A situation might engender similar emotions, reactions, or behaviors but those consequences will not be exactly the same for two or

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21 See Fischer (1998) and Oliver (1998), for example.
more people because individuals have alterity, an ipseity that retreats and that colors the world. And while common projects can gather people around a shared situation, they cannot “appear in the selfsame light” to each person – “Although his consciousness and mine, working through our respective situations, may contrive to produce a common situation in which they can communicate, it is nevertheless from the subjectivity of each of us that one projects this ‘one and only’ world” (ibid).

Yet the question remains whether Arendt correctly categorizes compassion as a sentiment and, as such, whether it appears without thought or warning, seeming both natural and uncontrollable. The location of sentiment is unclear in Merleau-Ponty precisely because it is tied to human significance. Sentiment is contingent, either spontaneous or deliberate, and it is situated in both the immanence of the situation and the transcendence of relating to another. As such, sentiments bind selves to others through transcendental upsurges like the desire to love and to be loved in return. Sentiments can arise in accordance to the “emotional categories of the environment” (PoP 442). We are not “perpetually in possession of ourselves in our whole reality,” argues Merleau-Ponty, who on this point agrees with Rousseau, “…It is simply a question of what we are doing” (ibid). But sentiments are also more subterranean, emerging in the interstices of the chiasm. In this way, sentiment shares in the generation of conscious life because it partakes in desire:

22 The chapter on Sexuality in PoP illustrates how sentiment is tied to desires like love and, as a result, caught in a metaphysical conflict around Ego, power, and reflection. “We discover both that sexual life is one more form of original intentionality, and also bring to view the vital origins of perception, motility and representation by basing all these ‘processes’ on an ‘intentional arc’ which gives way in the patient, and which, in the normal subject, endows experience with its degree of vitality and fruitfulness. Thus sexuality is not an autonomous cycle. It has internal links with the whole active and cognitive being, these three sectors of behavior displaying but a single typical structure, and standing in a relationship to each other of reciprocal expression” (PoP 182).

23 In explaining the environment’s influence on sentiment, Merleau-Ponty writes, “Illusory or imaginary feelings are genuinely experienced, but experienced, so to speak, on the outer fringes of ourselves. Children and many grown people are under the sway of ‘situational values,’ which conceal from them their actual feelings – they are pleased because they have been given a present, sad because they are at a funeral, gay or sad according to the countryside around them, and, on the hither side of any such emotions, indifferent and neutral” (PoP 440).
Let us therefore say rather, borrowing a term from other works, that the life of consciousness – cognitive life, the life of desire or perceptual life – is subtended by an ‘intentional arc’ which projects round about us our past, our future, our human setting, our physical, ideological and moral situation, or rather which results in our being situated in all these respects. It is this intentional arc which brings about the unity of the senses, of intelligence, or sensibility and motility. (PoP 157)

Together with reflection, or cognitive life, and perception, sentiment casts about us an intentional arc. It situates us in an environment and temporality, generates unity out of disparate and singular events, and it enables us to form a narrative about our life as well as form our style. Merleau-Ponty attributes “the birth of being,” that “area of our experience which clearly has significance and reality only for us,” to affective life (PoP 178). Understanding how affect and cognition work together in creating an “intentional arc” eases the entrenched border between the two.

Emotion is the way in which the body and the world “pattern” the world simultaneously, through language, gestures, and behavior. In a description that recalls Rousseau’s Origins of Language, Merleau-Ponty asserts that first attempts at language were the “emotional gesticulation whereby [hu]man imposes on the given world according to [hu]man” (PoP 219). A word’s “gestural sense” is its emotional content – words, vowels, phonemes offering “so many ways of ‘singing’ the world’ in order to “extract, and literally express, [a thing’s] emotional essence” (PoP 217). Words are not just references to functions, logically expounded and reducible, but signal how humans have patterned themselves sentimentally as individuals and as social beings through space and time. Both the body and words act as cultural objects through which associations, histories, and possibilities are drawn and conveyed. Language draws the “other by invisible threads like those who hold the marionettes – making the other speak, think, and become what he is but never would have been by himself…All those we have loved, detested, known, or simply glimpsed speak through our voice…Our traces mix
and intermingle; they make a single wake of ‘public durations’” (S 19). To speak compassionately, then, is not only to utter words that have a specific emotional content – to attend to the humanly valuable in a given situation – but to also iterate a compassionate behavior.

Considering compassion in its sentimental value, then, is to refer to its capacities for exceeding biological or physiological compulsions. Compassionate speech and behavior creates personal and social meaning, pulling from social conventions as well as individual impulses, dispositions, and decisions. It is both rooted in the human experience through communion and seeks relationship beyond solipsistic narcissism. In short, compassion is one means of responding to another’s tug and pull on our perceptual, emotional, and cognitive horizons. It is a means of situating oneself. Unlike empathy, which signifies an immediate neurological response and synchrony, compassion is a complicated (somatic) working through and out of empathy, sentiment, and agency in which the course of action to be taken cannot be presupposed and its beneficence cannot be guaranteed. Compassion is a baseline sentiment and practice that can cultivate receptivity, reciprocity, and comprehension of the complexity of human affairs. As a practice it enters conscious life and informs ethical decision-making and activity.

That compassion can act as an orientation as well as an active practice is seen in Homer’s *Iliad*. Compassion runs throughout, punctuating an ongoing war most known for its battles and its heroes with crystalline moments of compassion, grief, and suffering. It is Agemomenon’s lack of compassion towards Chryses, who bears a ransom for his still-living daughter, that sets in motion the events leading to Achilles’ anger, his refusal to battle, and the Patroclus’ death at Hector’s hands. Achilles demonstrates both the difficulty of maintaining one’s compassionate orientation or disposition in extremely distressing situations and the increased need for compassion’s presence as a practice.
Achilles’ encounter with Priam shifts and reworks his own bodily and lived-through meaning: he regains his compassion as well as his sense of humanity, and he recognizes the sets of human relations in which he is bound. Schein (1984) remarks that Achilles is “consistently portrayed as tender, compassionate, and loving towards others,” characteristics more representative of the Trojans who are strongly situated in and fighting for the integrity of their social and private relations (97). His philotes, or “an emotional color,’ a ‘sentimental attitude,’” is as important to his temperament as is his wrath and strength. But when Achilles’ wrath reaches its apex, it takes on dimensions both godly and barbaric. He kills suppliants on the battlefield, fights a river, and refuses to release Hector’s body to his loved ones, openly desecrating it. Apollo rebukes Achilles’ actions: “Achilles has lost all pity!" No shame in the man,/shame that does great harm or drives men on to good. / No doubt some mortal has suffered a dearer loss than this… / What honor will he gain? / Let that man beware, or great and glorious as he is, / we mighty gods will wheel on him in anger” (Homer 1990, 24.52-64). Schein argues that only Priam is able to restore Achilles to “the world of humanity, of normal social values and individual decency (1984 98-99, 91). Compassion is both the route to and the end for his restoration.

Yet the compassion referenced is hardly Martha Nussbaum’s compassion. Compassion here is full of narcissism and self-interest, asymmetrical power hierarchies, and turbulent emotions. Where is the concern for the other person that obscures one’s own situation? Moreover, power here is palpably asymmetrical. Priam overtly plays the victim: he supplicates Achilles on bended knee, refers to the act of supplication as an additional reason to pity him, and provides a king’s ransom for his son’s body. Achilles retains the power not only to decide whether Hector shall be released but also whether

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24 Ancient Greeks did not distinguish between pity and compassion as moderns do. There is some ambiguity as to whether Achilles’ pity is fraught with condescension but this dimension is irrelevant to the chapter’s thesis.
Priam himself will live. Add that the gods have pre-determined Achille’s decision and, subsequently, his restraint. Is Achilles acting out of his own liberty and agency if he heeds the gods’ wishes? Is he acting out of compassion for Priam if he gains wealth and ties his own grief to Priam’s? Finally, the scene itself is emotionally charged – Achilles oscillates between grief and anger, continually reminding Priam that their association is fragile. When does compassion situate itself in such a tenuous relationship?

Homer clearly refers us to pity, despite the scene’s tension and asymmetry. “Pity me in my own right, / remember your own father!” Priam implores Achilles, “I deserve more pity… / I have endured what no one on earth has done before – / I put to my lips the hands of the man who killed my son” (Homer 1990, 24.588-91). Compassion’s “fellow-feeling” relies on the ability to both perceive the other as distinct yet also bound up with oneself. Achilles first marvels at the sight of Priam. And it is Priam, praying his “heart out,” who calls on Achilles to, “Remember your own father, great godlike Achilles” (Homer 1990, 24.569-70). Achilles responds. He sees his father as well as his own mortality in Priam’s visage. Individual grief spills into a shared space as the two men succumb to their emotions. The alignment between the two men’s grief and loss, intention and gestures, enable each to find value in the other: “Priam the son of Dardanus gazed at Achilles, marveling / now at the man’s beauty, his magnificent build – / face-to-face he seemed a deathless god… / and Achilles gazed and marveled at Dardan Priam, / beholding his noble looks, listening to his words” (Homer 1990, 24.740-43).

But Achilles and Priam consistently work at maintaining level-headed sympathy even as they give into their grief, anger, fear, and anxieties: the “endless tears” and “pain that breaks the spirit” (24.643-44); impatient protestations are coupled with demands concerns; “Priam might let his anger flare / and Achilles might fly into a fresh rage himself, / cut the old man down and break the laws of Zeus” (24.685-87); or Priam’s terror that he may be discovered by Agamemnon (24.810), among others, suggest that
compassionate concord is but a fragile, fleeting moment. As Merleau-Ponty writes of enmity in war, “I can in such a case promise to hold generous feelings toward the enemy; I cannot promise not to harm him” (*PP* 35). Human affairs are fragile, especially when they are framed by conflict.

Compassion emerges from the flesh, the in-between, of a given encounter at a particular moment. As Achilles and Priam greet and decipher one another they are situated immediately in each other’s narrative. They cull out a momentary cessation in enmity by both leaning into the chiasm generated through perception and acknowledging how the other completes a perceptual system.\(^{25}\) They could have reacted otherwise – in anger, indignation, or violence, attempting to subdue the other or to refuse their corporeal interlacing. But out of the flesh found between the two men, a perceptual and corporeal opening materialized in which each apprehended the other’s contours and caught glimpse of the other’s basic humanity. In chapter one I termed it a “moment of insight,” a phenomenological opening that pauses the metaphysical desire to overpower the other and, instead, uplifts that individual’s value. This is a self-other somatic or conscious revelation arises that, in this case, contains compassionate dimensions.

Taking a visceral response like compassion and extending it over time, space, and persons requires something like work. If we understand that our behaviours are patterns, that we can set habits that influence our style – our way of moving in and through the world in relation to others and ourselves – and that sentiment is as important as cognition in establishing a pattern, then how we choose to orient ourselves affectively is as important as how we choose to act and interact. Priam’s interaction with Achilles functionally breaks his pattern of bereavement, fueled by that immortal and barbaric wrath that shut out suppliants and overruled his philotes. (Schein notes that

\[^{25}\text{This aspect is common to a phenomenological encounter and, subsequently, means that a violent response could be a possible means to completing a perceptual system.}\]
Achilles twice before denied this aspect, Books 9 and 20-22 (1984, 159). In as much as Patroclus’ death threw Achilles out of balance, then Priam moves Achilles into equilibrium. He regains a “core of significance,” which is most apparent when Achilles exceeds godly dictates to guarantee Priam that he will have enough time to honor and bury his child. We are always being worked upon and, importantly for power asymmetries, we are always working upon others, more often than not in unconscious and imperceptible ways. Compassion is more than imaginative empathy and sentiment – it is enacted physically, cognitively, or materially. Here reminded of Rousseau’s sociable pity, it is in this latter element that Nussbaum’s criteria begin to comport better with our experience, raising questions of how one should act and what are the foreseeable consequences.

**4.3. Violence and Compassion**

Arendt believes that compassion lends itself to violent action. Certainly compassion functioned alongside and within violence in *The Iliad*, but will compassion itself engender violence? Here I consider Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of violence and its relationship with compassion, an analysis in which his distinctions between morality and politics as well as the role of metaphysics in his phenomenology configure. I find that Merleau-Ponty partially agrees with Arendt but only because he implicates violence in all forms of perceiving, relating, and comprehending. There is a way in which even compassion contains violence, to which I will speak momentarily. At the same time, however, he generates a strong tension regarding the use of violence in politics and ethics, into which compassion as an ethos and an action might fall. I term the resulting tension between compassion and violence an un-absolute absolute, a metaphysical construction that endeavors to keep action, beliefs, and ideologies flexible, active, and responsive. The presence of the un-absolute absolute helps shift focus on
inter-corporeal inter-dependence, our sense of humanism, and our responsibilities to others as well as ourselves.

Significantly, because Merleau-Ponty sees the world as fundamentally laced with violence – phenomenologically through sensation, metaphysically through inter-subjective conflicts of consciousnesses, historically through the originating revolutions that determined and founded social pacts, and politically through the desires to see others achieve similar freedoms – he does not believe that we can avoid violence.

“Inasmuch as we are incarnate beings, violence is our lot” (ibid). And its active role in human affairs and conflict creates an uneasy situation. Its unrelenting and multifaceted existence is avoided by ethics of care and Nussbaum’s compassion, suggesting both our desire to avert our eyes to its presence and our concern to not be seen as condoning violence. Inter-corporeal inter-subjectivity relies on the thick network of transcendence, immanence, and depth and it occurs in a situation that is laced with historical and metaphysical meaning. Traces of violence linger, whether institutionalized like racism or individualized like the Hegelian encounter between two egos. As in feminism and ethics of care, we find in Merleau-Ponty an attention to how oppressions have been

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26 Much of Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of violence occurs in Humanism and Terror and The Adventures of the Dialectic as he considers Marxism, Communism, and liberalism. While the latter greatly modifies the former in terms of Marxism’s merits and potential, it does not shift substantially the occurrence of violence. Rather Merleau-Ponty shifts the grounds for how and when violence might be politically necessary. In HT Merleau-Ponty argues, “The original violence, which is the foundation of all other forms of violence, is that exerted by History when objectified as an incomprehensible Will before which all individual opinions are compounded as equally fragile hypotheses” (HT 19). He also distinguishes violence according to the different historical situations in which we live: a historical period is relatively calm and does not contain violence whereas a historical epoch finds liberty to be at danger and, consequently, contains violence (HT xvii). Acknowledging violence enables us to determine “whether the violence with which one is allied is ‘progressive’ and tends towards its own suspension or toward self-perpetuation; and finally, that in order to decide this question the crime has to be set in the logic of a situation, in the dynamics of a regime and into the historical totality to which it belongs” (HT 1-2). Accounting for violence requires that one project correctly history’s trajectory and that the violence remains both local and geared towards its own conclusion, e.g. violence has an endpoint and is not a constant and institutional force. In AD he revises this conclusion, asserting that (violent) actions undergone in Marxism’s name cannot be separated from its critical role. Here violence is associated with freedom, truth, and action. Weber, in forming a new liberalism that admits truth “leaves a margin of doubt,” juxtaposes truth and violence (AD 9) and “admits all politics is violence – even, in its own fashion, democratic politics” (AD 26).
institutionalized, hidden, and operative. Importantly, we find ourselves equally implicated as transgressors by virtue of our involvement in the situation.

Merleau-Ponty separates politics from morality. Implication in a given situation might engender responsibility but it does not dictate ethical action. Categorical imperatives exist for neither politics nor ethics: the politician must be unafraid to act immorally while morality cannot guarantee a moral politics (AD 154). He remarks that the “immoral” but proper “attitude” necessary to politics is one that takes the “gaze of the least-favored” alongside the “geographical, historical, and political circumstances” (ibid), which circumstances might contain overt political violence in order to obtain certain political goals or projects that is “excused” in historical hindsight. At the same time, however, Merleau-Ponty praises the political person who is able to go beyond the antinomies of force and freedom, of “values and efficacy, feelings and responsibility...[Weber] tried to show how one must go beyond these alternatives. The taste for violence, he says, is a hidden weakness; the ostentation of virtuous feelings is a secret violence (AD 27).” Merleau-Ponty attempts to temper the violence implicit in politics and the human experience by drawing it into tension with the perspective of the least-favored. In so doing Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the need for movement, for a continual and consistent appraisal of actions and relationships with others. He also underscores the complexity of human affairs with valuable implications for ethics, writing, “There is a way of affirming oneself which aims to suppress the other person – and which makes him a slave. And there is a relationship of consultation and exchange with others which is not the death but the very act of the self” (S 215). Ethical interaction with others is a choice and, as with judgment, we need to look beyond the appearance of conflict to the intersubjective strands that tie the self to others. He admits that this work is not easy; that “collective life is hell” and that “there is no area where rivalry ceases” but concludes that political virtue relies on finding “something other than antagonism in struggle itself” (S 211).
Other people offer “something other than antagonism” while concurrently tempting us towards that antagonism. Remember that the other grounds morality and that she can generate awareness of “our reciprocal relationship and our common humanity” (SN 68) but this possibility remains an active choice or responsibility because of the human desire for absolutes and, for some, for power. The other person is that “that intimate attestation of my existence, that contact of self with self, which is more certain than any external evidence and which is the prior condition for everybody else” (SN 29); the other person serves as “my twins or the flesh of my flesh” whose existence is so “disquieting” as to tempt me to oppress him (S 15). Race in the United States provides a prominent example of just how prejudice can embed itself in a person’s being, pre-determining the content and movement of an encounter and orienting it towards violence or domination. To explain this possibility, Merleau-Ponty moves into metaphysics, interpreting Hegel’s master-slave account of conflict and desire. As highlighted by Hobbes and critics of compassion, people often deny the equal rights of others, seek to oppress if not destroy others, and choose to ignore the ties that bind themselves to others. While some theorists follow Hobbes and locate these desires ontologically, Merleau-Ponty locates them in the metaphysical establishment of personal meaning.

Merleau-Ponty sees metaphysics as the meaningful texture of singular, individual experiences. In other words, it is tied to sentiment as well as conscious

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27 Remember that in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology the “flesh of my flesh” or my “twin” is not a matter of duplicating or projecting one’s self while effacing the other. Her inherent “strangeness” resists easy capture while it intercorporeally stitches her existence into one’s own.

28 This is not to say that Merleau-Ponty elevates metaphysics above phenomenology and, admittedly, his use of the term is fairly limited compared to his continued elaborations of his phenomenology, especially as he endeavored to find the right language to capture phenomenology (as seen especially in The Visible and Invisible). Yet he does incorporate it while also altering our understanding and definition of it. In The Adventures of the Dialectic he writes, “It is the metaphysical fact that the same life, our own, is played out both within us and outside us, in our present and in our past, and that the world is a system with several points of access, or, one might say, that we have fellow men” (22). For more on Merleau-Ponty’s specific sense of metaphysics as it relates to politics, ontology, and phenomenology, see “Metaphysics and the Novel,” “Hegel’s Existentialism,” and “The Metaphysical in Man” in Sense and Non-Sense.
reflection because it explains human significance. First defining it as a result of contingency and paradox, Merleau-Ponty strips it of its system-building tendencies. Metaphysics begins when we cease to live in “objectivity” and admit the “radical subjectivity of all our experience as inseparable from [an object’s] truth value” (SN 93). Subjectivity, like narcissism, cannot be erased from either one’s perception of an object or the definitions one inscribes in it. Yet the intertwinement of subject-object writ through perception and corporality also means that the subject is not the final standard. An experience is “nonetheless co-extensive with all being of which we can form a notion” (ibid). “Surprise at discovering the confrontation of opposites…[and recognizing] their identity in the simplicity of doing” (SN 94) generates a metaphysical consciousness. While one can theorize the simultaneity of opposites, it is the body that synthesizes that contradiction through action.

He then asserts that metaphysics enables morality to flower precisely because it establishes both the impossibility of an absolute evidence for a truth and the unquestionability of “knowledge and action, true and false, good and evil” (SN 94-96). This contradiction seems alarming: Merleau-Ponty strongly negates a truth’s absoluteness but just as strongly affirms its presence. This effectively establishes an ethical dichotomy built of absolutes like “good and evil” for which I criticized Arendt; yet, unlike Arendt, that dichotomy’s existence is troubled. Merleau-Ponty shares Arendt’s worry that a truth or principle is less resistant to ideological corruption or manipulation if it acts as a static and known absolute. Yet neither does he wish to foreclose either the possibility or the necessity of establishing ineradicable truths. These truths concern what is “humanly valuable” – people’s effective involvement in common projects that nourish their individual styles and provide a sense of dignity, of being

29 In Adventures of the Dialectic he emphasizes the dialectic that emerges between action and truth, for instance. Merleau-Ponty seems to discourage the use of dichotomies while also exploring their practical function in paradox, politics, and the human condition, generally.
inherently valuable. The absolute’s “impossibility” intends to cast the actions, policies, and practices pursued by a collective body or individual into question, debate, and contestation.

Metaphysics is active as a result. It is the “experience we have of these paradoxes in all situations of personal and collective history and the actions which, by assuming them, transform them into reason” (SN 95-96). Into metaphysics, then, falls both morality and sentiment because they are involved in the cognitive attempts at organizing life, memory, style, and behavior. These notes help to decipher the strange chapter on Sexuality in Phenomenology of Perception. The metaphysical encounter between lovers is wrought with the struggle to dominate because, at some level, consciousness and ego are involved: “Nature itself, I fear, attaches some instinct for inhumanity to man. It is because our body and its peaceful functions are traversed by the power that we have to devote ourselves to something else and give ourselves absolutes (S 200-01).” Merleau-Ponty signals the individual, metaphysical need for something like an absolute – something or someone, in the case of love and desire, to give oneself to absolutely. This need is as corporeal as it is cognitive and as emotional as it is reflective.

Yet the desire for an absolute, even the necessity of it, needs to give way to the contingency inherent in life. Violence emerges when an “absolute choice…does not present itself as a choice but takes itself for the law of the world” (AD 164). Action in the world fluctuates; it finds its way, requires mediations (ibed), is “relative and probable” (AD 205), and acts as a response to a “factual situation which we have not completely chosen” that assumes contingency (SN 37).

By accepting [life] we take the factual situations – our bodies, our faces, our way of being in the world – upon ourselves; we accept our responsibilities; we sign a contract with the world and with men. But this freedom, the condition of all morality, is equally the basis of an absolute immoralism because it remains entire, in both myself and others, after every sin and because it makes new beings of us at every instant. (SN 38)
The moment we begin to interact with the world – in other words, the moment that we are born into the world – we are engaged in a corporeal contract that differs profoundly from the contract found in the liberal tradition. This contract, immanent to the each situation and pre-reflective, takes into account both the sinews of inter-subjectivity and one’s individual subjectivity, as seen from outside by others, as developed in relationship with others, and as transcendent to other’s clenching grasp. It is also known as freedom, not a “freedom from” but a “freedom to” and a “freedom with,” and as such it grounds morality and immorality.

Merleau-Ponty’s claim that immorality is absolute is jarring given his admonitions that morality and absolutes are at odds with one another. Yet it coheres with how he sees action and responsibility. He claims that immorality\(^\text{30}\) remains whole after every sin. There is no way of erasing an action once it is loose in the world; there is no way of excusing a cruelty to the person who feels its blow. Immorality builds upon itself in a way that morality cannot and constrains action. Every “moral” act is singular. A person is not made wholly “moral” after a single act. Rather, such “goodness” must be made anew with each encounter. This stance is similar to Arendt’s own thoughts regarding action and forgiveness. Without freedom from acts that effectively limit natality, the possibility of being born anew through action, human agency is constricted. Arendt locates freedom in forgiveness; Merleau-Ponty in taking up individual and political responsibility to the other people who are situated and implicated in one’s actions.

Yet we still cling to and need absolutes. Arendt sees compassion as violence’s contrary, hence her alarm when she determines that pity bleeds into violence. Placing

\(^\text{30}\)Elsewhere he writes, “We have unlearned ‘pure morality’ and learned a vulgar immoralism, which is healthy. The moral man does not want to dirty his hands. It is because he usually has enough time, talent, or money to stand back from the enterprises of which he disapproves and to prepare a good conscience for himself. The common people do not have that freedom...We are in the world, mingled with it, compromised with it” (Sense 147).
them in opposition to one another matters, even if we recognize that their division is theoretical or that we cannot escape incarnate life without having harmed someone, because it is important to maintain some absolutes: violence cannot be compassionate. If the absolute’s totalizing capacity is shaken by giving its appearance and actions innumerable permutations within a wild and wide perceptual field, then its absoluteness is concretized by the unshakeable human need for ethical poles to which to cling during even the most tempestuous times. Perhaps, if we are princes, we can heed Machiavelli’s advice that what appears as cruelty might be rendered compassion in the forgiving grace of history, which situates those actions in their consequences. But mere mortals have neither the luxury of wanton action nor the kindness of hindsight. As both Arendt and Rousseau caution, compassion and forgiveness for the “wicked” are cruel to the living and there are some transgressions that are unforgiveable.

Taking Merleau-Ponty only slightly beyond himself (for he is a proponent of a roving and adaptive political virtú) I argue that his ethics and politics requires a kind of un-absolute absolute: a principle or sentiment that firmly grips us in order to help orient and guide our phenomenological and metaphysical acts in the world that simultaneously refuses to dictate those actions in an inflexible, dominating way. The un-absolute absolute requires that a person or a body politic nimbly approach ethical and political life. Merleau-Ponty’s metaphysical absolutes – the kinds out of which ethics are conceived and personal meaning is made – do not limit the element of choice in agency; more precisely, they encourage deliberate agency. A phenomenological and metaphysical conscious is aware of how moral prescriptions or categorical imperatives manifest in a totalizing principle and actions that are numb rather than sensitive to the situation at hand. Which is to say that Merleau-Ponty calls for greater self-awareness and attentiveness to the particularities of the context, the person before one’s self, and whether the foreseeable consequences might affirm what is humanly valuable. At its best, the role that metaphysics plays in Merleau-Ponty’s body of work is as a reminder
of the complexity of human affairs. Pre-cognitively, we contain the perceptual powers to behold other as other in a morally valid and politically valuable way. This means that how we perceive and interact with the other often occurs in the realm of choice and responsibility, hence Merleau-Ponty’s fascination with and continuing analysis of the paradoxes of conscious being.

For a phenomenon like compassion, it means that its incarnation is highly varied, highly tailored, and sometimes surprising. Rousseau’s and Nussbaum’s “criteria” for its application better reflect the socialization of compassionate norms, the societal rules that govern its display, than its full range of appearances. Like Arendt their depiction is partial. There is more flexibility, and consequently, greater liberty to practice compassion, within Merleau-Ponty’s approach. Compassion emerges from the flesh, the in-between, of a given encounter at a particular moment. Out of this flesh comes both a phenomenological transgression and affiliation whose twin movements join me to another person while distancing me from him. Whether this movement will result in violence and subordination or whether it will result in recognizing the other’s humanity cannot be pre-determined. It is influenced by the person’s orientation, the circumstances, and the particularities of that given moment and time. As Merleau-Ponty explains,

I speak to others, I act with them, with them I move beyond my condition at birth and they, theirs, toward a common future or toward the world taken as spectacle. In action...there is a relationship of calling and response. This solution is more apparent than real, for the relationship with the other is never symmetrical; rather it is always one of the two who proposes, the ‘common’ life is his project, and even the effort he makes to associate the other to it is the product of his good will. (AD 162)

But I see the recognition of another’s basic humanity as a compassionate action and sentiment precisely because it is both the affect and capacity to see the other as related to me, as joined up in “fellow-feeling.” In chapter one I termed it a “moment of insight,” a phenomenological opening that pauses the metaphysical desire to overpower the other and, instead, uplifts that individual’s value by locating it in a common project of humanity and mortality.
This is not to say that compassion as an un-absolute absolute eliminates the problem of overt political violence. Violence is not an easy solution, it is not justifiable on the personal level, and it is not condoned \((HT\ 2,\ 5)\). More importantly, it is an inexcusable terror for those people undergoing it \((HT\ 107)\). Yet, because “by hiding violence one grows accustomed to it and makes an institution of it” \((HT\ 34)\), it requires responsibility and accountability to the “least-favored” \((AD\ 154)\). In politics “it is more and more difficult to distinguish what is violence and what is idea, what is power and what is value, with the aggravating circumstance that in political life the mixture risks ending up in convulsion or chaos” \((S\ 235)\). Merleau-Ponty reaffirms this belief in *Adventures of the Dialectic* when he argues that Marxist critique of capitalism cannot be segregated from its actions – the two are a “single movement” in history \((AD\ 231)\). Rather compassion and politics require a strong attention to action, to the “relative and the probable,” that configure human possibility in a complex network of interdependence.

Consequently Merleau-Ponty affirms a liberalism that he attributes to Weber.\(^{31}\) It is “militant, even suffering, heroic. It recognizes the rights of its adversaries, refuses to hate them, does not try to avoid confronting them, and, in order to refute them, relies only upon their own contradictions and upon discussions which expose these” \((AD\ 26)\). This form of interaction requires something like what I registered as “compassion,” or empathy, above: the ability to perceive the congruence between self and other such that the other appears as aligned with and important to one’s own being. Merleau-Ponty presupposes either a strong orientation or a robust practice of compassion in his reference to refusing to hate in the midst of conflict and debate, itself characterized as more of an immanent critique than of haranguing the other. Taking on the perspective of its adversaries, to the degree that one can find internal weaknesses and failings, in both

\(^{31}\) See also *AD* 226.
heroic and suffering overtones is a highly imaginative and perceptual synchrony that sees the adversarial position as itself a valuable contribution. Asserting that compassion acts as a base is taking Merleau-Ponty beyond himself and, at the same time, it is taking compassion as a disposition or orientation, something that sustains other virtues like receptivity and respect, rather than a specific act or sentiment. In other words, compassion functions as an ethos central to a liberal politics.

But does compassion unleash reckless violence? Will it encourage people to judge and condemn others by virtue of their “lack” of compassion? Or, will it incite rage that only expels itself violently? That violence and compassion are not incompatible, are not necessary antimonies whose very contradiction highlights just what is at risk in any political endeavor – the living, breathing people who are loved and deemed valuable, if only in the private realm? One is reminded of Arendt’s Grand Inquisitor who, in the name of alleviating freedom’s burden, oversaw a violent and domineering regime. He might name his political ethos “compassion,” and we see that a “compassionate” foundation does nothing to alleviate, justify, or stop the violence that is conducted in its name. It is unsettling to think of a “compassionate” violence. If compassion can manifest itself in violent forms, then it seems a meaningless if not exploitive term that threatens to unravel common sense distinctions between “good” and “evil.”

Compassion has its limitations. There is nothing within compassion itself that can guarantee that it will be used well, that it will not be exploited for political purposes in ways that erase its original meaning of “fellow-feeling” and condone violent endeavors, just as there is nothing within “equality” or “liberty” itself that makes certain its appearance in the world is true to its meaning. Merleau-Ponty concedes that some people wish to rule, “and, as is appropriate in this case, they appealed to darker passions” (AD 233). When ego or a will to power enter any political equation, regardless of its inclusion of something like compassion, principles and virtues are held in abeyance even as they are named as the purposes or inspirations for political projects.
Even Arendt concedes this point, naming the Grand Inquisitor’s sentiment differently – she gives it the term, “pity,” and absolves “compassion” of any wrongdoing (while also denying that compassion can be public or political). If we disagree with Arendt’s notion that compassion is necessarily private, then we might prefer Rousseau’s distinction between a sterile and sociable pity. Certainly the Grand Inquisitor’s “compassion” is distorted. It falters precisely when it needs to move forward and it lacks a concrete action that mirrors its purpose.

Here the Grand Inquisitor begins to resemble Achilles. Despite their differences each man has removed himself effectively from a public or political project that is held in common with others. The Grand Inquisitor is isolated, inspiring fear from a populace who physically and emotionally distance themselves; Achilles is encapsulated in his raging grief. Both men deny human commonality, suffering, and possibility. Yet compassion penetrates their armor. Compassion offers restoration in a human community endowed with common projects, which the men take up or deny in turn. The Grand Inquisitor denies the transformative effects of Christ’s kiss, relenting only enough to spare but banish Christ. Achilles is released from an overwhelming grief and returns to his common project, albeit a war that spells his death.

The sterility of the Grand Inquisitor’s compassion – his failure to link it to concrete projects in which his constituents acted as valuable and empowered contributors – is perhaps where compassion disintegrated into and seemingly validated violence. Yet it occurs, in large part, because the Grand Inquisitor became infatuated with the notion of an un-free “freedom” in which his dictates enabled an easier, more placid form of human existence for his constituents. This desire became an absolute that solidified human action and relationships. In Arendt’s analysis, compassion came to determine the substance of “equality” (equality became security of physical life) and began operating as the sole principle and virtue for which to secure freedom and equality. In other words, it began to dictate both political action and political ends. In
this sense, compassion acts violently but also, in this sense, any value that acts similarly acts violently. Humanism is transformed into violence if it “attempts to fulfill itself with any consistency” (HT 13). And values like equality or freedom, once established absolutely and separated from the people for whom they are espoused, serve as false ensigns, lose the sense of ambiguity inherent in politics (HT xxxvi), and act as a “pure morality.” Stances that advocate absolutes in a moralizing capacity are problematic (and violent) in their presumptions that actions and people can be prescribed or known in their entirety. Merleau-Ponty agrees with Arendt: a principle or value must be living – it must act presently, freely, and with deliberateness.

In the same essay that Merleau-Ponty praises Machiavelli and subsequently blurs the line between violence and compassion he returns to the self-other co-constituting relationship. The “sole recourse” for violence is “that presence to others and our times which makes us find others at the moment we give up oppressing them – that is, find success at the moment we give up chance, escape destiny at the moment we understand our times” (S 218). It is, in a word, recognizing how I am entwined with others and actively working with that aspect of inter-corporeal inter-subjectivity. And, as noted above, this capacity is bound up with compassion insofar as perceptions spurs one’s compassion for another’s humanity and value.

Full participation in inter-subjectivity carries with it the acknowledgement that one participates in violence in myriad mundane, historical, and grand ways, even while instantiating “humanism.” Turning to a strange ally, Machiavelli, Merleau-Ponty challenges our conception of humanism and offers a revision:

32 “We must remember that liberty becomes a false ensign – a ‘solemn complement’ of violence – as soon as it becomes only an idea and we begin to defend liberty instead of free men…It is the essence of liberty to exist only in the practice of liberty, in the inevitably imperfect movement which joins us to others, to the things of the world, to our jobs, mixed with the hazards of our situation” (HT xxiv).
33 Merleau-Ponty distinguishes a “humanism of comprehension” from a “humanism of extension,” advocating the latter as one that prizes the individual person as “capable of self-determination and of situating himself in the world” (HT 175-76).
If by humanism we mean a philosophy of inner man which finds no difficulty in principle in his relationships with others, no opacity whatsoever in the functioning of society, and which replaces political cultivation by moral exhortation, Machiavelli is not a humanist. But if by humanism we mean a philosophy which confronts the relationship of man to man and the constitution of a common situation and a common history between men as a problem, then we have to say that Machiavelli formulated some of the conditions of any serious humanism. (S 223)

The humanist (and political) problem is how one goes about constructing a common situation and project. Merleau-Ponty signals of what we need to be wary: moral preaching and murky contexts that obscure how and when humans conflict. Machiavelli crafts a form of humanism that admits of violence and uncertainty because he attempts to “underline the condition for a power which does not mystify, that is, participation in a common situation” (S 215). Establishing full participation in projects both public and private reworks power, seen as crystallized opinion in a given moment (S 212) rather than leviathan-like force or legally-regulated agreements.34 His humanism aims at understanding “what is humanly valuable within the possibilities of the moment,” at which point “signs and portents never lack” (S 219).35 Consequently, polities, policies, and political actors are judged on how well their actions comport to securing what is humanly valuable.

The way out of violence is through individual and collective self-awareness about one’s privileges, transgressions, affiliations, and the work being done in one’s name. Merleau-Ponty finds that morality consists of “actively being what we are by

34 Here my argument is more with contractarian depictions of power, not structural or disciplinarian depictions. In part, a Foucauldian critique of Merleau-Ponty is anachronistic since Discipline and Punishment was published nearly fifteen years after Merleau-Ponty’s death. This does not mean, however, that there are not either serious critiques or alliances that can be made between the two. His remarks on intersubjectivity found in pages 104-110 in Humanism and Terror, for instance, foreshadow a softer form of structuralism. However this exploration is a separate project. See Diane Coole (1997) for further reading.
35 Merleau-Ponty’s assurance that signs are apparent may seem overly simplistic, even naïve. Since Cassandra and Tiresias, the (mis)reading of these signs has often been disputed or ignored.
chance, of establishing that communication with others and with ourselves for which our temporal structure gives us the opportunity and of which our liberty is only the rough outline” (SN 40). Actively being what we are by chance includes working with (and against) how others see us as well as how we see ourselves, and employing that knowledge in the attempts to communicate with others. Actively being what we are by chance admits that we are situated in other’s perceptual and corporeal fields and that we are characterized by a “certain way” of relating to the world, each other, and to activity.

Individuals are inter-subjective,

qualified as ‘my son,’ ‘my wife,’ ‘my friend’ whom we carry along with us into common projects where they receive (like ourselves) a definite role, with specific rights and duties, so in collective history the spiritual atoms train after them their historical role and are tied to one another by the threads of their actions; what is more, they are blended with the totality of actions, whether or not deliberate, which they exert upon others and the world so that there exists not a plurality of subjects, but an intersubjectivity, and that is why there exists a common measure of the evil inflicted upon certain people and of the good gotten out of it by others. (HT 110)

The actions and responsibilities between people serve as the active measures of “good” and “evil.” Again Merleau-Ponty references an “absolute” that is immanent to a particular situation and defined within its context. Explaining that “[w]e are inextricably and confusedly bound up with the world and others,” Merleau-Ponty finds that “[e]ach one is totally responsible because, if he acted differently, the others in turn would have treated him differently; and each can feel innocent because the others’ freedom was invisible to him, and the face they offered to him was as fixed as fate” (SN 36). Total responsibility emerges in the context of inter-corporeal perception and action because others cannot be avoided and because others help determine the significance and outcome of the encounter. Outside of the direct consequences from one’s actions, however, there is an element of innocence because of both its transcendental and invisible qualities.

Responsibility for one’s actions in an inter-subjective, inter-corporeal life may be hard but Merleau-Ponty encourages us to take up its challenge. Montaigne, famous
skeptic, is wary of tying himself to the public because it is “full of madmen” that threaten one’s own sanity (S 204). But he refuses to withdraw completely because he recognizes that people outside himself “were like the emblem of his outward freedom” (S 207). To refuse inter-dependence is to refuse the means for regaining himself. Rather Montaigne lends himself to others. He consistently if cautiously moves himself outwards – into public life, into personal relationships, and into politics – because “what he loves is at stake, out there” (S 209). Extending oneself outwards, through both perceptual and corporeal planes and more metaphysical and political acts, generates the possibility that one will create a common situation. This common situation neither guarantees progress and beneficence nor organizes human action so that reciprocity and goodwill result but it grounds ethics in a particular and specific context. Though “each gesture of our body or our language, each act of political life, as we have seen, spontaneously takes account of the other person and goes beyond itself in its singular aspects toward a universal meaning” (S 239), they do not accumulate into a general mandate that binds each and every action.

4.4. Conclusion

What matters in a polity is not just superficial structure of governance but, as Rousseau and Merleau-Ponty point out, the relations making it up. Merleau-Ponty understands that values easily slide into demagogic banners used to mask or excuse partisan behavior that shirks intersubjectivity and eradicates common projects. He asserts that “the value of a society is the value it places upon man’s relation to man” and that to “understand and judge a society, one has to penetrate its basic structure to the human bond upon which it is built; this undoubtedly depends upon legal relations, but also upon forms of labor, ways of loving, living, and dying” (emphasis added, HT xiv). Here Merleau-Ponty indicates the matrices by which we can begin to judge abstract, banner principles. If it is justice, freedom, or liberty that is demanded, then for who is it
demanded and with whom is society “to be made – slaves or masters” (S 220)? What “forces, which men” will apply those principles (ibid)? Certainly it is easier to judge when time has unfolded but it is also possible to do it while the action is still unfolding. And it is exactly this critical pressure that civil rights activists have placed and continue to place on the United States.

Compassion is a complement to these values because it continuously refers us to what is humanly valuable and it sustains the relationships between people. The other as an alter ego situated in common with oneself is not a philosophical abstraction intended to ease the logical pains of a Kantian self-other experience, although it is also this alternative; it is a means by which we can begin to adjudicate just how abstract principles are felt in the body politic by diverse, oftentimes outnumbered and out-powered, people. Just what ways of “loving, living, and dying” as well as of socializing, laboring, and deploying political voice and power on local, state, and national levels does the United States promote? Compassion’s role as a civic virtue emerges in this puzzle because it offers a means by which to grasp another’s multifaceted position and to explore how forces, policies, and politics touch on (or strong-arm) those facets. Compassion already intercedes in and supplies political practices like listening, taking responsibility, and encouraging common projects around what is humanly valuable. Affirming compassion’s role in politics merely confirms that it is already present and formative in political and social relations. But to speak of compassion – to draw attention to its appearances as well as its possibilities – is to begin noting its value.

If we look at Achilles and Priam again, then we see two possible translations of perception’s phenomenology. First, the translation is a logical, informed choice based on self-interest. If Achilles’ freedom depends upon Priam’s, then it is in Achilles’ best interest to negotiate well with Priam. This option requires that cognition come into play. Alternatively, the ethical implications are spontaneously and inexplicably felt. Achilles is uncertain why he feels kinship for Priam until his mind works through the emotional,
metaphysical layers of his reaction. All Achilles knows is that he is moved to act in a certain way, respectfully and reciprocally. If the transition is made within the mind, then the tendency to act “inhumanely” kicks in because it then enters a Hegelian metaphysical conflict between two egos wherein the desire to oppress must be consciously tempered. Yet we again run into the same vicious cycle: what halts the desire to dominate? Is it self-interest? Or, is it something that is somewhere, somehow, felt in the body’s interstices and made apparent through a kind of “dawning,” corporeal understanding?

These questions lead back to Merleau-Ponty’s stronger claim regarding compassion: that comprehending another’s behavior requires sympathy. It requires a bodily reverberation be made somewhere beneath the patterning of mind and emotion, somewhere in the chiasm that unites a person to another despite external enmity. Otherwise a person gets caught into that tangled web spun by Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology and metaphysics where conflict seems both avoidable and inevitable. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology and ethics requires a baseline, bodily impulse that is best understood as compassion. This assumption of his also comports to the literature on empathy and compassion explored in Chapter One. We have the intersubjective, phenomenogical (and ontological) leanings for compassionate living; the challenge is in harnessing it as we act.

The Iliad cannot sing the praises of Achilles’ heroism in war without also crafting an ode to compassion. For it is through compassion that Homer brings Achilles back to his humanity and to his mortality with its loves and losses. The language used to describe Achilles’ compassion and humanity is essentially Trojan: the allusions to and metaphors about nature as well as social relations are Trojan descriptors that highlight the Greeks’ radical isolation and distance from their home as well as Achilles’ own greatness (Schein 1984, 97-98).
That Achilles is described in his enemy’s terms gestures back to the alter ego that the other presents. Human relations, be they social or political, cannot avoid the fact of co-constitution: we are inextricably bound to and with the others surrounding us. In Achilles’ case, he is unable to achieve his personal greatness as a hero without Trojans’ sacrifice. Which is to say that without his enemy, Achilles cannot be his full self (he cannot even be his partial self). The Trojans, Hector, and Priam come to define Achilles’ nature and possibility as much as Patroclus, his mother, or his father does. In an intersubjective, incarnate life we cannot avoid implicating others in our personal ambitions and actions. All agency is wrought within this complex as is emotion, reason, and corporeality, and the resulting perspective reframes ethics within political life and principles.

I mentioned earlier that this chapter gestures towards a political ethos that is both sustained by compassion and admits of compassion’s presence. To see this ethos – the “prevalent tone of sentiment” of a people or community (Oxford English Dictionary) – it helps to consider compassion as both a sustaining orientation and an active choice like Achilles himself displays. Schein repeatedly draws our attention to the balance Homer tries to strike between fury and compassion, or between aggression and affiliation, and the kind of dangerous, raging spiral in which Achilles sinks when his generous humanity has been overwhelmed. And as Rousseau predicts, it is Achilles’ “deliberate” choice to activate his compassion that enables him to temper his strong passions and move towards regaining his personal equilibrium. This also breaks him out of self-isolation and readmits him into his broader social network, one spanning space and time. Yet Merleau-Ponty’s work also suggests that the “deliberateness” of this choice was initiated somatically and emotionally: it is Priam’s energetic visage – how Priam physically and emotionally inserts himself into Achilles’ perceptual field and thereby commits himself to Achilles’ situation – that stirs Achilles’ compassion and enables it to move out from the shadows of Achilles’ temperament. Achilles both regains
himself and reworks himself insofar as his suffering intensifies both his compassion and sense of humanity.

Compassion is violent fury’s contrast and counter-balance. And if Merleau-Ponty is right in that violence is somehow ineradicable and that ethics in politics consists, in part, of admitting its presence so as to abate it, then compassion offers a means by which to both recognize and challenge violence itself. As Schein argues, the violence that defines *The Iliad* also underscores the human costs accompanying it. The ethical dichotomy works to protect what is “humanly valuable” by continually drawing our attention to its fragility and the tragedy that results when it is torn asunder. Importantly, however, this work operates in a highly complex and paradoxical inter-corporeality that pluralizes their appearance and functions.
5. A Compassionate Political Ethos and the United States’ *E Pluribus Unum*

“Men in general judge more by their eyes than their hands. Every man can see, but very few know how to touch. Each man easily sees what he seems to be, but almost no one identifies what he is.” – Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1964c, 216)

“When you teach a man to hate and fear his brother, when you teach that he is a lesser man because of his color or his beliefs or the policies he pursues, when you teach that those who differ from you threaten your freedom or your job or your family, then you also learn to confront others not as fellow citizens but as enemies, to be met not with cooperation but with conquest; to be subjugated and mastered.” – Robert F. Kennedy (Guthman and Allen 1993, 361)

This dissertation has considered compassion primarily through the works of Hannah Arendt, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. As demonstrated by the continual redefinition of its movement in the individual as well as the body politic, by the revelations of its latent potential, and by its various appearances in the chapters, compassion is not a staid concept. Rather it informs and is formed by its context. It is highly inter-corporeal and collaborative. It sustains social and political principles and phenomena and it helps make clear the contours, consequences, and possibilities of a given situation. In all, compassion shows itself to be necessary to politics. All of which suggests that the current depictions found in political theory are problematic because they consider compassion only in single manifestations, critiquing or praising it according to what they find.

Arendt’s fears determined the crux of this dissertation’s concerns. She raises questions about whether compassion as a principle can guide a people and a polity towards just, lasting institutions and relationships. Driving that worry was a
compassion that was unruly and overwhelming, both egalitarian and exceedingly narrow, complacent and aggressive, threatening towards individuality and encouraging a “Blob” mentality, and highly mute. But within her analysis I also traced out a compassion in which silence is not absence but an articulation of something emotional, psychological, or social but nonetheless powerful that lies behind and beneath other phenomena and a compassion that empowers the person choosing to use it. Her analytical tendencies to craft strong identities for phenomenon leads to a certain kind of blindness and deafness to plurality and multiplicity, and her rendering of compassion suffers as a result.

Rousseau provides one response to Arendt’s worry, turning towards humans’ “natural” capacity for compassion as well as the need to train its development and actions individually. With Rousseau we traced the underground evolution of an insistent natural pity, whose civilized appearance depends upon its interaction with other passions, the ego, and action. Rousseau introduces the notion of differentiating compassion so that its sterile form is distinct from its socially and politically productive form; the latter I term sociable pity and trace its relationship to individual particularity as well as individual agency. Which is to say, that who a person is – her temperament and habits – matter in considering how she ought to cultivate a generative compassion. Minimally, Rousseau has four different temperaments associated with compassion that can be tailored to specific individuals while encouraging its flourishing in political and social life. I also suggest that Rousseau’s general will relies on a robust and fluent compassion so that particularity can be wed to generality without endangering the former.

Merleau-Ponty brings out compassion’s somatic dimensions. Defining a person as a “field of experience” a priori to an “ego cogito” Merleau-Ponty situates individuals
in their bodies and, as a result, in their environment. Interactions between people, then, take on new dimensions that help ease Arendt’s worries about compassion. Compassion emerges as a responsive and collaborative engagement with another person by perceiving her basic humanity. Compassion is a means of tempering violence. As a result it provides a valuable political ethos, especially in intensely contentious political times and spaces where seeing beyond enmity is difficult. When we look for compassion in the polity we need to consider its incarnate as well as its cognitive or emotional displays. Martha Nussbaum, Lauren Berlant, and Clifford Orwin, for instance, look primarily to the latter and fail to consider the former. As the previous chapter explored, however, Merleau-Ponty’s sense of self and its corporeal investments in the world affects both our consideration of compassion and its potential in securing political space, activity, and solidarity.

Each of these chapters offer elaborations on Candace Clark’s definition of compassion, admitted in the first chapter as the definition that most closely resembled how compassion is experienced. Her compassion is the physical, emotional, or cognitive “reaching out” to another, a “fellow-feeling” that has a three-stage process in which a person experiences compassion: first, she empathizes, or imagines the other person’s situation; second, she experiences sympathy sentiment, or recognizes compassion has emerged; and, finally, she displays those sentiments (1997, 27). At any point in the process a person may stop, which means that appearance is not necessary for its experience. And compassion works through the person on multiple levels – it is not just a cognitive nor is it just an emotional experience, as Nussbaum and Arendt, respectively, tend to depict it. Rather it has the capacity to be both simultaneously and much more.

Is it that politics demands a manifest compassion, as in rational acts or long-lasting institutions? Or is it enough for compassion to act as an orientation? Rousseau
and Merleau-Ponty suggest both options are possible and necessary for a dynamic public and political sphere wherein contestation is supported by a compassionate undercurrent and punctuated by compassionate acts. Principles like equality and justice are strengthened when compassion underlies their application. Other ethical models like care, justice, or feminist ethics presume a baseline of compassion. I argue in Chapter One that compassion needs to be recovered because other ethical models like justice, care, or feminist ethics rely on it.

This chapter considers a final example of compassion. Specifically, I look at Robert F. Kennedy’s years as Attorney General, Senator for New York, and campaigner for presidential nominee to locate a political ethos in its context and consider how a somatic compassion complements, indeed generates traction for, other principles like equality, justice, responsibility, and moral courage. His ethos is one that nourishes the United States’ informal motto, “e pluribus unum.” Out of many Americans have sought to create one body politic that respects individual distinction while encouraging sociality and solidarity, whether as through federalism that unites several states into one or as through a multicultural and diverse gathering that creates a nation. To activate a compassionate ethos and engender solidarity in fractious times Kennedy offered a highly inter-corporeal political style that encouraged shared responsibility and common projects.

Those Kennedy combined were too unlike to see themselves as somehow sharing an experience, but he was effective in getting them to see how they might experience another’s situation. His campaign for Presidency shows his ability to bring together small farmers, businesses, African Americans and American Indians, laboring
Hispanics, students, and educated middle-class or privileged Caucasians.¹ Diane Coole remarks that Merleau-Ponty’s “exemplary political actor” has an “active/passive agency – of construction and learning, intervention and listening” and a praxis that aims towards a “new ethos of coexistence” (1997, 149). As we will see, Kennedy offers similar practices. He calls his audiences to witness injustices and to feel the experience of injustice. He then offers active solutions for specific injustices, thereby offering a common project around humanly valuable tasks like poverty alleviation. His compassion-driven project is coupled with an intense body politics, in which he physically touches the “untouchable” and brings those on the periphery into his circle. The consequences are such that, figuratively, he fuses unlike perspectives together through his own person by opening his body to others. In so doing he generates a new ethos, one calibrated to re-gathering and sustaining the “e pluribus unum” of the union.

This chapter closely examines three key moments for Kennedy. First I consider Kennedy’s “education” on poverty and race issues. Next I look at Kennedy’s speeches and actions following Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination, especially in contrast to President Lyndon Johnson’s actions, in order to evaluate his growth and see how he endeavors to generate a common project. I reflect on his particular political style, which is highly inter-corporeal and which weaves compassion into his rhetoric and his actions as he aims at fortifying national unity through compassionate imagination and increased individual responsibility. Finally, I move into an investigation about the dangers involved in replicating his style and the implications it holds for contemporary politics. Before beginning, however, I look at the man, the myth, and the context.

¹ Privileged Caucasians liked him, to a degree. He partly blamed losing the Oregon primary on the inability of white, middle-class citizens to identify strongly with an urban black experience.
5.1. The Man and the Myth

The sixties were a turbulent era in which national unity seemed endangered. It was a decade largely writ on the physical bodies of individuals comprising the nation. Black bodies, Latino bodies, poor bodies, young bodies became visible as war, protests, civil and labor rights, riots, and poverty not only ascribed those bodies but became the issues for which people resisted such ascription. Their vulnerability was physical, emotional, and material. But, excepting the Black Power movement and the release-valve of the riots, leading figures like Martin Luther King and Cesar Chavez praised the potent power in non-violence, love, and compassion and sought political solutions through their admixture with physicality. Admittedly their efforts were stymied and attacked by people brandishing violence or apathy. And the decade seemingly capitulated to violence as the deaths of Medgar Evers, John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and finally Robert Kennedy effectively ended an era of progress, hope, and endurance. Or, as Roger Wilkins put it upon Robert Kennedy’s death, “We’ve lost that compassion, that understanding, that capacity to grow” (Stein vanden Heuvel 1970, 124).

Kennedy’s political style, to borrow a term from Merleau-Ponty, offered a promise of national unity – of unlikely solidarity – through an embodied compassion, one that was tangible, rhetorical, and legislative, and it responded to a certain hunger in the nation for some palpable form of reconciliation. Coole, again describing Merleau-Ponty’s politics, writes, “The virtuosity that is particular to politics must be underwritten by an ontology of the between, inter-corporeity, and intersubjectivity, wherein agentic capacities emerge” (1997, 163). Attending to the in-between requires that we focus on the kinds of interactions that enable visceral and emotional connections. It might also require that we contemporaries momentarily suspend
skepticism of “authenticity” or “sincerity” and, instead, choose to believe that Kennedy’s contemporaries found something “genuine” in Kennedy. This “suspension of disbelief” does not mean that we ignore the challenges implicit in his politics or the disagreement around Kennedy himself, but that we take seriously the context’s particular needs and Kennedy’s specific response. It also requires separating Kennedy from contemporary parodies like Bill Clinton’s “I feel your pain” and George W. Bush’s “compassionate conservatism” that are strongly critiqued for encouraging a kind of political theatrics by Orwin (1997) and Berlant (1998, 2004).

Admittedly Kennedy lingers as a kind of myth or legend, which time seems to have amplified. The man, burdened with humanity’s privileges as well as its tragedies, lingers mostly as a question: What if Kennedy had not been assassinated and had secured the presidency? For his admirers it is the lost potential – the “might have been” – that feels most cruel. John Lewis remarked, four decades after Kennedy’s death, “I thought that if this one man was elected president, he could move us closer to what many of us in the movement called “The Loving Community”’ (Clarke 2008, 9). Why and how did this man conjure such strong hope while he was alive and such mournful loss upon his death? Was it because his rise and fall so quickly succeeded the public loss of other leaders? Was it because his death extinguished the last light of promise, of reconciliation? Or was there something uniquely his, as friends, members of his reporting crew, and loved ones adamantly report? While we cannot deny the situation of his emergence and his loss, we cannot attribute it merely to that. There is something strangely compelling about Kennedy’s form of charisma, which is not his brother’s grace or King’s powerful eloquence. His is more hesitant, vulnerable, extemporaneous and it could quickly turn, too blunt in its honest delivery of his opinion, too melancholy or moody, too isolating in its strangeness. He was a politician who hated politics’ glad-
hanging yet he, as Merleau-Ponty’s Montaigne, “lent himself to others” in highly tactile ways. Vincent Harding said of his magnetism, “Bobby indicated more the physical emotion...you got the sense that you could get your hand on a person” (Stein vanden Heuvel 1970, 123). That sense of tangibility and of immediacy fuels a kind of solidarity that is different from Arendt’s interest-based or friendship-based solidarity.

It might be said that Kennedy’s myth stands in the way. That without knowing the “true” man – without being able to decipher between the adulation and the repugnance – we cannot ask one to imitate him. The media caricatured him often, casting him as his own opposite: “Good Bobby,” a sensitive crusader dedicated to poverty relief and civil and labor rights, versus “Bad Bobby,” a manipulative politician who brokered back-door deals, dealt with the Mafia, and tapped Martin Luther King, Jr.’s phone.2 And perhaps this duality fit Bobby’s own moral tendencies, sometimes described as Manichean in which he sought a hard line between “good” and “bad.” He relentlessly indicted the “bad” in the name of the “good,” and some believed that he did not worry about what means were used so long as he achieved the “good” end.

The difficulty with Kennedy is that his appearance shifted depending upon the vantage point at which one saw him. George McGovern roughly summed it up when he said, “Bob, at various times, appeared different sizes to me. Sometimes he seemed like a large man...I mean physically. At other times, he seemed very slight, small. It depended, I guess, on the angle of vision” (Stein vanden Heuvel 1970, 274). He was a complex man containing contradictions whose likability depended on the context in which one met him, the duration and number of interactions, the focus of the exchange, and one’s relative position (people at the receiving end of his criticism or his actions did not like him, e.g. Southern politicians or police officers opposed to integration). Yet, journalists,

2 Kennedy expressed remorse at approving Hoover’s request for permission to wire-tap Martin Luther King, Jr’s lines.
staffers, and others admit to forming an initial opinion of Kennedy as ruthless, belligerent, apathetic, insensitive, manipulative, arrogant, presumptuous, or oblivious, only to have it changed later. Mike Forrestal reports that he nearly punched Kennedy because he found him “very offensive, rude, and obnoxious” but realized after a month or so that Kennedy was “the most astounding person I’ve ever met” (Schlesinger 1978, 593). Kennedy was often uneasy and “diffident” with strangers; he appeared “abrupt or preoccupied” when he felt shy; he “radiated a sense of power;” and he seemed combative or imperious (Schlesinger 1978, 589). Kennedy was candid and a good listener who was anxious to learn. Schlesinger attributed his identification with and appeal to minorities to his “convictions about participation, his readiness to bypass established bureaucracies, his impulse to experiment with new institutional forms, above all, his instinct for sympathy” (Schlesinger 1978, 416). Despite being tough and “often graceless,” Kennedy was also a man of commitment, loyalty and kindness (Schlesinger 1978, 568, 594, xiii). Yet even his compassion had its limitations – for instance, his occasional homophobia led him to say cruel things both to and about people he met and his belief in racial equality is did not lead him to support miscegenation (Thomas 2000, 263, 346). He reluctantly went to California to meet with Cesar Chavez, trusting his friends’ and aides’ assurances that the strikes were important. When he met with skepticism about his intentions to help the urban poor in Bedford-Stuyvesant, he grumbled, “I don’t need this shit…I could be down in Palm Beach catching some sun and sipping a Mint Julep. I don’t need to hear that I’m like every other goddamn politician”” (Heymann 1998, 421).

But if we peer closely enough into most people’s lives, we will find them writ with contradiction, narrowness, and challenges. For our own purposes, the facts of Kennedy’s personal life matter less than the myth that endured. His contemporaries and
his admirers are aware of his potential moral failings – in some cases, some of them may have tried to revise his history so as to leave those failings out – but they still found themselves captivated by his particular style, by his compassion, his courage, and his desire for justice. And Kennedy’s crueler dimensions caution us against sheer lionization of the man.

This focus takes up Merleau-Ponty’s rendering of politics. He writes, “Or as mirrors set around in a circle transform a slender flame into a fairyland, acts of authority reflected in the constellation of consciousnesses are transfigured, and the reflections of these reflections create an appearance which is the proper place – the truth, in short, of historical action. Power bears a halo about it” (Signs 216). By taking the disparate views of Kennedy into consideration with their reflections, we have a sense of the “truth” of his historical action. It also helps us determine whether such politics are currently possible. Can his form of politics be replicated? Is it desirable to replicate it? Or, is it that not only is his politics unique to his disposition, his context, and his abilities, but also that it is both too privileged and too vulnerable to be encouraged in the polity at large? These questions will be taken up as I conclude the analysis of Kennedy.

5.2. “The Slow Violence of Institutions”

“For there is another kind of violence, slower but just as deadly destructive as the shot or the bomb in the night. This is the violence of institutions; indifference and inaction and slow decay,” intoned Kennedy, “This is the violence that afflicts the poor, that poisons relations between men because their skin has different colors” (Guthman and Allen 1993, 360). Kennedy’s awareness of poverty and race grew substantially during his time as Attorney General and Senator. As Attorney General he enforced legal desegregation and oversaw juvenile delinquency, both of which sharpened his understanding of race politics and prejudice in the south and urban north. His
congressional assignment to the Labor Committee expanded his sense of poverty in the United States by bringing him face to face with American Indians, poor rural blacks and whites, and migrant labor workers. Despite the historical, cultural, or lived differences between the groups, he saw that poverty and race similarly affected them in terms of dignity, opportunity, and quality of life. He later gathered these experiences together to talk about the slow violence of institutions, inducing his campaign audiences to hear about and experience the conditions of race and poverty. This section considers two especially instructional experiences for Kennedy – his encounter with a small child in the Mississippi Delta and a rough meeting he had with James Baldwin, Jerome Smith, Lorraine Hansberry, and Kenneth Clark, among others – both of which were formative in focusing his compassion and shaping his understanding of what it means to create “e pluribus unum.”

As part of the Senate Labor Committee’s sub-committee on poverty, Kennedy made several trips around the United States to see and hear testimonies on poverty. In New York, Kennedy saw rats, cockroaches, scared mothers and their children, scars from rat bites and lamps to keep the rats at bay during the night. Poverty showed up in the form of bloated stomachs, listless children who could hardly engage with others, filthy living conditions, and bleak expressions. In 1966 he joined the Migratory Labor Subcommittee’s hearings in Delano, California where the United Farm Workers were striking. In 1967 he travelled to upper state New York to visit a migrant agricultural worker’s camp, severely rebuking the landowner for allowing sub-standard living conditions.

In April 1967, as part of senatorial duties, Kennedy went to the Mississippi Delta. The experience shocked Kennedy, despite numerous encounters with poverty before, because he had not known either the depths of poverty in the United States or how
psychologically and developmentally debilitating it is. Shack after shack he went. The most frequently discussed interaction from this time concerned a small child, barely two years old and wearing only a dirty undershirt, who he had spotted sitting on the floor of a tiny back room of a shack, the smell of which was nauseating (Guthman and Allen 1993, 200-01). Nick Kotz, a reporter with the Des Moines Register, watched Kennedy:

The Senator knelt beside her. “Hello…Hi…Hi, baby” he murmured, touching her cheeks and her hair as he would his own child’s. As he sat on the dirty floor, he placed his hand gently on the child’s swollen stomach. But the little girl sat as if in a trance…For five minutes he tried: talking, caressing, tickling, poking – demanding that the child respond. The baby never looked up. (ibid)

Charles Evers recalled that tears ran down Kennedy’s cheek as he held the little girl, oblivious to the roaches and rats surrounding them. “‘How can a country like this allow it?’ Kennedy asked, ‘Maybe they just don’t know’ (ibid). Marian Wright Edelman was struck by Kennedy’s compassion. Later, she explained her support for him by referencing this moment and her inability to pick up such a filthy child, exclaiming, “‘I didn’t do that! But he died. And I saw that compassion, and I saw that feeling, and I saw how he was learning” (Stein vanden Heuvel 1970, 124).

Kennedy applied the lessons he learned to his politics. Believing that most Americans were ignorant of poverty’s toll and pervasiveness, he offered testimony and facts to compel their hearts and educate their minds. He made it his responsibility to testify about poverty in the United States, to inform those who “just don’t know.” He supplemented his experiences with “expert” testimony, calling academics, psychologists, labor organizers, community leaders, and other experts to appear at Congressional hearings. Statistics peppered his speeches. In one small Indiana campaign stop, the attendees at the luncheon laughed when Kennedy told them that there were more rats than humans in the city of New York. He paused, shocked at their laughter, and then informed them, “Don’t …laugh…” (Guthman and Allen 1993, 382).
Following his trip to the Delta in 1967 Kennedy worked hard to secure emergency funds for the sharecroppers whose occupations were ruined by mechanization of agriculture and access to food programs were severely limited (Heymann 1998, 413). His subcommittee petitioned President Johnson to declare an emergency; Johnson did not reply. Kennedy called for hearings in July, tried to work an emergency hunger and medical aid through Congress where it was blocked, tacked the bill onto the reauthorization of the poverty program in November where it passed. Johnson again stalled in implementing the bill until April 1968, nearly a full year after the efforts had begun (Guthman and Allen 1993, 201). He devoted similar energy to changing the educational and employment opportunities for American Indians, whose living conditions, rate of suicide, and sense of despair astounded him. As Senator Kennedy eventually negotiated chairing a new committee on Indian education, eventually passing legislation aimed at its flaws (Heymann 1998, 412).

Robert Kennedy’s primary introduction to the Civil Rights occurred as Attorney General when he was charged with ensuring that integration took root in the states. Overall, Kennedy was in for an experience, perhaps intellectually understanding but grossly underestimating the emotional and historical content of the Southern reaction, both black and white. In the beginning Kennedy urged Civil Rights leaders to work slowly and through the judicial system, arguing that concentrating on voting rights provided the surest means. In 1962, Martin Luther King, Jr. summed Kennedy’s comprehension, “‘I’m afraid that the fact is he’s got the understanding and he’s got the political skill…but the moral passion is missing’” (Schlesinger 1978, 316). The political maneuvers and theatrics involved in registering James Meredith in September 1962 at the University of Mississippi and Vivian Malone Jones, Dave McGlathery, and James Hood in June 1963 at the University of Alabama as well as the continual efforts to ensure
the safety of Civil Rights protestors began the process of reworking Kennedy’s sense of the Southern attitude toward blacks.

Yet the sum of these experiences – emphasizing political solutions for legal and civil injustices – did not necessarily disclose the emotional and psychological difficulty in being a black American; it did not stimulate that moral passion. Comprehending the “plain, basic suffering of being a Negro” (Schlesinger 1978, 332) required something like a “jolt,” which Kennedy unexpectedly received at a meeting he asked James Baldwin to arrange. Kennedy arrived at Baldwin’s New York apartment expecting to find “experts,” i.e. policy wonks, on the black experience in northern cities. Baldwin brought a number of “experts on the northern city,” including Kenneth B. Clark, Edwin C. Berry and Clarence B. Jones, but included artists like Lena Horne, Harry Belafonte, and Lorraine Hansberry as well as a CORE field worker and Freedom Rider, Jerome Smith.

Smith’s testimony determined the direction and intensity of the meeting, which, over the course of three hours, became increasingly emotional, frustrating, and isolating. “It became really one of the most violent, emotional verbal assaults,” recounted Dr. Clark, “that I had ever witnessed before or since” (Schlesinger 1978, 333), and Kennedy was the target of those assaults by virtue of his position and his person – the Attorney General was white, male, privileged, and influential. And seen by the participants as the “best” that whites might offer, Kennedy’s incremental withdrawal from and silence during the meeting exacerbated an already tense situation: “Dr. Clark charged that during the meeting, ’we never got through to him. I think that we might as well have been speaking different languages. There were times when we just broke out in hysterical laughter. Even the laughter wasn’t laughter. It was the laughter of desperation” (JET Magazine 1963, 7). The meeting was deemed a failure by most of Kennedy’s non-intimates.
Historian Arthur Schlesinger’s report of the meeting is intense. He interweaves different testimonies with the event’s narrative, and it is worth quoting at length:

Jerome Smith, as Baldwin put it later, ‘set the tone of the meeting because he stammers when he’s upset and he stammered when he talked to Bobby and said that he was nauseated by the necessity of being in that room. I knew what he meant. It was not personal at all…Bobby took it personally…and turned away from him…‘This boy,’ Lena Horne said afterward, ‘just put it like it was. He communicated the plain, basic suffering of being a Negro. The primeval memory of everyone in that room went to work after that…He took us back to the common dirt of our existence and rubbed our noses in it…You could not encompass his anger, his fury, in a set of statistics, nor could Mr. Belafonte and Dr. Clark and Miss Horne, the fortunate Negros, keep up the pretense of being the mature, responsible spokesmen for the race.’ (Schlesinger 1978, 331-332)

Smith, “nauseated” with his role and the meeting, asserts that he is uncertain how long he can stay nonviolent: “‘When I pull the trigger, kiss it goodbye’” (Schlesinger 1978, 332). His lack of patriotism shocks Kennedy, who gets “redder” in turns and consequently garners the desire to protect and support Jerome. “‘And it really became an attack!’” (ibid). Kennedy tries to sympathize by extrapolating from his own Irish history, affirming that there will be a black president in the next 40 years. This analogy angers Baldwin, who points out the fact that black ancestry has been a part of the American canvas for far longer than Kennedy’s ancestors. Kennedy’s Civil Rights efforts with are laughed at while his relationship with King is “jeered” (Schlesinger 1978, 333).

Baldwin: ‘Bobby didn’t understand what we were trying to tell him…didn’t understand our urgency.’ Kennedy: ‘They seemed possessed. They reacted as a unity. It was impossible to make contact with any of them.’ Clark: ‘Bobby became more silent and tense, and he sat immobile in the chair. He no longer continued to defend himself. He just sat, and you could see the tension and the pressure building in him.’ It went on for three hours; then suddenly stopped, out of sheer exhaustion. (ibid)

Lorraine Hansberry led the walk-out.

Smith’s stutter surely set the meeting’s tone, more adept than words at conveying the frustration, impatience, anger, and disgust built over years of being subject to racial prejudice, oppression, and hatred. Recall that Arendt diagnoses a stutter’s ineloquence to goodness’ and compassion’s incoherency – she limits the two to
mute gestures that debilitate dialogue. Kennedy might be inclined to agree with Arendt, asserting that the emotion that came into the room at that time obscured any possibility for “reason” or “fact,” embodied by statistics, to come to the fore. But Smith also affirms how a stutter and silence can signify more depth and breadth – more content – than speech itself. Of the participants at the meeting, Smith was likely the most experienced in non-violent activism. He took a stand at desegregating buses in New Orleans at an early age. His work as a freedom rider and a CORE field worker resulted in several beatings; at the time of the meeting, he was in New York receiving medical treatment for his injuries. It is his body, young, male, and black, that is deemed to be dangerous to the polity at large and to white women particularly; it is his body, young, male, and black, that receives the blows of white supremacy; it is his body, young, male, and black, that both resists racial prejudice and receives its inscriptions. Of the participants, Smith likely placed himself most frequently, visibly, and vulnerably in a body politics. And it is the fullness of his and similar experiences that cannot be quantified or easily parsed and resolved in public policy. But it is critical that white Americans, especially, get a visceral sense of his stutter, its meaning, and its depth.

Participants expressed disappointment after the meeting, certain that not only had the Attorney General failed to comprehend black “urgency” but also that he would not likely act to support radical change. “Kennedy’s silence, following the meeting, was not half as excruciating, however, as were the indications sifted out of the session which suggested that he reached the ‘wall’ over which no white man seems to be able to step in understanding the Negro’s aims and aspirations” (JET Magazine, 13 June 1963, p. 6). Baldwin asserted that Kennedy tried to frame the black experience as a “political matter” – “of finding out what’s wrong in the twelfth ward and correcting it...But what was wrong in the twelfth ward in this case turned out to be something very sinister,
very deep, that couldn’t be solved in the usual way. Bobby didn’t understand that” (Stein 199-20). Clark left feeling that Kennedy was “extraordinarily insensitive” and that he “did not have empathy” (Stein 121-22). Kennedy himself indicated that he did not know how to process or summarize his meeting. Kennedy noted his despair and concern with the conversation, saying that it was impossible to talk with them the way one might with King. Later he interpreted the conversation as having conflicting, unspoken misconceptions – he wanted policy, they wanted witness.

Schlesinger’s incisive account of Kennedy’s “working meeting” with Baldwin, et al conveys the experience’s palpable energy, one which exhausted its participants after three hours and lingered in memories as a traumatic experiences But Schlesinger is firm in believing that it helped Kennedy comprehend – emotionally, psychologically, “as from the inside” – the black experience and “the nature of black anguish” (1978, 335). Though Kennedy asked Baldwin to arrange the meeting, he did not choose his role of “witness,” the conditions, the terms of the conversation, or the participants except Baldwin. He did not choose to serve as a scapegoat for collective white oppression or receive derision for his Civil Rights efforts. He might have resented the experience. He may have withdrawn into a corner after feeling shocked at Smith’s lack of patriotism or surprised by the conversation’s passionate turn towards sympathy, anger, urgency, or anguish. But he chose to stay and to listen; he reflects and he grows. He might not have understood the meeting but, over time, he came to grasp its significance and its underlying message that change is necessary and the sooner, the better. The necessity of its directive became clearer as race riots roiled the nation.

As witness, Kennedy also began to testify in concert with others. Kennedy sprung into action following the meeting. Stein reports that he met with every senator, excepting southern senators, to rally energy and votes for the Civil Rights Act he and
team drafted. He held hearings, gathering together various testimonies on the black experience in both the north and the south. Vincent Harding remarks of Kennedy, trying to gather support for the Civil Rights Bill in 1963, “He said something about how he would respond if he were a black person at this particular time; on a certain level, I had the feeling that he was serious in trying to say how he would feel as a black person, even though I thought that at certain levels it was really impossible for him to do more than want to feel that” (Schlesinger 1978, 349). This description is contrary to Clark’s pessimistic conclusion that Kennedy failed to comprehend. For Burke Marshall, who was assigned to civil rights matters in the Attorney General’s office, Kennedy’s continual interactions with civil rights “displaced organized crime as the issue of law enforcement closest to his heart. ‘The more he saw,’ Burke Marshall said, ‘...the more he understood. The more you learned about how Negroes were treated in the South, ...the madder you became. You know he always talked about the hypocrisy. That’s what got him. By the end of a year he was so mad about that kind of thing it overrode everything else’” (Schlesinger 1978, 409). Even Clark modified his initial assessment of Kennedy, noting that while he never became a fan, he “respected the complexity of the man” and he admitted, “that our original judgment...in that meeting...might have been overharsh and severe. Had he lived, he really would have demonstrated a rare combination of courage, clarity, and concern about the same issues that concerned me” (Stein vanden Heuvel 1970, 121-22).

Kennedy also carried lessons from that meeting into other meetings with black leaders. He decoupled anger at white oppression from anger at himself personally, sharpened his listening skills while offering honest opinions when asked, and saw the meetings as opportunities to gain more numerous and diverse perspectives. The “information” gathering exceeded examination of “political matters” through statistics
and resisted becoming a means of pandering for votes or support. A campaign stop in Oakland, California was similarly blustery, and Kennedy warned the aides coming with him that the meeting would be unorganized and angry. A participant reported, “It was a rough, gut-cutting meeting in which a handful of people stood up and blistered white society and him as a symbol of white society. He sat there and listened and took it, and answered their questions directly and bluntly. He didn’t pull any punches with them” (Stein vanden Heuvel 1970, 305). Kennedy reacted similarly at a meeting convened immediately following King’s funeral. Initially reluctant to attend, he gave in to the requests of his aids. Andrew Young explained that people, “angry and bitter and grieving,” took those emotions out on Kennedy. Young recalled being “impressed” with Kennedy’s calm, “He listened while we blew off steam. But I mean, he wasn’t upset” (Stein vanden Heuvel 1970, 259-60). Kennedy’s sensitivity to the tragic situation was often more extensive than others. In response to their angry demand that he list specific policy solutions, Kennedy restrained from talking politics, asserting, “‘But really, I didn’t come here to discuss politics. That would be in the worst taste.’ He said, ‘I just came to pay a tribute to a man that I had a lot of respect for’” (ibid).

Kennedy demarcates the spaces and times appropriate for politicking, suggesting sensitivity to a situation’s idiosyncratic emotional needs not yet present at the Baldwin meeting. Admittedly this particular attunement might be correlated more to his brother’s death, which, while always in the back of his mind, King’s assassination brought to the forefront. Yet he has developed more ease with his symbolic function as a person not just of privilege but also as a person complicit in white oppression of blacks, and in this capacity he willingly receives, listens, and responds to anger, frustration, and disappointment. Unlike his meeting at Baldwin’s apartment, he does not recede nor generate the impression that he is apathetic, insensitive, or ignorant. Participants in the
meeting might have walked away either skeptical of Kennedy’s ability to do something about the black urban experience or uncertain whether Kennedy could be trusted, but they did not walk away doubting Kennedy’s ability to empathize. And in his willingness to re-articulate their experiences for a broader (white) audience, Kennedy functions as a translator.³

5.3. “The Mindless Menace of Violence”

Kennedy’s ability to empathize with suffering and to translate that empathy into compassion, responsibility, and accountability was tested by the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.. In the speeches he made following King’s death, Kennedy continually calls for actions that memorialize King’s work. He attempts to generate a new common project for the collective body, one that channels frustration, fear, and sympathy to ameliorating ongoing suffering in the nation. This work is one that recognizes the corporeal entwinements between people as well as socio-economic and political interdependence.

The day of King’s death Kennedy was campaigning in Indiana. When he learned that King had been shot, he was boarding a plane for his next campaign stop. His arrival in Indianapolis brought with it news of King’s death and the question as to who should relay the news to the people at his campaign rally. The police warned Kennedy that they feared a riot and could not guarantee his safety, urging him to go to his hotel rather than the assembly. Kennedy sent his wife onto the hotel but met the crowd.

The crowd was predominantly black and, depending upon when they arrived, either fully aware or oblivious of King’s death. A few Black Power members came late, yelling out threats and calling for violence as revenge. Others, closer to the platform, had

³ That whites might need another white person to serve as “translator” is problematic but is itself a separate problem, one that seems ingrained in racial politics generally.
been waiting for several hours. Some, including children, were there merely because they got pulled along with the crowds. Kennedy’s entourage and the city police were nervous – would Kennedy incite a riot or help calm unruly passions?

Kennedy managed to calm the crowd, speaking extemporaneously from a few notes he jotted down on the ride to the rally but then stuffed haphazardly in his coat pocket. He encouraged the crowds to refrain from violence, referring them to King’s work and legacy: “Or we can make an effort, as Martin Luther King did, to understand and to comprehend, and to replace that violence, that stain of bloodshed with compassion and love” (Guthman and Allen 1993, 356-57). He also linked his personal story of loss to theirs, publicly mentioning for the first time his brother’s death:

For those of you who are black and are tempted to be filed with hatred and distrust at the injustice of such an act, against all white people, I can only say that I feel in my own heart the same kind of feeling. I had a member of my family killed, but he was killed by a white man. But we have to make an effort in the United States, we have to make an effort to understand, to go beyond these difficult times…What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence and lawlessness, but is love and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice toward those who suffer within our country, whether they be white or whether they be black. (ibid)

The crowd dispersed soon after Kennedy’s brief remarks, which lasted no more than five minutes. That night 110 cities were rocked by riots, killing 39 people while injuring more than 2500. In the name of security 75,000 National Guardsmen and federal troops were moved into the urban streets (Schlesinger 1978, 877). But Indianapolis remained quiet.

Why was Kennedy successful in calming the crowds? Is it that Indianapolis had a major public figure not only address the death publicly but do so in a public fashion – by climbing onto a slightly shaky platform and making himself physically present in public discord? Is it that a white politician, in addressing racial unhappiness and frustration, also managed to tie to the two races together by referring to commonalities in the human
condition: the indiscriminating nature of violence, the universality of suffering, and the heartfelt desire for happiness? Is it because, in the midst of such a public and intense experience, Kennedy shared an equally strong but private part of himself and created a moment of intimacy? Is it because he treated the crowd as his confidante, not a “blob” to be feared or quelled? I suspect that each of the questions can be answered affirmatively, and that Kennedy intuited somehow exactly what the situation required: respect of the loss felt, an understanding of the hopes that died with King, and the frustrations that intensified in response.

Out of the tragedy Kennedy points the nation towards a common project by recalling King’s sensibilities and directing attention to “those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or they be black” (Guthman and Allen 1993, 357). He concludes, “Let us dedicate ourselves to what the Greeks wrote so many years ago: to tame the savageness of man and make gentle the life of this world” (ibid). Kennedy responds to King’s death – to the crowds gathering and to the multiple emotions running through the body politic – by summoning compassion. In this way, Kennedy’s rhetoric around compassion acts much as Rousseau’s sociable pity: it tempers rising passions in the midst of a challenging, stimulating environment by referring the members of the crowd to each other and to the nation as a whole. As Rousseau demonstrates, the passions can stimulate a solipsistic narcissism that focuses on one’s own intense pains, now magnifying that pain by locating it in related disappointments. It is this reaction that curls into anger and frustration and explodes in violence. But compassion retains one’s sociality by redirecting attention towards others and connecting individual suffering to a larger body of suffering. In this way, compassion is both immanent to the particular situation and person at hand while transcending that singularity to find commonality.
Merleau-Ponty takes the analysis further, offering a “flesh-ridden” world where the gestures of one person can find alignment with another and where cooperation can be wrought out of unlikely, intense encounters. Kennedy’s call for compassion works because it is a physical, visceral display of compassion. His mannerisms – how he nervously touches his hair and seems to shrink into his overcoat; his gaze; the way he fingers a piece of paper held in his hands, alternating which hand the paper is in, whether he punctuates his sentence with an open hand or with the paper in hand; and the breaks and hesitancies in his speech – suggest that this, too, is a person struggling to comprehend a nonsensical world and a violent act; that he too grieves; and that he too fears what lies ahead. His demeanor aligns with the psychological, nonverbal cueing for compassion and sadness. Compassion is usually comprehended as a kind of concerned attention, which includes “the eyebrow pulled down flat and forward over the bridge of the nose, furrowing in the center of the brow . . . eyelids not pulled in tight or raised, head and body oriented forward, bottom eyelids sometimes raised slightly, and lower face relaxed” (Goetz 2010, 358). A compassionate person leans forward into the space between one’s self and another while a sad person slumps in posture, averts one’s gaze, and withdraws physically from the situation (Goetz 2010, 360). Kennedy blends sadness and compassion – the sadness is there in the eyes and the occasional posturing – but he favors compassion: he continually offers his gaze to the crowd, he leans towards them, and he looks at them with concerned attention.

The crowd predominantly mirrors Kennedy’s work. Video footage\(^4\) shows faces that are shocked, sad, and even angry but they lean forward, towards Kennedy. Recent studies in compassion suggest that even a small act like “tapping one’s hands in synchrony with another” can stimulate feelings of compassion and increase the desire to

\(^4\) Frankiewarren YouTube: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BCrx_u3825g](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BCrx_u3825g). Obtained 19 September 2012.
help. “The compassion we feel for others is not solely a function of what befalls them: if our minds draw an association between a victim and ourselves – even a relatively trivial one – the compassion we feel for his or her suffering is amplified greatly” (DeSteno, 2012). Perception’s transversal movement, discussed in Chapter Four, reappears. Kennedy’s speech, mannerisms, and emotions move out into the perceptual field and effectively bind himself to his peers. He and the crowd’s mannerisms intermingle and together they cull a moment of intimacy, or of solidarity, that effectively halts violence’s development and brings the basic contours of the human condition into relief.

The day after King’s death, at the urging of black community leaders, Kennedy delivered a speech entitled, “On the Mindless Menace of Violence,” to Cleveland’s City Club. He returns to the idea of unifying the nation around a common project, beginning by first situating the nation in the commonality of violence. Violence bridges class, race, gender, and age because it is indiscriminate, unaccountable, and often unexpected. He then details just what is under threat: the sweetness and value found in “human beings whom other human beings have loved and needed” (Guthman and Allen 1993, 359) and the nation’s dignity because “whenever we tear at the fabric of life which another man has painfully and clumsily woven for himself and his children, the whole nation is degraded” (Guthman and Allen 1993, 360). These assassinations are not insular and the riots are not the sole concern of their locality. The fragile “e pluribus unum” is at stake because violence shifts perception and comprehension:

We learn at last, to look at our brothers as aliens, men with whom we share a city, but not a community; men bound to us in common dwelling, but not in common effort. We learn to share only a common fear, only a common desire to retreat from each other, only a common impulse to meet disagreement with force...But we can perhaps remember, if only for a time, that those who live with us are our brothers, that they share with us the same short moment of life; that they seek, as do we, nothing but the chance to live out their lives in purpose and in happiness, winning what satisfaction and fulfillment they can. (Guthman and Allen 1993, 361)
Kennedy seeks to stabilize national, even communal, unity through compassion: by recognizing the sufferings and joys that people hold in common. There is no one who does not seek happiness. And he emphasizes this shared condition by using inclusive pronouns that implicitly yoke black, white, young, old, poor, and wealthy together. More than this, he calls attention to the relationship between how we perceive a person and how we feel towards them. Fear or hatred not only mars the community but it limits the possibility that community shall ever be found.

Kennedy’s speech is a stark contrast to Lyndon Johnson, who focuses his remarks more on securing the nation. His initial remarks are very brief, mentioning sympathy for King’s family but concentrating on the violence that was beginning to rock the cities. He urges “every citizen to reject the blind violence that has struck Dr. King” and notes that, “We can achieve nothing by lawlessness and divisiveness…I hope that all Americans tonight will search their hearts as they ponder this most tragic incident” (1968a). Johnson implicitly encourages an individual to secure himself. He offers little testimony to the nature of King’s message and provides little direction for national unity outside of shunning violence. For what shall we join together and how shall we work together? For what shall we search our hearts? And, in a move that conjures Rousseau’s sterile pity, Johnson offers little more than “sympathy” to Coretta Scott King. It is Kennedy who secures transportation for King’s body; it is Kennedy who provides more phone lines in her house. Coretta Scott King, remarking on whether Kennedy’s help was political maneuvering, asserted, “[The Kennedy’s] were political figures; but, aside from that, they were human beings first, and that humanness in them reached out to the needs of other people” (Stein vanden Heuvel 1970, 257).

Johnson again addresses the nation the day after King’s death. With more time for preparation, this address is longer and includes a presidential proclamation for a day
of mourning. Yet his focus is again on securing the nation from lawlessness, which
effectually re-introduces division in the nation. Like Kennedy he employs the pronoun
“we” but then he makes incisions into the unity he is trying to re-gather. He begins by
stating that, “my heart went out to his family and to his people -- especially to the young
Americans who, I know, just sometimes wonder if they are to be denied a fullness of life
because of the color of their skin” (Johnson 1968b). The sentiment is “good” but the
language choice is less careful, reflecting (perhaps even encouraging) the black-white
divide. His heart goes to “King’s people,” then clarifies who they are by referencing “the
color of their skin.” This phrasing forecloses the possibility that the nation as a whole
lost something valuable and necessary with King. It also overlooks substantial
philosophical and leadership differences in the black community, conglomerating all
blacks into “King’s people.” And implied therein is that it is “King’s people” who
endanger their communities and the nation.

Johnson then moves into reassuring the nation of its safety. He attests “Men who
are white -- men who are black -- must and will now join together as never in the past to
let all the forces of divisiveness know that America shall not be ruled by the bullet, but
only by the ballot of free and of just men” (Johnson 1968b). Johnson switches racial
group placement, allocating white men the primary responsibility of regaining security
and providing a poorly phrased metaphor concerning the ballot. It may have been a
reference to Malcolm X’s “The Ballot or the Bullet” speech, itself a strange oversight
given the ideological differences between Malcolm X and King. And given recent history
of black disenfranchisement and struggle around voting rights, it seems more to
emphasize more that some (not all) are “free and just men.” Johnson now convenes
Congress so that he may provide the “President’s recommendations” for “constructive
action instead of destructive action.” Johnson avoids the question of national healing by
initiating a presidentially directed enterprise primarily concerned with restoring “order” in the streets. His conclusion weakly gestures towards a common project, undercutting it by, again, demarcating difference: “But together, a nation united, a nation caring, a nation concerned, and a nation that thinks more of the Nation’s interests than we do of any individual self-interest or political interest -- that nation can and shall and will overcome” (Johnson 1968b).

In fairness to Johnson, the riots were alarming and fears did need assuaging. But whereas Johnson could have utilized the occasion to honor King’s role in the nation at large, acknowledge the portions of his work still requiring national energy and attention, and unify national action under his own platform of the Great Society, he chose to focus solely on restoring an order that still ignored the poverty of condition and opportunity for numerous citizens. The places rocked by riots largely housed minority populations who did not have a friendly relationship with (white) authority and policing. The imposition of order from without and the insinuation of force by National Guardsmen could only stigmatize and segregate a population already grieving another lost community leader. Johnson’s rhetoric suggests that “e pluribus unum” can be distilled in order to maintain the security and happiness of some at the expense of others.

Yet the contrast between Johnson and Kennedy is apparent. Whereas Kennedy’s actions seek to assure the nation and redirect their energy and attention towards common projects and common sufferings that are still at hand, Johnson’s focus remains on “securing” the nation from (black) unrest and frustration. Kennedy is still at work in crafting a solidarity that brings disparate and distinct experiences together so that responsibility might be named and healing might occur.
5.4. Political Style: Re-conceiving Solidarity

The ethos Kennedy pursued complemented the one sought by King and other Civil Rights Leaders, but it was not the Loving Community in which national healing and redemption would be wrought through non-violent, loving ways. Rather Kennedy’s ethos concerned individual and national accountability for actions undertaken domestically and abroad. He focused attention on a broad, general principle – the welfare of the individual person – while speaking to it in individual terms. In the days following King’s death, Kennedy spoke in Indiana:

Our nation today is beset by apprehension and fear, anger and even hatred. It is easy to understand the springs of such passion; even as we know the highest traditions of this country forbid them. By today’s difficult issue is not whether white American will help black Americans, but whether we will help ensure the well-being of every citizen. It is not whether white and black will love one another, but whether they will love America. (Guthman and Allen 1993, 365)

Kennedy does not ask citizens to love one another, perhaps perceiving that such an emotion is both too strong and too difficult for most people; he asks that they love individuals in their anonymity and generality and that this love be tied to love of nation. Kennedy reworks patriotism, defusing it of its typical nationalist and military styling and infusing it with compassionate action that secures the *e pluribus unum*. By loving the union in the abstract, we can make decisions that uplift its individuals.

He combines compassion with moral courage⁵ and a strong sense of responsibility as a means of pursuing and achieving more “democratic” principles like equality and justice. He asserts that the United States needs a better liberalism that recognizes its limits and a better conservatism that brings principles to life for all people: “What the new politics is, in the last analysis, is a reaffirmation of the best within the great political traditions of our nation: compassion for those who suffer, determination

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⁵ Moral courage, he says, is the “one essential, vital quality of those who seek to change a world which yields most painfully to change” (Guthman and Allen 1993, 244).
to right the wrongs within our nation, and a willingness to think and to act anew, free from old concepts and false illusions” (Guthman and Allen 1993, 390). Kennedy calls his audiences to testify to and imaginatively undergo the experience of poverty and racism. This capacity, itself largely compassionate, provides the fuel and content for policy changes and community action. In this way, Kennedy endeavors to generate a compassion-based ethos that complements, indeed directs, other political norms and activities.

The ethos concentrates on ministering e pluribus unum, uniting many into one not just through characteristics or interests but also through fundamental human experiences connected to the human condition’s sufferings and joys. Being forgotten, feeling left behind, and feeling alienated became characteristics held in common, a means for crafting a “coalition of urban blacks, ethnic working-class whites, and farmers; and he fervently believed in uniting them in a recommitment to shared principles of compassion, community, and empowerment” (Guthman and Allen 1993, 372). Already Kennedy displays a different attitude to the poor and to compassion than Arendt’s revolutionaries – he does not praise the person or the principle as inherently good but frames them as vital contributors to the polity and valuable in itself. The question then became engaging people who felt economically, politically, or socially secure in a project that focused on the dispossessed. His speech writer Walinsky remarks that they determined the “involvement and commitment to the public purposes of the country” needed to be “spiritual” or “personal” (Guthman and Allen 1993, 364). Kennedy seeks to bridge the divides through a highly corporeal and rhetorical “call-and-respond” political style that physically, emotionally, or cognitively engaged people.

In this way, Kennedy takes on Montaigne’s admonition that we must lend ourselves to others. The most visible and tangible display of Kennedy’s willingness to
lend himself was the access he gave to his physical body. Kennedy would arrive at his destination, having slowly made his way through a thronging crowd, with his clothing ripped, cuff links gone, a shoe or two missing, and scratches down his hands, arms, and cheeks. The images of Kennedy in crowds are astounding: often, the platform or car on which he rests is imperceptible, so covered it is with individuals extending their limbs and transforming the space. Men would have to hold him in the open cars. Charles Quinn describes it:

The touching of Kennedy and the pulling and the pushing and the screaming and all that frenzy and turmoil and turbulence that used to surround him...had a great symbolic meaning. He was not only there, saying, ‘I’m here because I want to help you.’ But he was also there to let them him touch him so that there was a reaching out, so that they really could feel physically – not just emotionally – that here was a guy who was interested in them. He knew that that was part of it, and he knew he got a lot of publicity and attention by having all this wild hysteria swirling around him to the point of physical danger – not only to himself – but to people who were there! (Stein vanden Heuvel 1970, 295)

The crowds mobbed Kennedy both domestically and abroad. And, as Quinn notes, Kennedy was aware of its strategic function in terms of directing publicity to himself and demonstrating his popularity with the populace, an especially important function during his presidential campaign. But it also resonated with the populace by itself and he allowed interactions with individuals that few politicians did. But it generates some questions: Why this style? Was it merely spectacle or did it serve a different political purpose that spoke to a particular need in the nation?

Touch was not a “natural” mannerism for Kennedy. Despite his willingness to engage in a tactile interaction with strangers, he was not comfortable with touch. Shlesinger credited his dislike of touch to his “New England manner” (1978, 623). Joe Dolan stated that Kennedy “recoiled at being touched” (Thomas 2000, 345) and Letitia Baldridge, White House Social Secretary, described his body language as a “closed circle” when he gathered with two or three people (Thomas 2000, 189). He disliked the “backslapping and glad-handing” of politicians like Lyndon Johnson, who casually
touched people in order to create a sense of shared experiences or similarities. But he made exceptions for children, people he encountered during his tours of working class and impoverished conditions, and for his campaign.

Why he allowed some to touch him and not others, why he bristled at the distinctly political and jocular use of touch while simultaneously employing touch in his own political style, has been partly speculated without reconciling the two contrary impulses. Thomas remarks that Kennedy seemed to recognize both the political need and the political utility of being touched by the crowds. This suggests that the use of touch was deliberate with an undertone of manipulation for political purposes. But this argument forgets several difficulties in such machinations. First, even the best political handlers have a hard time creating rolling crowds nearly frenetic in their desire to be close to Kennedy, to grasp a part of Kennedy tangibly in their hands. If it were a singular occurrence, this latter explanation might seem more plausible. But it happened across time and in a variety of geo-political contexts, in Latin America, South America, and the Mississippi Delta, which suggests that something else is at play, something beyond Kennedy’s own machinations even if he chose to work with, even exploit, it. It ignores that it is Kennedy’s body and clothing that comes most frequently under attack. It forgets the role reversal that happens in the immediate interaction – Kennedy is not playing his crowds but they are, in fact, asserting themselves onto him in ways that at times is rambunctious and at times verging on violent. And it avoids the fact of spontaneity – that Kennedy often acted as he spoke – off-the-cuff, uncontained in how he followed his emotions and his intuition in responding to people and situations.

Thomas describes it elsewhere as Kennedy’s need and desire to “be touched,” asserting that he “managed to find communion in the hurly-burly” (2000, 369). Did Kennedy have a driving need to be touched because it offers a moment of attention,
however brief, to the individual? Kennedy disliked politicking and politicians and he bristled against the Senate’s politics of restraint, calculation, and time. He was ill fitted for its traditional games of cultivating networks, hierarchies based on seniority, and talking without always acting. His politics on the street was the exact opposite – he deterred from established agendas frequently, he took time with individuals he encountered, and he focused in on the particular instance or individual while keeping its general dimensions in sight. Kennedy prefers highly individuated interactions in which he can be more playful, forceful, sensitive, honest, or blunt. These encounters emphasized the humanness that politics alleges to preserve or find valuable. Achilles reaches out to Priam to lift him, literally, from a suppliant position into one of more equal standing. That gesture, like the innumerable grasps between Kennedy and his constituents, offers a tangible and human connection, out of which other political and ethical possibilities might be established. Certainly these interactions could reinforce asymmetrical positions of power or privilege but, were that the case, their replication across time, space, and people would be less likely.

Though the “mob” aspect of his campaigns would seem to negate the possibility of either generating communion or attending to the individuals, Kennedy somehow kept sight of individuals, especially those on the periphery. Clark describes Kennedy’s interactions on the presidential campaign:

As he was saying, ‘We have seventy million TV sets, but I travel to the Delta in Mississippi and I see children starving,’ he noticed a little girl being crushed against a chain-link fence. He held up his hands for quiet, then waded into the crowd and picked her up. This was one of many occasions when he would demonstrate a peripheral vision that was both real and metaphorical, enabling him to speak about people living on the peripheries of society while also noticing the angry woman, bewildered child, or wheelchair-bound man on the periphery of an audience. He noticed a woman fall and scrape her knee as his motorcade passed and invited her into his car…’Did you see their eyes?’ he asked Roger Mudd of CBS after his car had inched through crowds lining outside Detroit. ‘Did you see their faces?’ he asked after driving through Watts, and went on to describe the expressions of the children who had chased his car. (Clarke 2008, 57)
It may be that Kennedy was particularly perceptive, able to simultaneously hold individuals and the total crowd in his gaze. But it may also be that the quiet attention that compassion helps cultivate can assuage Arendt’s fears that generality will overwhelm particularity and obscure individual distinction. David Murray attributes Kennedy’s attention to his compassion, writing that this was the “word that came on strongest as he sat and listened to the children [at an orphanage] and made a quiet remark now and then...lonely little children don’t come up and put their heads on your lap unless you mean it.” (Clarke 2008, 211). Kennedy’s capacity to engage both individuals and large crowds through a corporeal politics was facilitated by his compassion.

His compassion also anchors his rhetoric and policy choices. Kennedy was not a natural public speaker. His voice was slightly high pitched; his speeches were filled with silences, “er,” and “um;” and he had a funny way of punctuating his point with his thumb, which would strike out into space as it led a closed fist. Often, he would catch his rhetorical feet by bantering with the audience before starting his speeches and campaigns. Question and answer sections displayed his ability to respond wittily, thoughtfully, sometimes emotionally, but often truthfully. He had terrific speechwriters and was himself widely and well read, able to quote the Greeks and Shakespeare or recall statistics he had read with ease. He would often deviate from the written text – taking time to recount the contours of poverty or race if he felt that his audience insufficiently comprehended either the urgency or the depravity of American anguish. And his prepared remarks, peppered with statistics, sought to intertwine pragmatic logic with compassion-based imagery in order to rouse his audiences to both witness suffering and act on it.
Most found his halting speech reassuring. It picked up on an underlying desire for blunt honesty and signaled a simple openness. Gilded tongues and polished phrases often appear as though they are hiding something – a linguistic sleight of hand suggesting that something important has been obscured or is absent. But the hesitant quality of Kennedy’s speech – the way he often thought before he spoke (though there is considerable evidence he also often did not think before he spoke) – caught the attention of Nebraskan farmers and American Indians, for instance, and gained a bit of trust. It is plausible that his speech patterns reflected something about the hesitant feeling of power and presence in the body polity. In a decade with so much upheaval it is difficult to land on a bit of easy stability. Kennedy’s own challenge in finding the “right” speech at the “right” time, especially regarding matters of substance like policy recommendations or legislation, demonstrates coherence with the times and its people.

Observers of Kennedy’s extemporaneous banter, which he maintained especially with hostile crowds, roundly praise its effectiveness as well as its honesty. Tom Wicker remarks, “Kennedy was always trying to draw the crowd in, so that you had, in a sense, an event that touched everyone. He was very successful at that. He head little exchanges back and forth with the crowds” (Stein vanden Heuvel 1970, 304-05). Kennedy did not always keep his emotions in check. Rather, he accorded his audiences a particular kind of respect – seeing them as capable of being persuaded if informed. Observing his speech at the hostile Indiana University Medical Center, Jules Witcover noted, “it was the kind of give-and-take that [Kennedy] most enjoyed, and at which he was most effective. It was also an example of his inability to keep his emotional feelings in check all the time, even when the strategy called for him to woo the conservative vote” (Guthman and Allen 1993, 343). When asked where Kennedy would get money for federally subsidized programs, he fired off, “From you…There are people in this
country who suffer.” He continued, “You are the privileged ones here. It’s easy to sit
back and say it’s the fault of the federal government, but it’s our responsibility too”
(ibi). Yet his forthrightness was not off-putting entirely. It was, admittedly, a strange
way of selling himself and his platform to voters not initially inclined to either like or
agree with his policies and person, but it often succeeded in pulling people around to his
point of view. At Purdue Kennedy gained a standing ovation from a crowd initially
displaying “hostile disinterest” (Clarke 2008, 181). “He [Kennedy] spoke from the
heart,’ Martin wrote, ‘and the sincerity and compassion wrapped around every word
reached out and pulled that audience to its feet in a roaring, whistling, cheering
standing ovation. You knew that the audience had discovered that this was not just a
politician, but a man who cared and truly believed that we could do better”” (Clarke

His speeches endeavored to shake people loose of complacency, ignorance, or
misperception by calling them to witness, feel, and act upon the suffering of their
compatriots. Campaign historian Theodore White called Kennedy furious and indignant
about the black experience (Guthman and Allen 1993, 367). In one speech, he says, “Let
us look for a moment,” at the kind of despair and lack of hope minorities feel. In a 1968
press conference, Kennedy spoke to the different interpretations of racial “progress.” He
notes that whites look at legislation, federal or judicial appointments, and poverty
programs as a form of progress, which should satisfy or at least pacify blacks, not lead
them to riot, loot, or commit crimes. But he then speaks back, responding that the black
person does not see an effect on his life – opportunities remain limited, the quality of life
remains substandard, and the Kerner Report demonstrates that things are getting worse
for the poor. He concludes, “But basically there is this [need] of generosity and
compassion to have the white people understand that the conditions are still very
difficult for black people” (Guthman and Allen 1993, 363). At University of Michigan, he asks the students to empathize with black Americans by imagining their lives, which he then goes on to provide (Clarke 2008, 146).

Depicting the experience of race and racism for predominantly white audiences required that Kennedy point out the discrepancies in quality of life and opportunity that hide under cover. In 1965 Kennedy noted, “prejudice against Negroes often masquerades as adherence to principles of individual freedom and responsibility” (Guthman and Allen 1993, 156). A year later he remarked that three hundred years of repression had “softened” to “massive indifference” (Guthman and Allen 1993, 167). He informs white Americans that political and legal institutions have different valences for the different races; that the lived experiences of some do not translate into an equal, or even similar, sensibility for others. Noting that “the law” is seen and felt differently by the two races, Kennedy explains that, “The laws do not protect them from paying too much money for inferior goods…The law does not protect them from having to keep lights turned on the feet of children at night, to keep them from being gnawed by rats. The law does not fully protect their lives – their dignity – or encourage their hope and trust for the future” (Guthman and Allen 1993, 162). The laws might stabilize life for whites, ensuring a modicum of safety while proposing an optimism for the future, but they are apathetic, if not debilitating, to the black condition. This palpable difference in effects correlates to a difference in perspective, attitude, and trust. Kennedy calls whites out on the apparent “separate but equal” philosophy that permeated the nation, saying that “if any man claims the Negro should be content or satisfied, let him say he would willingly change the color of his skin and go to live in the Negro section of a large city. Then, and only then, has he a right to such a claim” (Kennedy 1998, 35). It is unlikely that any of white audience members would be willing to make such a trade, a position
that Kennedy uses to highlight the enduring oppression and its affect on individual lives and attitudes.

These remarks reflect Kennedy’s continued growth in comprehending how racism manifests itself and how inadequate principles like equality can be in protecting “dignity,” as Kennedy puts it. Without the social, corporeal, and emotional dimensions of inter-dependent living that compassion provides political principles falter. The principles’ de jure status are not equivocal to their de facto consequences, and all too often people are willing to overlook those discrepancies unless they are perceived, in Merleau-Ponty’s fullest sense of that word. Arendt’s solidarity suffers from a similar anemia: How might a white Indiana businessman or Nebraskan farmer see himself as sharing interests with an urban, young, black male? The answer cannot rest in shared interests alone or gathering around a common principle. Rather compassion provides a critical undercurrent of prosocial behavior and attitudes. As Clark uncovers, sympathy exchanges are part of a socioemotional economy – a system for distributing valuable but perhaps intangible resources – that links the members of groups, communities, and societies together in networks of reciprocal feeling and interaction. The rules and logic of the socioemotional economy give people a conception of ‘distributive justice’ (Homans 1984, 72-78), a sense of ‘what’s fair,’ which emotions they should be getting and which they should be giving. (1997, 20)

Clark’s research shows that the content and instantiation of principles like justice are partly determined by a collective body’s affective “rules” and “logic,” and that emotions are not only resources in themselves but also means of gathering people together. As a part of this system compassion reminds us of others’ basic humanity and the ways in which their person, efforts, or situations are not valued or fulfilled.

Kennedy’s rhetorical style comports with his determination to speak on behalf of the dispossessed, the quieted, the shunned, the locked-up, and the forgotten. He told his audience, “There are millions of Americans living in hidden places, whose faces and names we never know” (Guthman and Allen 1993, 332). While he may not have known
their individual stories, he could conceive of how it might feel to live as one of those hidden Americans, those living in the outlands of the public arena and American thought. As seen above his “education” was effective in steering his sensitivity and fueling his determination. Because he believed that people similarly needed merely to understand the difficulties and debasements of impoverished life as a minority, he spent a good deal of energy depicting their plights as well as calling for increased individual and collective responsibility to the “least of us.”

Responsibility was key for Kennedy: he felt responsible to the public at large and he believed that the public had a responsibility to its members. The question and answer he posed while visiting that starving, unresponsive little girl in the Mississippi Delta – that Americans do not know the extent and depth of poverty – hung in the background of his subsequent political endeavors. Kennedy phrased his opportunity to share his experiences as a “chance to teach people something; and to tell them something that they don’t know because they don’t have the chance to get around like I do, to take them some place vicariously that they haven’t been, to show them a ghetto, or an Indian reservation” (Clarke 2008, 110). These moments brightened an experience that Kennedy found otherwise arduous. As Sylvia White reported, “it was moments like these, he said, that made a political campaign, despite all its banalities and indignities, ‘worth it’” (ibid). And because his work as Attorney General and Senator enabled Kennedy to travel domestically and abroad, he was able to visit with a variety of people representing a broad range of interests – students, miners, Marxists, government bureaucrats, laborers, unemployed men and women, and celebrities – and to communicate those perspectives to the American public.

This focus requires Kennedy to be honest: he cannot pander to his audience under the auspices of needing their vote or support. Clarke notes that “[t]elling people
the opposite of what they want to hear, and making members of a sympathetic audience ashamed of themselves, is a reckless political strategy, but one that Kennedy pursued throughout his campaign” (2008, 185). Kennedy was unafraid of inciting his audiences, of turning them against him, because he joined compassion to principles like liberty and equality in order to emphasize the role of decency. And as he emphasized,

Make no mistake: Decency is at the heart of the matter – and at the heart of this campaign. Poverty is indecent. Illiteracy is indecent...It is indecent for a man to work with his back and his hands without hope of ever seeing his son enter a university. It is indecent for a man in the streets of New York or Portland, Detroit or Watts, to surrender the only life he will ever have to despair. It is indecent for the best of our young people to be driven to terrors of drugs and violence, to allow their hearts to wither with hatred. (Guthman and Allen 1993, 348)

Kennedy’s truth telling could (and sometimes did) backfire. And while he was concerned about gaining popular support, he was unwilling to sacrifice his honesty or integrity in order to convince them.

He also asked people to take responsibility for one’s broadest actions, here defined by Kennedy as actions done in one’s name, provided a means for both healing the wounds that result and achieving “redemption.” In this way Kennedy’s prescription – compassionate action – for diagnosed social and political ills echoes Rousseau’s own. This theme was incorporated especially into his speeches about Vietnam. Individuals were responsible for actions taken in their collective name and they could remedy the negative actions by working productively at home. “At Kansas State, Kennedy had explained how Vietnam had wounded the national soul. At the University of Kansas, he told students that they could heal their country by ending the disgrace of poverty and hunger among their fellow citizens. The first speech had contained the diagnosis; the second, the remedy” (Clarke 2008, 48). He repeated this association at Notre Dame (Clarke 2008, 85). In 1967, speaking to the Senate about the Vietnam War and Johnson’s policies:
All we say and all we do must be informed by our awareness that this horror is partly our responsibility; not just a nation’s responsibility but yours and mine. It is we who live in abundance and send our young men out to die. It is our chemicals that scorch the children and our bombs that level the villages. We are all participants. To know this and feel the burden of this responsibility is not to ignore important interests, nor to forget that freedom and security must, at times, be paid for in blood. Still, even though we must know as a nation what it is necessary to do, we must also feel as men the anguish of what it is we are doing. (Guthman and Allen 1993, 294)

The sense that individuals were responsible for military actions was a refrain repeated throughout his speeches on Vietnam. Governmental officials act in “your name;” American soldiers operate in Vietnam “for you;” these are “moral problems; they’re security problems. They’re problems for all of you, for all of us as American citizens” (Clarke 2008, 86). At Ball State he asked the students to consider their responsibilities and obligations to others, affirming that it is not just governmental obligation (ibid).

Kennedy took the sense of personal responsibility seriously, blending compassion and individual empowerment into his approach to policies and community regeneration. “Asked if jobs were the solution to the despair in black neighborhoods,” writes Clarke, “he said that jobs were important, but needed to be accompanied by ‘compassion for one’s fellow human beings’” (2008, 106). Beginning with his time as Attorney General, where he became involved with work on juvenile delinquency, Kennedy develops habits of first listening and then asking questions geared towards learning what the community members need or desire. He applies this approach to community action, preferring to shift policy creation and power into the hands of the local community.

Kennedy’s work on juvenile delinquency shaped both his awareness of racism and his approach to policy work. He assigned two Justice Department deputies to work on the problem of delinquency, and they came to see that the term “delinquent” was a cover word for poverty and racial discrimination. Their investigations led them to conclude that the “orthodox welfare bureaucracies had a vested interest in regarding
delinquency as a problem distinct from poverty and race; that the poor themselves offered a basis from which to challenge the established social service agencies; that involving the poor in their own salvation through ‘community action’ would enhance their confidence and mobilize them as a constituency” (Schlesinger 1978, 412). Rather than sustaining work through uncoordinated agencies, they advised the federal government to coordinate at the local level through new structures in which “public and private agencies cooperate” (Schlesinger 1978, 411). Though Kennedy delegated, he was “eager to be involved. He interrogated the experts, visited projects, chatted with youth gangs in the streets of East Harlem, talked up the program in speeches” (Schlesinger 1978, 412).

He applied these insights as Senator for New York, advancing a legislative agenda that would bring community members together with business interests in order to generate vibrant, community centers and businesses whose operations, scopes, and locations would be largely guided by outspoken community need. A week after the Watts Riots in August 1965, Kennedy encouraged a white civic organization in Spring Valley to think more broadly about the kinds of problems that needed resolution and work that creatively met them. “The first step is to move beyond thinking about this as a ‘Negro problem’...But if our help is to be meaningful, it must be directed at them as people – not as a single class labeled Negro,” he urged, “The second broad step we must take is to bring these problems into the political process – to make them the subject of public action” (Guthman and Allen 1993, 162). Kennedy makes an important distinction that parallels Baldwin’s: the social or political “problem” cannot be resolved by seeing it as restricted to just one group. By expanding and shifting perception we can see that those affected are individuals of value who have desires and sufferings common to the human condition. Policy needs to strike a balance between understanding which groups
are most vulnerable and not segregating those groups and de-humanizing them by categorizing the problem in a certain way.

A few months later, Kennedy unveiled his ideas for job creation and urban reconstruction, aimed ultimately at reducing racial inequality. The ideas were presented in a trilogy of speeches in January 1966 and delivered on consecutive days to different audiences. Urban reconstruction “should be consciously directed at the creation of communities…neighborhoods in which physical surroundings help the residents to create the functioning community which must be our goal” (Guthman 1993, 171). Kennedy believed that residents are “a valuable resource” and “people whose work can make a significant contribution to themselves, their families, and the nation” (Guthman 1993, 171). For those skeptical about either the necessity or their responsibility, Kennedy made a final appeal in his third speech, delivered to the New York United Auto Workers, in which he asserted, “the majority could advance its quality of life by ensuring that the poorer minority had both life’s necessities and the full opportunities for success” (Guthman 1993, 174). As we saw with his rhetoric, which coupled responsibility with specific action around suffering, Kennedy ties the fate of some to the fate of all.

Kennedy matched action to rhetoric when he launched the Bedford-Stuyvesant (Bed-Sty) project in December 1966. His initial walking tour of Bed-Sty, taken shortly after the January speeches, was met with skepticism, even hostility. “‘Senator,’ one large man told him, somewhat hostilely, ‘we have been studied, examined, sympathized with, and planned for. What we need is action!’” (Guthman and Allen 1993, 186). He responded with action, securing the Congressional package of his Special Impact Program amendment to the 1966 Economic Opportunity Act, the principal poverty legislation. The federal government committed seven million dollars to Bed-Sty for two
years. Kennedy found partisan support for the initiative, which joined internal community resources, including the formation of a community board, to external business investors, which formed a secondary advisory board. When the Corporation celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary in 1992, it had constructed or renovated 2,225 units of housing, improved energy conservation for more than 4,8000 homes, secured tens of thousands of jobs for community members, created cultural and athletic opportunities, and established hundreds of other programs (Guthman and Allen 1993, 192). Some two thousand organizations are patterned on the Bedford-Sty project nationwide.

Thomas implicitly criticizes Kennedy’s politics, noting that the Bed-Sty Corporation was “his kind of organization: small, anti-bureaucratic, seemingly democratic but in fact tightly controlled, operating outside the mainstream and proud of it. Kennedy’s men saw themselves as dashing guerillas – Swamp Foxes of the war on poverty – upstaging and outperforming the clumsy redcoats – LBJ’s Great Society” (2000, 326). This might be, but the community members were not timid in expressing their opinions, even to a man as seemingly indomitable as Kennedy. Thomas Jones, a community leader and civil court judge, recounts a conversation he had with Kennedy in which Kennedy admits that he did not know how to interact with the many women who led on the community’s behalf. Kennedy told Jones, “‘They take particular delight in abusing me, in accusing me, in harassing me. I…I…don’t know what to do, but I just can’t stand it.’ And he flushed and his face turned beet red” (Heymann 1998, 423).

Kennedy’s political style was agonistic as much as it was compassionate. His campaigns held few lines of authority; staffers formed a rather motley crew of advisors who bickered with each other, contested each other’s ideas, and vied to offer the best solution to a given problem at hand. That he constructs a community organization in roughly a
similar manner speaks to his desire to see a similar venue for lively dialogue and debate, one that more equally empowered each of its members to speak and to be heard in the hope that the best idea would come to the fore, stand its ground against the most lively contentions, and gain support. Thomas’ accusation is that the white business leaders might “mastermind” the actions undertaken by black community leaders miscalculates the benefit of agon and underestimates the vocal strength and lack of timidity by the members themselves.

Kennedy’s suspicion of bureaucracy, which he believed stripped its “recipients” of meaningful agency and dignity, translated into a desire to find a more flexible political, social, and economic infrastructure that believed in and incorporated community members. He sought out ways of empowering those traditionally without power – of tying the means for self-improvement and self-mastery to initiatives that improved the community as a whole. Kennedy shares Orwin’s (1997a) disapproval of the contemporary “welfare state” but, unlike Orwin, he does not believe that removing compassion from the institution’s foundations will resolve anything. Orwin conflates altruism and compassion with each other, and with altruism comes a presumption of power: she who “gives” holds the power while she who receives holds none. Yet Kennedy demonstrates that compassion and empowerment are not contraries but complements. The institution errs not in its compassionate impulse but in its framing assumptions that structure its form and practices.

Kennedy demonstrated a flexibility and willingness to tinker with institutions in order to achieve results. Clark notes, “Because he had arrived at the issue of poverty through emotion instead of ideology, his proposals were nonideological” (2008, 80). This claim is rather astounding – Arendt, after all, fears that emotions and poverty make for a dangerous situation. Certainly the impoverished communities dealt with the fires and
mayhem that broke loose during the 1960s race riots. Kennedy was well aware of the limits of African American patience, and his comments throughout his term as Attorney General, Senator, and while campaigning for President reflect his awareness. But the emotions fueling the race riots were not the ones Arendt diagnosed: it was not pity for the poor or seeing them as somehow “naturally good,” but long-simmering rage and frustration at the continued inequalities and the continual demarcation between white and black.

Perhaps it is because Kennedy has no fear of becoming impoverished that he is able to passionately argue for non-ideological policies. This position actually dovetails with and departs from Rousseau’s sense of compassion. Rousseau believes that compassion might drown the too-sensitive person who finds herself in poverty, yet he also asserts that the rich man is unlikely to be compassionate if he himself feels that he will never be poor. Kennedy strikes a middle ground: it is unlikely that Kennedy feared being impoverished while he also yokes his privilege to responsibility. But he broadens the notion of responsible privilege beyond its noblesse oblige or paternalist forms to entwine interdependence and a sense of fortune’s variability into it. At Berkeley he cajoles the students, “By coming to this school you have been lifted onto a tiny, sunlit island while all around you lies an ocean of human misery, injustice, violence, and fear...as the years pass, you will ultimately judge yourself, on the extent to which you have used your gifts to lighten and enrich the lives of your fellow man” (Guthman and Allen 1993, 147). Given the chance of being born with certain opportunities in one’s grasp or having the wherewithal or fortune to make one’s way into those opportunities, one ought to except the responsibilities that come with it. Regret comes in doing nothing at all. He later elaborates,

We all owe our very existence to the knowledge and talent and effort of those who have gone before us. We have a solemn obligation to repay that debt in the coin in which it was given: to work to meet our responsibilities to that greater
part of mankind which needs our assistance, to the deprived and the downtrodden, the insulted and the injured. (Guthman and Allen 1993, 248).

By being born into a given, inter-corporeal and inter-subjective situation – a lifeworld replete with pre-established opportunities and objects – a person is already embedded in a network of action. Her character, her talents, and the very fact of her condition owe themselves to others, past and present. Reciprocating in kind is how one repays that fact.

Clark’s comment is also surprising because he connects emotion to non-partisanship, which is only partially true. It is not that partisanship is unemotional so much as a different form of emotion, one that can draw hard boundaries around the policies, actions, and forms of political possibility a person is willing to entertain. Kennedy is non-partisan in that he is unwilling to let convention and party loyalties circumscribe his forward movement. Moreover the emotions underlying his anti-poverty work are the same that sustain his commitment to labor rights and civil rights – compassion, courage, and a strong bent for justice. These emotions are non-partisan when they focus on nourishing what is humanly valuable. Partisanship may enter in what policies better reflect the humanly valuable but this intervention is intentional, not necessary. This is partly why Rousseau believes that a general will can be formed despite the presence of competing particular wills and why I claim that a compassionate undercurrent sustains that general will. It is also why Merleau-Ponty believes that the “humanly valuable,” which he leaves open in its incarnation, is a pivot by which to organize politically and to adjudicate which policies might benefit the nation as a whole.

Throughout this dissertation I argue that compassion is a psychological, emotional, cognitive and somatic impulse that can both orient one’s perspective and shape one’s actions. I argue that compassion has the capacity to create political spaces in which basic humanity is met and responded to without imposing structures of hierarchy. And I argue that compassion can gather (in)different people whose shared
interests are unapparent, which may in fact be antithetical to one another, so that energy and focus shifts towards securing a common project. These arguments point to compassion’s necessity in the body politic, strengthening and fine-tuning the exhibition of principles like equality and justice. In other words, compassion nourishes a solidarity that is different from interest-based affiliations and it provides both content and direction for political principles.

Kennedy constructs a distinctly compassionate political style and ethos that brought diverging interests in the nation together through his tactile interactions, his morally imaginative and compassion-based rhetoric that conjures emotional experiences and calls for increased responsibility, and his desire to bring the polity together through common projects aimed at alleviating suffering. The resulting solidarity is an embodied solidarity, one that he practically fuses through his own body. Its fragility is apparent as is its appeal.

5.5. The Dangers Involved and Implications for Politics

Kennedy’s terms as Attorney General and Senator for New York supplied an array of domestic (and international) experiences that exposed him to a variety of perspectives and depicted his readiness in seeking out perspectives radically contrary to his one of privilege. Kennedy shows growth from his initial impressions of race in the United States. Gone is the sullen man, expecting to find a slow but institutional route through law, who mistakenly equates the Irish immigration experience to the African American experience, and underestimating the power of skin color to influence and determine one’s limitations or opportunities. Kennedy appears as someone who, in the course of listening and learning, endeavors to help, if not make, others understand the indignities of poverty and racism that continue to cripple the United States and threaten its overall solidarity.
Yet using Kennedy as an example brings in a serious question about privilege, access, and possibility in advocating a political ethos established through compassionate inter-corporeality. Kennedy has opportunities and resources few have due to his family and wealth and he literally embodies established, traditional power. He is male, white, and a member of the upper class (also noted as America’s “royalty” or as having celebrity status) with an unquestioned masculinity that verges on hyper-virility. This privilege allows Kennedy to employ a highly tactile, corporeal politics both unthinkingly and without social repercussions. The question remains as to how gender, race, and class intersect with a compassionate politics that mirrors Kennedy’s. It may be that the use of a tactile politics and the vulnerability implicit in that style are too worrisome to advocate its replication. I address these concerns and then look at compassion’s implications for contemporary politics.

If compassion is an effeminizing faculty, as Orwin (1997) worries, then Kennedy’s example should alleviate such fears. Given his alleged extramarital affairs and his noted physical adventures, which included hiking fifty miles in three days on little more than a dare, swimming in a piranha-filled Amazonian lake, and the well-known family obsession with touch football, Kennedy displays a quintessential masculinity. He was vigorous with a devil-may-care attitude that seemed to taunt death. This masculinity acted as an essential foil to his sensitivity. Few voters worried that Kennedy might be too “soft” in ensuring the nation’s domestic and national security.

Kennedy is able to employ compassion successfully precisely because he is male, and his marked masculinity and toughness enabled him to breech the “double-bind” most men find themselves in – he can be powerful while also being sensitive. Kennedy’s compassion is praised because it is unexpected. Clark (1997) explains the “double bind” of gendered expectations:
People value an emotional gift differently if it comes from a man or a woman. Since people do not expect men to give open, effusive displays of sympathy, the slightest glance, the weakest gesture carries more weight than a woman’s. A man’s show of sympathy is a benefaction; a woman’s sympathy is owed, expected. Ironically, then, those who do the most sympathy work receive the least credit and may even be teased or ridiculed for being too sensitive and sentimental. (Clark 1997, 77-78)

Clark’s research shows that both genders equally feel sympathy but they display it differently given their socialization into gender rules and roles (1997, 51-77). On average men face more pressure to hide their compassion or to display it covertly, afraid of the social ramifications of being denounced as a “sissy” or as unprofessional and irrational. On the other hand, women are expected to display sympathy and their failure to do so incurs negative consequences. For women in corporate or political culture, the balance between compassionate display or its repression is delicate. Male sympathy rules dominate in traditionally male-oriented cultures. To be found competent, rational, or professional a woman needs to control her sympathy display, yet if she withholds compassion too much, then she will most likely be deemed “cold” or “unnatural” (Clark 1997, 78-79). Women in power, then, might feel too constrained by gender rules to use a similar political style as Kennedy; she will likely be found “weak” or “emotional.” The gender bias around compassion most likely augments Kennedy’s own stylings, and it questions whether Orwin’s fears about a strange androgyny are warranted.

It is also possible that Kennedy’s gender enables him to touch without worry. Female touch carries with it different connotations, most strongly dichotomized as the harlot versus the (virginal) mother. Of the two, maternalistic touch seems more comforting and politically plausible with its strong dimensions of care-taking and concern (to the point of self-abnegation), until Orwin (1997) couples it with the touchy-feely, highly tactile and physical job of a nanny in his characterization of the “welfare state” as a “Nanny state” – maternalism is more overbearing than endearing when made pervasive through a bureaucratic institution. But on an individual level – politician to
constituent and vice versa – maternal touch is typified as compassion made visible and desirable.⁶ That maternal touch might “devolve” to sexualized touch if the individual woman is attractive, sexually powerful, or “aggressive” is worrisome for women in power. Men might also see her touch as an act of sexual aggression or enticement, focusing attention on her sexuality than on her political skill, sensitivity, or leadership.⁷ Being seen as coquettish implicitly questions her integrity. A double standard again emerges, questioning whether Kennedy’s particular style of politics is gender-neutral or holds gender parity.

It is also questionable whether Kennedy’s tactile politics would translate across racial, ethnic, or cultural lines, especially insofar as touch can carry discomfort, oppression, or paternalism for the recipient. This valence is especially difficult in light of racism’s own history wherein white males (and females) felt they had the license to touch any black body as they pleased without significant legal or social repercussions. As Melane cautions in his analysis of Merleau-Ponty’s work for “victim life,” “If indeed our bodies are for us the measure of all things, then the degree to which others define our body’s measure is the degree to which we cease to be subject and become object” (2006, 140). Just how was his touch interpreted? If it was intended to be consoling, then was it always? Did it ever register anxiety, unease, or condescension in light of racism’s history and its context? If Kennedy managed to get outside of this register, how was he able?

The possibility that compassion plays a communicative role with regards to intention and trust is high, especially if we recall and apply the lessons gained from Merleau-Ponty. I argued previously that perception creates an opening, a moment of

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⁶ This stereotype forgets that maternal touch can also be harsh, violent, degrading, or apathetic.
⁷ This characterization is also heteronormative. The dimensions of touch shift radically if we consider how and when touch is or is seen as homosexual and who determines the touch as such. This dimension merits an investigation outside this dissertation.
insight, out of which compassion can emerge in order to reach beyond the immediate visage of a person to recognize that she has multiple dimensions of value. Compassion intercedes to prioritize her humanity, her very subjectivity, and to refuse harming her. If Kennedy’s touch is enlaced with compassion, it is unlikely that it would be employed to objectify the other person. And, like Achilles and Priam, it is possible that the intentions of Kennedy and his constitution would coalesce. Mazis, writing on the ethics that result from Merleau-Ponty’s work, argues that “the kinship felt within the depths of the perceptual, within the layerings of movements of the circulation of the flesh, brings us to a sense and an activity of community for which radical hate and violence towards others becomes overrun and impossible in our transformed acting from within this sensibility” (2006, 204). Of course intention secures neither interpretation nor consequence, as Arendt rightly worries, but it is likely that the energetic synchrony between two (or more) people within perception’s chiasm can aright compassion’s efforts and align their intentions and comprehensions. Insofar as compassionate touch is able to communicate a sense of equality and a sense of modesty in its reach, then it might avoid the problems of a power-laced touch.

Yet problems linger in assuming that a highly tactile politics can be used equally. It is still the case that minorities do not have the same range of touch as do white men of privilege, black men especially. Touch can also violate others and be the means through which oppression, threats, or control are established. This latter possibility remains open even if intentions are “good” – if the person being touched neither wishes it nor trusts it, then the touch will be uneasy and violating. For touch to be healing or collaborative – for it to pull together two or more people in solidarity – requires that all parties consent to its use and (implicitly) agree on its meaning.

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8 See Franz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*; James Baldwin’s *Collected Works*; and W.E.B. DuBois’ *Souls of Black Folks*, for example.
Furthermore, Kennedy’s political style contains concerns about vulnerability. Kennedy lets people into his personal boundaries while also expending tremendous energy towards them. Does it work for Kennedy because he is white, male, and privileged? That is, while Kennedy could be as much drained as energized by the crowds, his privilege meant that he was relatively protected in fundamental ways. He did not have to worry about whether his children would be harmed or whether they would have enough food; he did not worry about their education, their ability to craft their future, or their social acceptance; he did not worry about bills, whether the lights and the heat would be paid. His privilege lifted him out of a great number of concerns about physical well-being or survival; the people for whom he advocated did not share this ability. They were already physically, socially, economically, and politically vulnerable. What would it mean for others – unprivileged or already defined by and through their bodies – to have such a politics? Would it render the vulnerable more vulnerable?

There are several instances of minorities instantiating body politics and practices, especially connected with civil rights. As Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman demonstrate in “Queer Nationality,” the deliberate insertion of vulnerable bodies in public spaces is a political act. Securing safe space through visibility, presence, and engagement, which may include embodied political practices. For Berlant and Freeman the queer body becomes a “unit of self-defense,” an “agent of publicity,” that displays and resists the ways in which it has been disciplined by straight culture and socialization (1993 205). These kinds of body practices defined the civil rights movement as lunch counter sit-ins, protests, boycotts, Freedom Riders, and voter registrations made visible the indignities of racial segregation, made nationally public the violent repression of black bodies via fire hoses and dogs, and made manifest the precious humanity under
threat by centuries of white oppression. Black bodies, already exposed to white hate and caprice, resisted that susceptibility by constituting their protests in it.

The question is whether such a body politics – one in which vulnerability is transfigured into a kind of strength – can also be a compassionate politics. Either Arendt is correct in arguing that compassion is a vehicle of the powerless, i.e. a weak principle for the weak, or compassion is empowering, an ability to gather and strengthen intercorporeal “resonances” and networks in order to generate alternate public spaces and political practices. I already countered Arendt with this latter argument in chapter two and I return to it here to continue its investigation.

In chapter two I put forth the possibility that compassion was an empowering practice, enabling a person found in a traditionally “powerless” position to iterate a sense of agency and self. It can become an active practice that shifts power into the practitioner’s hands: it is the non-violent activist, for example, who determines whether and how to extend compassion. And, while it may not protect the body or the person, it can affect a situation’s dynamics. Barbara Brodsky underwent repeated beatings – encountering the same “combatant,” same place, each day for several weeks – as she non-violently protested against nuclear energy. She recalled that, at one point, “I lay there on the ground, feeling his feet against my head and ribs, and suddenly I loved him. I’m not saying there was no longer anger, but it was more just the continuing reverberations of anger in the body, taking their time to fade away. Simultaneously, there was loving spaciousness. There was no more judgment, just two people feeling fear together” (Bloom 2010, 183). What began as an exercise in compassion resulted in an energetic spaciousness, one that she qualifies as loving. Compassion shifted Brodsky’s perspective to see how anger and fear dominated both her and her assailant’s interaction. She reports that the “combatant” sensed her change, stopped his kicking,
and asked her why she repeatedly came back. The two began a conversation that enabled both parties to learn about the other’s perspective and to secure compromises. In Brodsky’s case, compassion facilitates listening to and conversation between radically different positions. Had the two met in anger or resistance, brandishing sharp words and protest signs, it is unlikely that their passions would have allowed them to see their commonalities or to initiate conversations. Compassion clears psychic, emotional, and physical space so that other productive actions and practices can begin. It helps to break cycles of behavior and response, or habits, and generates not just “suffering with” but also “suffering through” the fissures of the body.

Compassionate bodily practices does not presume that compassion will be the only operative emotion – it can be combined with anger, indignation, disappointment, and a host of other emotions. However, it is the case that compassion needs to be deliberately sought and cultivate, as Rousseau argues. Brodsky, remembering her work in racial desegregation, said that she initially lacked compassion towards prejudiced Southerners: “They were wrong and I was right; it was that simple. I had no ability to be present with their pain nor to hear them. I had no ability to be present with my own fear nor hear myself” (Bloom 2010, 123). Brodsky says that, while she learned compassion slowly and over the years, she is indebted to jail time that she shared with an older black woman. “‘Aren’t you angry too?’ I asked her. ‘Yes,’ she replied, ‘but I also love them, sweetheart, and they are so afraid’...She taught me with those simple words that anger and compassion were not mutually exclusive” (Bloom 2010, 124). Pent-up anger is isolating and socially devastating, as we saw with Achilles’ great wrath. Achilles’ wrath and heroic skill was not diminished by his compassion; rather, compassion secured his humanity in the midst of that war. It is precisely those moments that enmity is strong, passions are high, and conflict is intense that the human costs of war-like endeavors and
attitudes as well as the human values for which those battles are fought need to be kept in sight, and compassion provides this anchor.

Brodsky’s experience suggests and research confirms that compassion, if sought out, can be cultivated and strengthened. Rousseau is right. Buddhism, for instance, has several compassion-specific meditation practices that hone one’s capacity and use. Research into Buddhist meditation suggests that they shift brain function in areas associated with greater social approach tendencies, promote well-being, and encourage social connection: “These studies suggest that mindful experiences of compassionate states increase traitlike tendencies to feel compassion” (Goetz 2010, 364). Gilbert reports, “wanting to be a kind and compassionate person (i.e. to harness the care-giving mentality for self and social role co-creation) does contribute to more benevolent behaviors and values” (2005, 56). Compassion as well as associated traits like caring and kindness form a moral identity, which, when central to one’s own identity, is correlated with less hostility towards people who are different from one’s self as well as a higher likelihood to forgive (ibid). Desiring not only manifest itself over time but has personal and social benefits.

Compassion offers a different but plausible and valuable form of power, especially for people already vulnerable in the community. It also supports the establishment and growth of social and political networks. It is the case that people with less security, fewer resources and privileges, and more susceptibility to socio-economic shifts around housing and labor are also more likely to employ compassion in their daily life. Recent studies (Stellar 2012, van Kleef 2008, Piff 2012, Kraus 2010) suggest that empathy and compassion are more accurate and more active in lower-class citizens. The relative lack of income and greater vulnerability requires them to be more attentive to

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9 See Jack Kornfield’s The Art of Forgiveness, Lovingkindness, and Peace and His Holiness the Dalai Lama’s Ethics for the New Millenium, for example.
contexts, expands their attention beyond themselves, and rely on a larger interdependent network, all of which compassion facilitates and encourages. Not only are they better at perceiving subtle shifts in facial expression and body language but they are also more likely to feel and display compassion towards others. The dispossessed are more fluent in compassion. But is this fluency a weakness? Or does it a valuable instrument for gathering alternative forms of resources and support?

It would be foolhardy to cast aside a valuable and functioning resource for organizing different socio-economic networks just because it falls under the heading “compassionate,” because the lower class uses it more frequently and with greater skill, or because it is a somatic, emotional, psychological, and cognitive faculty. Rather, these characteristics strongly argue for more exploration of compassion’s role in shaping non-bureaucratic, community-oriented publics and spaces that speak to basic needs. Moreover, the fact that lower income classes have greater skill in empathy and compassion can be a critical edge over and against upper income classes. The question then becomes finding ways amplifying those social skills and social capital in order to decrease socio-economic vulnerability.

If we apply the research’s findings to the current socio-economic and political spheres, then the question of why compassion is not blatantly present in either the institutional structure or its practices becomes reconfigured. Insofar as these institutions are constructed by and reflect the perspectives, assumptions, and capacities of elites, they will be less likely to manifest compassion or encourage it as a valuable organizing principle. As Gilbert warns, “Compassion is tricky if we stay in denial of the fact that sociopolitical systems are organizing processes in their own right that can influence the most intimate aspects of our lives (our physiologies, values, goal pursuits and self-identities) and the forms of co-constructed relationships we enact with others” (2005,
Compassion will not be found if it is not included, but this exclusion is not itself an argument against its incorporation. Moreover, insofar as those institutions systematically outlaw or degrade compassionate display or skill, then those restrictions begin to permeate other forms of relating.

But there are social and material benefits to increasing compassion in the polity. “Groups/societies that value caring and the welfare of others,” suggests Gilbert, “and seek equity, have lower rates of crime and various forms of illness” (ibid). Against its critics who argue its presence in institutional form is suspect, I argue that its absence is more suspicious. Against what are we wishing to brace ourselves – the possibility of hypocrisy? More likely, it is already present and accompanying other behaviors and actions. Is it the exchange of care between people? These behaviors seem laudable in increasing social bonds, boosting morale, or providing support. Is it, as Orwin fears, that “p/maternalism” might creep in, generating domineering institutions and infantile adults? But this institutional framework is not necessary so long as creativity and adaptation focused on empowering compassionate adults drive institution-creation. Compassion mediates difference, tempers strong passions, and steers the fruition of principles like equality and justice.

Some questions about whether Kennedy’s political style could be replicated remain. It is not clear whether women and racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities would be able to deploy a highly tactile politics or display compassion so unquestionably without social and political repercussions. It is also the case that compassion might be solidified in institutional form in ways that radically weaken people’s individual and collective political power. Yet it also seems that compassion’s own plasticity, the fact that it appears and acts so variously, works in its favor. I am not arguing that Kennedy’s ethos and style be duplicated wholesale; rather, I am arguing that compassion has had an
apparent role in sustaining \textit{e pluribus unum} and directing political actions, rhetoric, and policies in valuable and compelling ways. In other words, I am arguing for compassion’s politicalness. And I believe that Kennedy offers but one example of how it can intercede and does undergird a politics that desires to open certain forms of relating and appearing between its members, a politics that privileges listening and responsibility, a politics that generates common projects, and a politics that finds its members valuable in themselves and collectively.

With the assistance of Rousseau, Merleau-Ponty, and Kennedy, I have met Arendt’s concerns as well as depicted a compassion-based politics that began repairing the \textit{e pluribus unum} of a fragmented nation. Compassion’s appearance depends on its context, its function, and the agents using it. It is a discursive phenomenon that that can sustain sociality in highly contentious times or situations and enable political principles to flourish. And its use in politics does not necessarily collapse political space, lead to an overwhelmed emotional landscape that limits the use of reason, or weakens political institutions like Arendt worries. On the contrary, as Rousseau and Kennedy communicate, compassion has the capacity of tempering strong passions, motivating action that empowers community members, and bringing diverse people together for common projects that aim at securing or maintaining what is humanly valuable. That it can exceed both Nussbaum’s and Rousseau’s rigid categories and criteria for appearing is due to its flexibility and its operation in inter-corporeality. The texture and depth that Merleau-Ponty’s sense of perception brings to compassion highlights its capacity to function emotionally, cognitively, and physically. His work also brings out its ethical and political dimensions.

It might be questioned whether compassion is applicable to contemporary politics. I believe it is. The issues that Kennedy sought to redress are still present in the
nation and their solutions are hampered by a highly antagonistic partisanship in which compromise is equated to ideological treason. The US Census Bureau reports that the poverty rate in 2010 and 2011 was 15.3% and 15.9%, respectively. Jennifer Hoschild relates that, while racial segregation appears to have decreased, urban centers remain spatially segregated on a block-by-block basis. She also dryly points out that poor blacks and poor Latinos living together (and not without poor whites, for instance) does little to promote increased racial integration: “Residential separation by income has been growing steadily over the past few decades to the point that most people are now more segregated by class than by race” (Hoschild 2012, 655-56). And Dawson points out the continued presence of racial inequality, despite protestations of a “post-racial” polity following the election of a black president:

Black poverty rates run twice that of whites, and disproportionately high unemployment—due to the economic pressures of neoliberalism as well as to long-standing patterns of racial discrimination—is a persistent cause. High levels of poverty, the concentration of blacks in segregated areas, and discriminatory loan practices magnified the mortgage crisis in black communities. Compounding economic disadvantage, the extraordinary rate of incarceration of African Americans is a disaster for the black community. African Americans also face severe health challenges, from lack of insurance to poor quality healthcare and the effects of the AIDS crisis. The health crisis is magnified by both black mass incarceration and economic deprivation. As we saw earlier, the interracial political unity that is supposed to herald a truly post-racial society also does not exist. (Dawson 2012, 671)

The problems of poverty and race still exist and still continue to coincide. The resulting differences in quality of life and equality of opportunity between classes and races create differing visions of the nation and its experiences. Dawson notes that blacks and whites still perceive the world in radically different ways. “How are we to understand deliberative discourse and rational communication when major segments of a polity’s population seemingly inhabit different lifeworlds,” he asks, “If I am on the right track, this argument suggests that the racial divide reflects cleavages so deep that the basic communicative processes of democratic societies are fundamentally undermined”
Compassion can intercede to encourage both listening and perspective-taking, particularly on the part of white Americans.

Better communication between racial groups as well as across the partisan divide is needed. Hoschild calls for an increasing need of “the capacity of some to speak for others” (2012, 651) and Dawson’s own concern suggests that translators would be helpful. Compassion, insofar as it encourages moral imagination, better listening, and a sense of accountability and responsibility, could soften strong passions and facilitate communication. Clark (1997) and Gilbert (2005) both note that community leaders can inspire and encourage a greater use of compassion. If, like Kennedy, those leaders also connect that compassion to public endeavors and political activism around justice and equality, then it is possible that others might be inspired to act accordingly. Clark notes that, “[b]ecause sympathy and morality interlink in many ways, expanding the mainstream conceptions of what constitutes valid grounds for sympathy increases the society’s fund of moral worth” (Clark 83). Our social and political expectations around compassion will necessarily circumvent its use and its possibilities unless we admit it is necessary; that it currently functions by grounding other political capacities that we appreciate like listening, caring, and taking responsibility; and that it augments other political principles like equality and justice because it shines attention on what is humanly valuable and on what is ineradicable about the human condition, its sufferings as well as its joys. Admitting these aspects not only initiates more conversations and investigations into compassion’s use but also encourages its growth. Compassion will always be limited by how we conceive it and how we speak about it.

Certainly compassion has its dangers but it has revealed itself to be more than the limitations we have given it. Berlant’s essay on the “unfinished business of sentimentality,” which lambasts compassion for promoting “individual acts of
identification based on collective group memberships” in order to “bind persons to the
nation through universalist rhetoric…of the capacity for suffering and trauma” (1998,
636), is a helpful antidote to wild and exuberant acceptance of compassion, which
threatens to overtake political caution and implement new forms of power or privilege.
Arendt’s and others’ criticisms work in the same vein. Yet these concerns effectively
function as an a priori determination of compassion’s contents, manifestations, and
trajectories. Is it the case that Kennedy binds people together through compassion-laced
and compassion-based rhetoric? Yes, but his calls are neither clichéd nor bereft of
accountability and action. Is it the case that compassion must always appear in this form
or through that manner? No, compassion exceeds these stereotypes but only provided
we pay attention to just how plural and diverse it appears in us individually and
collectively, and we apply those experiences to politics at large.

I have argued that a fuller, more complex sense of compassion – one that
comports to the actual somatic, emotional, psychological, and cognitive experience of it
– is necessary and beneficial for politics, particularly one that is strained by partisanship,
prejudice, or conflict. Compassion is a collaborative and responsive engagement with
another person that simultaneously opens and focuses perception to what is humanly
valuable, to the effective involvement of people in their communities and in common
projects, and to the inter-corporeal tissues of the human condition. Rousseau believes
that a sterile pity can and should be separated from its more productive possibilities and
that compassion can be cultivated according to temperament. Merleau-Ponty’s sense of
inter-corporeality and entwinement can foster “moments of insight” in which
compassion emerges to bridge enmity, even if temporarily. And Kennedy offers a
political style centered on a compassionate ethos, one seeking to sustain e pluribus unum.
Each of these depictions offers aspects of compassion that are not considered in the
criticisms yet which gesture towards compassion’s potential. Politics can thrive with a stronger, explicit sense of compassion because, in fact, politics finds its vitality only when antagonism, dynamism, diversity, and a commitment to political principles cultivate the compassion already undergirding it.
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Biography

Winter Eliza-Noel Brown was born in Idaho Falls, ID on 6 January 1980. In 2002 she graduated *magna cum laude* with honors in Political Science from Seattle University, receiving a Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy and Political Science each. Prior to matriculating in a doctoral program at Duke University, Winter served as an AmeriCorps*VISTA* with North Carolina Campus Compact on service-learning and volunteer service initiatives. She continued this work while at Duke, working with DukeEngage as well as the Ralph Bunche Summer Institute during summer sessions, and also taught several courses in political theory and women’s studies. She has received her MA and her PhD from Duke University. She is a member of the American Political Science Association and the Association for Political Theory.