Compassion & terror

The name of our land has been wiped out.
- Euripides, Trojan Women

Not to be a fan of the Greens or Blues at the races, or the light-armed or heavy-armed gladiators at the Circus.
- Marcus Aurelius, Meditations

The towers of Troy are burning. All that is left of the once-proud city is a group of ragged women, bound for slavery, their husbands dead in battle, their sons murdered by the conquering Greeks, their daughters raped. Hecuba, their queen invokes the king of the gods, using, remarkably, the language of democratic citizenship: "Son of Kronus, Council-President [prytanis] of Troy, father who gave us birth, do you see these undeserved sufferings that your Trojan people bear?" The Chorus answers grimly, "He sees, and yet the great city is no city. It has perished, and Troy exists no longer." Hecuba and the Chorus conclude that the gods are not worth calling on, and that the very name of their land has been wiped out.

This ending is as bleak as any in the history of tragic drama — death, rape, slavery, fire destroying the towers, the city's very name effaced from the record of history by the acts of rapacious and murderous Greeks. And yet, of course, it did not happen that way, not exactly: this story of Troy's fall is being enacted, some six hundred years after the event, by a company of Greek actors, in the Greek language of a Greek poet, in the presence of the citizens of Athens, most powerful of Greek cities. Hecuba's cry to the gods even casts Zeus as a peculiarly Athenian official — president of the city council.

So the name of Troy wasn't wiped out after all. The imagination of its con-
querors was haunted by it, transmitted it, and mourned it. Obsessively the Greek poets returned to this scene of destruction, typically inviting, as here, the audience’s compassion for the women of Troy and blame for their assailants. In its very structure the play makes a claim for the moral value of compassionate imagining, as it asks its audience to partake in the terror of a burning city, of murder and rape and slavery. Insofar as members of the audience are engaged by this drama, feeling fear and grief for the conquered city, they demonstrate the ability of compassion to cross lines of time, place, and nation – and also, in the case of many audience members, the line of sex, perhaps more difficult yet to cross.

Nor was the play a purely aesthetic event divorced from political reality. The dramatic festivals of Athens were sacred celebrations strongly connected to the idea of democratic deliberation, and the plays of Euripides were particularly well-known for their engagement with contemporary events. *The Trojan Women’s* first audience had recently voted to put to death the men of the rebellious colony of Melos and to enslave its women and children. Euripides invited this audience to contemplate the real human meaning of its actions. Compassion for the women of Troy should at least cause moral unease, reminding Athenians of the full and equal humanity of people who live in distant places, their fully human capacity for suffering.

But did those imaginations really cross those lines? Think again of that invocation of Zeus. Trojans, if they worshipped Zeus as king of gods at all, surely did not refer to him as the president of the city council; *prytanis* is strictly an Athenian legal term. So it would appear that Hecuba is not a Trojan but a Greek. And her imagination is a Greek democratic (and, we might add, mostly male) imagination. Maybe that’s a good thing, in the sense that the audience is surely invited to view her as their fellow and equal. But it still should give us pause.

Did compassion really enable those Greeks to comprehend the real humanity of others, or did it stop short, allowing them to reaffirm the essential Greekness of everything that’s human? Of course compassion required making the Trojans somehow familiar, so that Greeks could see their own vulnerability in them, and feel terror and pity, as for their own relations. But it’s easy for the familiarization to go too far: they are just us, and we are the ones who suffer humanly. Not those other ones, over there in Melos.

America’s towers, too, have burned. Compassion and terror now inform the fabric of our lives. And in those lives we see evidence of the good work of compassion, as Americans make real to themselves the sufferings of so many people whom they never would otherwise have thought about: New York firefighters, that gay rugby player who helped bring down the fourth plane, bereaved families of so many national and ethnic origins. More rarely our compassion even crosses national boundaries: the tragedy led an unprecedented number of Americans to sympathize with the plight of Afghan women under the Taliban.

Yet at the same time, we also see evidence of how narrow and self-serving our sense of compassion can sometimes be. Some of us may notice with new appreciation the lives of Arab Americans among us – but others regard the Muslims in our midst with increasing wariness and mistrust. I am reminded of a Sikh taxi driver describing how often he was told to go home to “his own country” – even though he came to the United

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States as a political refugee from the miseries of police repression in the Punjab. And while our leaders have preached the virtues of tolerance, they have also resorted to the polarizing language of ‘us’ versus ‘them,’ as they marshal popular opinion to pursue a war on terrorism.

Indeed, the events of September 11 make vivid a philosophical problem that has been debated from the time of Euripides through much of the history of the Western philosophical tradition. This is the question of what to do about compassion, given its obvious importance in shaping the civic imagination, but given, too, its obvious propensity for self-serving narrowness. Is compassion, with all its limits, our best hope as we try to educate citizens to think well about human relations both inside the nation and across national boundaries? So some thinkers have suggested. I count Euripides among them, and would also include in this category Aristotle, Rousseau, Hume, and Adam Smith. Or is compassion a threat to good political thinking and the foundations of a truly just world community? So the Greek and Roman Stoics thought, and before them Plato, and after them Spinoza and (again) Adam Smith.

The enemies of compassion hold that we cannot build a stable and lasting concern for humanity on the basis of such a slippery and uneven motive; impartial motives based on ideas of dignity and respect should take its place. The friends of compassion reply that without building political morality on what we know and on what has deep roots in our childhood attachments, we will be left with a morality that is empty of urgency—a ‘watery’ concern, as Aristotle put it.

This debate continues in contemporary political and legal thought. In a recent exchange about animal rights, J. M. Coetzee invented a character who argues that the capacity for sympathetic imagination is our best hope for moral goodness in this area. Peter Singer replies, with much plausibility, that the sympathetic imagination is all too anthropocentric and we had better not rely on it to win rights for creatures whose lives are very different from our own.¹

I shall not trace the history of the debate in this essay. Instead, I shall focus on its central philosophical ideas and try to sort them out, offering a limited defense of compassion and the tragic imagination, and then making some suggestions about how its pernicious tendencies can best be countered—with particular reference throughout to our current political situation.

2

Let me set the stage for the analysis to follow by turning to Smith, who, as you will have noticed, turns up in my taxonomy on both sides of the debate. Smith offers one of the best accounts we have of compassion, and of the ethical achievements of which this moral sentiment is capable. But later, in a section of The Theory of Moral Sentiments entitled “Of the Sense of Duty,” he solemnly warns against trusting this imperfect sentiment too far when duty is what we are trying to get clear.

Smith’s concern, like mine, is with our difficulty keeping our minds fixed on the sufferings of people who live on the other side of the world:

Let us suppose that the great empire of China, with all its myriads of inhabitants, was suddenly swallowed up by an earthquake, and let us consider how a man of humanity in Europe, who had no sort of

connexion with that part of the world, would be affected upon receiving intelligence of this dreadful calamity. He would, I imagine, first of all, express very strongly his sorrow for the misfortune of that unhappy people, he would make many melancholy reflections upon the precariousness of human life, and the vanity of all the labours of man, which could thus be annihilated in a moment. And when all this fine philosophy was over, when all these humane sentiments had been once fairly expressed, he would pursue his business or his pleasure, take his repose or his diversion, with the same ease and tranquility, as if no such accident had happened. The most frivolous disaster which could befall himself would occasion a more real disturbance. If he was to lose his little finger to-morrow, he would not sleep tonight; but, provided he never saw them, he will snore with the more profound security over the ruin of a hundred millions of his brethren, and the destruction of that immense multitude seems plainly an object less interesting to him, than this paltry misfortune of his own.

That's just the issue that should trouble us as we think about American reactions to September 11. We see a lot of 'humane sentiments' around us, and extensions of sympathy beyond people's usual sphere of concern. But more often than not, those sentiments stop short at the national boundary.

We think the events of September 11 are bad because they involved us and our nation. Not just human lives, but American lives. The world came to a standstill, in a way that it rarely has for Americans when disaster has befallen human beings in other places. The genocide in Rwanda didn't even work up enough emotion in us to prompt humanitarian intervention. The plight of innocent civilians in Iraq never made it onto our national radar screen. Floods, earthquakes, cyclones, the daily deaths of thousands from preventable malnutrition and disease - none of these makes the American world come to a standstill, none elicits a tremendous outpouring of grief and compassion. At most we get what Smith so trenchantly described: a momentary flicker of feeling, quickly dissipated by more pressing concerns close to home.

Frequently, however, we get a compassion that is not only narrow, failing to include the distant, but also polarizing, dividing the world into an 'us' and a 'them.' Compassion for our own children can so easily slip over into a desire to promote the well-being of our children at the expense of other people's children. Similarly, compassion for our fellow Americans can all too easily slip over into a desire to make America come out on top and to subordinate other nations.

One vivid example of this slip took place at a baseball game I went to at Comiskey Park, the first game played in Chicago after September 11 - and a game against the Yankees, so there was heightened awareness of the situation of New York and its people. Things began well, with a moving ceremony commemorating the firefighters who had lost their lives and honoring local firefighters who had gone to New York afterwards to help out. There was even a lot of cheering when the Yankees took the field, a highly unusual transcendence of local attachments. But as the game went on and the beer began flowing, one heard, increasing, the chant "U-S-A, U-S-A," a chant first heard in 1980 during an Olympic hockey match in which the United States defeated Russia. In that context, the chant had expressed a wish for America to humble its Cold War enemy; as time passed, it became a general way of expressing the desire to crush an...
opponent, whoever it might be. When the umpire made a bad call against the Sox, a group in the bleachers turned on him, chanting "U-S-A." From ‘humane sentiments’ we had turned back to the pain in our little finger.

With such examples before us, how can we trust compassion and the imagination of the other that it contains? But if we don’t trust that, what else can we plausibly rely on to transform horror into a shared sense of ethical responsibility?

I shall proceed as follows. First, I shall offer an analysis of the emotion of compassion, focusing on the thoughts and imaginings on which it is based. This will give us a clearer perspective on how and where it is likely to go wrong. Second, I shall examine the countertradition’s proposal that we can base political morality on respect for dignity, doing away with appeals to compassion. This proposal, at first attractive, contains, on closer inspection, some deep difficulties. Third, I will return to compassion, asking how, if we feel we need it as a public motive, we might educate it so as to overcome, as far as we can, the problem that Smith identified.

More than a warm feeling in the gut, compassion involves a set of thoughts, often quite complex. We need to dissect them, if we are to make progress in understanding how it goes wrong and how it may be steered aright. There is a good deal of agreement about this among philosophers as otherwise diverse as Aristotle and Rousseau, and also among contemporary psychologists and sociologists who have done empirical work on the emotion.

Compassion is an emotion directed at another person’s suffering or lack of well-being. It requires the thought that the other person is in a bad way, and a pretty seriously bad way. (Thus we don’t feel compassion for people’s loss of trivial items like toothbrushes and paper clips.) It contains within itself an appraisal of the seriousness of various predicaments. Let us call this the judgment of seriousness.

Notice that this assessment is made from the point of view of the person who has the emotion. It does not neglect the actual suffering of the other, which certainly should be estimated in taking the measure of the person’s predicament. And yet it does not necessarily take at face value the estimate of the predicament this person will be able to form. As Smith emphasized, we frequently have great compassion for people whose predicament is that they have lost their powers of thought; even if they seem like happy children, we regard this as a terrible catastrophe. On the other side, when people moan and groan about something, we don’t necessarily have compassion for them: for we may think that they are not really in a bad predicament. Thus when very rich people grumble about taxes, many of us don’t have the slightest compassion for them: for

3 C. Daniel Batson of the University of Kansas should be mentioned with honor here, because he has not only done remarkable empirical work, but has also combined it with a conceptual and analytic clarity that is rare in social science research of this type. See in particular The Altruism Question (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1997). Candace Clark’s sociological study is also exemplary: Misery and Company: Sympathy in Everyday Life (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

2 I am drawing on an analysis of compassion for which I argue at greater length in Nussbaum, Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), chaps. 6–8.
we judge that it is only right and proper that they should pay what they are paying – and probably a lot more than that. So the judgment of seriousness already involves quite a complex feat of imagination: it involves both trying to look out at the situation from the suffering person’s own viewpoint and then assessing the person’s own assessment. Complex though the feat is, young children easily learn it, feeling sympathy with the suffering of animals and other children, but soon learning, as well, to withhold sympathy if they judge that the person is just a crybaby, or spoiled – and, of course, to have sympathy for the predicament of an animal who is dead or unconscious, even if it is not actually suffering.

Next comes the judgment of nondeserter. Hecuba asked Zeus to witness the undeserved sufferings of the Trojan women, using the Greek word anaxia, which appears in Aristotle’s definition of tragic compassion. Hecuba’s plea, like Aristotle’s definition, implies that we will not have compassion if we believe the person fully deserves the suffering. There may be a measure of blame, but then in our compassion we typically register the thought that the suffering exceeds the measure of the fault. The Trojan women are an unusually clear case, because, more than most tragic figures, they endure the consequences of events in which they had no active part at all. But we can see that nondesert is a salient part of our compassion even when we do also blame the person: typically we feel compassion at the punishment of criminal offenders, to the extent that we think circumstances beyond their control are at least in good measure responsible for their becoming the bad people they are. People who have the idea that the poor brought their poverty upon themselves by laziness fail, for that reason, to have compassion for them.4

Next there is a thought much stressed in the tradition that I shall call the judgment of similar possibilities: Aristotle, Rousseau, and others suggest that we have compassion only insofar as we believe that the suffering person shares vulnerabilities and possibilities with us. I think we can clearly see that this judgment is not strictly necessary for the emotion, as the other two seem to be. We have compassion for nonhuman animals, without basing it on any imagined similarity – although, of course, we need somehow to make sense of their predicament as serious and bad. We also imagine that an invulnerable god can have compassion for mortals, and it doesn’t seem that this idea is conceptually confused. For the finite imaginations of human beings, however, the thought of similar possibilities is a very important psychological mechanism through which we get clear about the seriousness of another person’s plight. This thought is often accompanied by empathetic imagining, in which we put ourselves in the suffering person’s place, imagine their predicament as our own.

Finally, there is one thing more, not mentioned in the tradition, which I believe must be added in order to make the account complete. This is what, in writing on the emotions, I have called the eudaimonistic judgment, namely, a judgment that places the suffering person or persons among the important parts of the life of the person who feels the emotion. In my more general analysis of emotions, I argue that they are always eudaimonistic, meaning focused on the agent’s most important goals and proj-

4 Clark’s empirical survey of American attitudes finds this a prominent reason for the refusal of compassion for the poor.
ects. Thus we feel fear about damages that we see as significant for our own well-being and our other goals; we feel grief at the loss of someone who is already invested with a certain importance in our scheme of things. Eudaimonism is not egoism. I am not claiming that emotions always view events and people merely as means to the agent’s own satisfaction or happiness. But I do mean that the things that occasion a strong emotion in us are things that correspond to what we have invested with importance in our account to ourselves of what is worth pursuing in life.

Compassion can evidently go wrong in several different ways. It can get the judgment of non-desert wrong. sympa-thizing with people who actually don’t deserve sympathy and withholding sympathy from those who do. Even more frequently, it can get the judgment of seriousness wrong, ascribing too much importance to the wrong things or too little to things that have great weight. Notice that this problem is closely connected to obtuseness about social justice, in the sense, for example, that if we don’t think a social order unjust for denying women the vote, or subordinating African Americans, then we won’t see the predicament of women and African Americans as bad, and we won’t have compassion for them. We’ll think that things are just as they ought to be. Again, if we think it’s unjust to require rich people to pay capital gains tax, we will have a misplaced compassion toward them. Finally, and obviously, compassion can get the eudaimonistic judgment wrong, putting too few people into the circle of concern. By my account, then, we won’t have compassion without a moral achievement that is at least coeval with it.

My account, I think, is able to explain the unevenness of compassion better than other more standard accounts. Compassion begins from where we are, from the circle of our cares and concerns. It will be felt only toward those things and persons we see as important, and of course most of us most of the time ascribe importance in a very uneven and inconstant way. Empathetic imagining can sometimes extend the circle of concern. Thus Batson has shown experimentally that when the story of another person’s plight is vividly told, subjects will tend to experience compassion toward the person and form projects of helping. This is why I say that the moral achievement of extending concern to others needn’t antedate compassion, but can be coeval with it. Still, there is a recalcitrance in our emotions, given their link to our daily scheme of goals and ends. Smith is right: thinking that the poor victims of the disaster in China are important is easy to do for a short time, but hard to sustain in the fabric of our daily life; there are so many things closer to home to distract us, and these things are likely to be so much more thoroughly woven into our scheme of goals.

Let us return to September 11 armed with this analysis. The astonishing events made many Americans recognize with a new vividness the nation itself as part of their circle of concern. Most Americans rely on the safety of our institutions and our cities, and don’t really notice how much they value them until they prove vulnerable – in just the way that lovers often don’t see how much they love until their loved one is ill or threatened. So our antecedent concern emerged with a new clarity in the emotions we experienced. At the same time, we actually extended concern, in many
cases, to people in America who had not previously been part of our circle of concern at all: the New York firefighters, the victims of the disasters. We extended concern to them both because we heard their stories and also, especially, because we were encouraged to see them as a part of the America we already loved and for which we now intensely feared. When disaster struck in Rwanda, we did not similarly extend concern, or not stably, because there was no antecedent basis for it: suffering Rwandans could not be seen as part of the larger 'us' for whose fate we trembled. Vivid stories can create a temporary sense of community, but they are unlikely to sustain concern for long, if there is no pattern of interaction that would make the sense of an 'us' an ongoing part of our daily lives.

Things are of course still worse with any group that figures in our imaginations as a 'them' against the 'us.' Such groups are not only by definition non-us, they are also, by threatening the safety of the 'us,' implicitly bad, deserving of any misfortune that might strike them. This accounts for the sports-fan mentality so neatly depicted in my baseball story. Compassion for a member of the opposing team? You've got to be kidding. "U-S-A" just means kill the ump.

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In light of these difficulties, it is easy to see why much of the philosophical tradition has wanted to do away with compassion as a basis for public choice and to turn, instead, to detached moral principles whose evenhandedness can be relied on. The main candidate for a central moral notion has been the idea of human worth and dignity, a principle that has been put to work from the Stoics and Cicero on through Kant and beyond. We are to recognize that all humans have dignity, and that this dignity is both inalienable and equal, not affected by differences of class, caste, wealth, honor, status, or even sex. The recognition of human dignity is supposed to impose obligations on all moral agents, whether the humans in question are conational or foreigners. In general, it enjoins us to refrain from all aggression and fraud, since both are seen as violations of human dignity, ways of fashioning human beings into tools for one's own ends. Out of this basic idea Cicero developed much of the basis for modern international law in the areas of war, punishment, and hospitality. Other Stoics used it to criticize conventional norms of patriarchal marriage, the physical abuse of servants, and many other aspects of Roman social life.

This Stoic tradition was quite clear that respect for human dignity could move us to appropriate action, both personal and social, without our having to rely at all on the messier and more inconstant motive of compassion. Indeed, for separate reasons, which I shall get to shortly, Stoics thought compassion was never appropriate, so they could not rely on it.

What I now want to ask is whether this countertradition was correct. Respect for human dignity looks like the right thing to focus on, something that can plausibly be seen as of boundless worth, constraining all actions in pursuit of well-being, and also as equal, creating a kingdom of ends in which humans are ranked horizontally, so to speak, rather than vertically. Why should we not follow the countertradition, as in many respects we do already – as when constitutions make the notion of human dignity central to the analysis of constitutional

rights, as when international human rights documents apply similar notions.

Now it must be admitted that human dignity is not an altogether clear notion. In what does it consist? Why should we think that all human life has it? The minute the Stoic tradition tries to answer such questions, problems arise. In particular, the answer almost always takes the form of saying, Look at how far we are above the beasts. Reason, language, moral capacity—all these are seen as worthy of respect and awe at least in part because the beasts, so-called, don’t have them, because they make us better than others. Of course they wouldn’t seem to make us better if they didn’t have some attraction in themselves. But the claim that this dignity resides equally in all humanity all too often relies on the better-than-the-beasts idea. No matter how we humans vary in our rational and moral capacities, the idea seems to be, the weakest among us is light-years beyond those beasts down there, so the differences that exist among us in basic powers become not worth advertising to at all, not sources of differential worth at all. Dignity thus comes to look not like a scalar matter but like an all-or-nothing matter. You either have it, or, bestially, you don’t.

This view has its moral problems, clearly. Richard Sorabji has shown how it was linked with a tendency to denigrate the intelligence of animals; and of course it has been used, too, not only by

6 Germany is one salient example. In a forthcoming book, James Whitman describes the way this central notion has constrained legal practices in Europe generally, especially in the area of criminal punishment. Dignity, he argues, is a nonhierarchical notion that has replaced hierarchical orders of rank.


the Stoics but also by Kant and modern contractarians to deny that we have any obligations of justice toward nonhuman forms of life. Compassion, if slippery, is at least not dichotomous in this way; it is capable of reaching sympathetically into multiple directions simultaneously, capable, as Coetzee said, of imagining the sufferings of animals in the squalid conditions we create for them.

There is another more subtle problem with the dignity idea. It was crucial, according to the Stoics, to make dignity radically independent of fortune: all humans have it, no matter where they are born and how they are treated. It exerts its claim everywhere, and it can never be lost. If dignity went up or down with fortune, it would create ranks of human beings: the well-born and healthy will be worth more than the ill-born and hungry. So the Stoics understood their project of making dignity self-sufficient as essential for the notion of equal respect and regard.

But this move leads to a problem: how can we give a sufficiently important place to the goods of fortune for political purposes once we admit that the truly important thing, the thing that lies at the core of our humanity, doesn’t need the goods of fortune at all? How can we provide sufficient incentive for political planners to arrange for an adequate distribution of food and shelter and even political rights and liberties if we say that dignity is undiminished by the lack of such things? Stoic texts thus look oddly quietistic: respect human dignity, they say. But it doesn’t matter at all what

conditions we give people to live in, since dignity is complete and immutable anyway. Seneca, for example, gives masters stern instructions not to beat slaves or use them as sexual tools (Moral Epistle 47). But as for the institution of slavery itself? Well, this does not really matter so much, for the only thing that matters is the free soul within, and that cannot be touched by any contingency. Thus, having begun his letter on slavery on an apparently radical note, Seneca slides into quietism in the end, when his master scornfully says, “He is a slave,” and Seneca calmly replies, “Will this do him any harm? [Hoc illi nocebit?]”

Things are actually even worse than this. For the minute we start examining this reasoning closely, we see that it is not only quietistic — it is actually incoherent. Either people need external things or they do not. But if they do not, if dignity is utterly unaffected by rape and physical abuse, then it is not very easy, after all, to say what the harm of beating or raping a slave is. If these things are no harm to the victim, why is it wrong to do them? They seem not different from the institution of slavery itself: will they really do him any harm, if one maintains that dignity is sufficient for eudaimonia, and that dignity is totally independent of fortune? So Seneca lacks not only a basis for criticizing the institution of slavery, but also for the criticism his letter actually makes, of cruel and inhumane practices toward slaves.

Kant had a way of confronting this question, and it is a plausible one, within the confines of what I have called the countertradition. Kant grants that humanity itself, or human worth, is independent of fortune: under the blows of “step-motherly nature” goodwill still shines like a jewel for its own sake. But external goods such as money, health, and social position are still required for happiness, which we all reasonably pursue. So there are still very weighty moral reasons for promoting the happiness of others, reasons that can supply both individuals and states with a basis for good thoughts about the distribution of goods.

The Stoics notoriously deny this, holding that virtue is sufficient for eudaimonia. What I want to suggest now is that their position on human dignity pushes them strongly in this direction. Think of the person who suffers poverty and hardship. Now either this person has something that is beyond price, by comparison to which all the money and health and shelter in the world is as nothing — or she does not have something that is beyond price. Her dignity is just one part of her happiness — a piece of it that can itself be victimized and held hostage to fortune; her human dignity is being weighed in the balance with other goods and it no longer looks like the thing of surpassing, even infinite worth, that we took it to be. There are, after all, ranks and orders of human beings: slavery and abuse can actually change people’s situation with regard to their most important and inclusive end, eudaimonia itself.

Because the Stoics do not want to be forced to that conclusion, they insist that external goods are not required for eudaimonia: virtue is sufficient. And basic human dignity, in turn, is sufficient for becoming virtuous, if one applies oneself in the right way. It is for this deep reason that the Stoics reject compassion as a basic social motive, not just because it is slippery and uneven. Compassion gets the world wrong, because it is always wrong to think that a person who has been hit by misfortune is in a bad or even tragic predicament. “Behold how tragedy comes about,” writes Epic-
tetus, "when chance events befall fools." In other words, only a fool would mind the events depicted in Euripides' play, and only fools in the audience would view these events as tragic.

So there is a real problem in how, and how far, the appeal to equal human dignity motivates. Looked at superficially, the idea of respect for human dignity appears to provide a principled, even-handed motive for good treatment of all human beings, no matter where they are placed. Looked at more deeply, it seems to license quietism and indifference to things in the world, on the grounds that nothing that merely happens to people is really bad.

We have now seen two grave problems with the countertradition: what I shall call the external goods problem. Neither of these problems is easy to solve within the countertradition. By contrast, the Euripidean tradition of focusing on compassion as a basic social motive has no such problems. Compassion can and does cross the species boundary, and whatever good there may be in our current treatment of animals is likely to be its work; we are able to extend our imaginations to understand the sufferings of animals who are cruelly treated and to see that suffering as significant, as undeserved, and to see its potential termination as part of our scheme of goals and projects.

As for the problem of external goods, compassion has no such problem, for it is intrinsically focused on the damages of fortune: its most common objects, as Aristotle listed them in the Rhetoric, are the classic tragic predicaments: loss of country, loss of friends, old age, illness, and so on.

But let us suppose that the countertradition can solve these two problems, providing people with adequate motives to address the tragic predicaments. Kant makes a good start on the external goods problem, at least. So let us imagine that we have a reliable way of motivating conduct that addresses human predicaments, without the uneven partiality that so often characterizes compassion. A third problem now awaits us. I shall call it the problem of watery motivation, though we might well call it the problem of death within life.

The term ‘watery motivation’ comes from Aristotle's criticism of Plato's ideal city. Plato tried to remove partiality by removing family ties and asking all citizens to care equally for all other citizens. Aristotle says that the difficulty with this strategy is that "there are two things above all that make people love and care for something, the thought that it is all theirs, and the thought that it is the only one they have. Neither of these will be present in that city' (Pol. 1262b2-3).

Because nobody will think of a child that it is all theirs, entirely their own responsibility, the city will, he says, resemble a household in which there are too many servants so nobody takes responsibility for any task. Because nobody will think of any child or children that they are the only ones they have, the intensity of care that characterizes real families will simply not materialize, and we will have instead, he says, a 'watery' kind of care all round (Pol. 1262b15).

If we now examine the nature of Stoic motivation, I think we will see that Aristotle is very likely to be correct. I shall focus here on Marcus Aurelius, in many ways the most psychologically profound
of Stoic thinkers. Marcus tells us that the first lesson he learned from his tutor was “not to be a fan of the Greens or Blues at the races, or the light-armed or heavy-armed gladiators at the Circus” (1.5). His imagination had to unlearn its intense partiality and localism; his tutor apparently assumed that already as young children we have learned narrow sectarian types of loyalty. And it is significant, I think, that the paradigmatic negative image for the moral imagination is that of sports fandom: for in all ages, perhaps, such fandom has been a natural way for human beings to express vicariously their sectarian loyalties to family, city, and nation. It was no accident that those White Sox fans invoked the hockey chant to express their distress about the fate of the nation.

The question is whether this negative lesson leaves the personality enough resources to motivate intense concern for people anywhere. For Marcus, unlearning partiality requires an elaborate and systematic program of uprooting concern for all people and things in this world. He tells us of the meditative exercises that he regularly performs in order to get himself to the point at which the things that divide people from one another no longer matter. One side of this training looks benign and helpful: we tell ourselves that our enemies are really not enemies, but part of a common human project:

Say to yourself in the morning: I shall meet people who are interfering, ungracious, insolent, full of guile, deceitful and antisocial.... But I, ... who know that the nature of the wrongdoer is of one kin with mine — not indeed of the same blood or seed but sharing the same kind, the same portion of the divine — I cannot be harmed by any one of them, and no one can involve me in shame. I cannot feel anger against him who is of my kin, nor hate him. We were born to labor together, like the feet, the hands, the eyes, and the rows of upper and lower teeth. To work against one another is therefore contrary to nature, and to be angry against a man or turn one’s back on him is to work against him.10

Notice how close these thoughts are to the thought-content of a greatly extended sort of compassion. Passages such as these suggest that a strong kind of even-handed concern can be meted out to all human beings, without divisive jealousy and partiality; that we should see ourselves not as team players, not as family members, not as loyal citizens of a nation, but, most essentially, as members of the humankind with the advancement of our kind as our highest goal.

Now even in this good case problems are lurking: for we notice that this exercise relies on the thoughts that give rise to the animal problem and the external goods problem. We are asked to imagine human solidarity and community by thinking of a ‘portion of the divine’ that resides in all and only humans: we look like we have a lot in common because we are so sharply divided from the rest of nature. And the idea that we have a common work relies, to at least some extent, on Marcus’s prior denigration of external goods: for if we ascribed value to external goods we would be in principle competing with one another, and it would be difficult to conceive of the common enterprise without running into that competition.

But I have resolved to waive those two difficulties, so let me do so. Even then, the good example is actually very complex. For getting to the point where we can give such concern evenhandedly to all human beings requires, as Marcus


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makes abundantly clear, the systematic extirpation of intense cares and attachments directed at the local: one’s family, one’s city, the objects of one’s love and desire. Thus Marcus needs to learn not only not to be a sports fan, but also not to be a lover. Consider the following extraordinary passage:

How important it is to represent to oneself, when it comes to fancy dishes and other such foods, “This is the corpse of a fish, this other thing the corpse of a bird or a pig.” Similarly, “This Falernian wine is just some grape juice,” and “This purple vestment is some sheep’s hair moistened in the blood of some shellfish.” When it comes to sexual intercourse, we must say, “This is the rubbing together of membranes, accompanied by the spasmodic ejaculation of a sticky liquid.” How important are these representations, which reach the thing itself and penetrate right through it, so that one can see what it is in reality. (VI.13)  

Now, of course, these exercises are addressed to the problem of external goods. Here as elsewhere, Marcus is determined to unlearn the unwise attachments to externals that he has learned from his culture. This project is closely connected to the question of partiality, because learning not to be a sports fan is greatly aided by learning not to care about the things over which people typically fight. (Indeed, it is a little hard to see how a Kantian project can be stable, insofar as it teaches equal respect for human dignity while at the same time teaching intense concern for the externals that go to produce happiness, externals that strongly motivate people not to treat all human beings equally.) In the Marcus passage, however, the link to partiality seems even more direct: for learning to think of sex as just the rubbing of membranes really is learning not to find special value or delight in a particular, and this extirpation of eroticism really does seem to be required by a regime of impartiality.

But getting rid of our erotic investment, not just in bodies, but in families, nations, sports teams – all this leads us into a strange world, a world that is gentle and unaggressive, but also strangely lonely and hollow. To unlearn the habits of the sports fan we must unlearn our erotic investment in the world, our attachments to our own team, our own love, our own children, our own life.

Marcus suggests that we have two choices only: the world of real-life Rome, which resembles a large gladiatorial contest (see Seneca De ira 2.8), each person striving to outdo others in vain competition for externals, a world exploding with rage and poisoned by malice; or the world of Marcus’s gentle sympathy, in which we respect all human beings and view all as our partners in a common project whose terms don’t seem to matter very much, thus rendering the whole point of living in the world increasingly unclear.  

And this means something like a death within life. For only in a condition close to death, in effect, is moral rectitude possible. Marcus repeatedly casts life as a kind of death already, a procession of meaningless occurrences:

The vain solemnity of a procession; dramas played out on the stage; troops of


12 It is significant that this adopted emperor did not, as the movie Gladiator shows us, make a principled rational choice of the best man to run the empire. In real life, Marcus chose his worthless son Commodus, tripped up yet once more by the love of the near.
seen is that impartiality, fully and consistently cultivated, requires the extirpation of the eroticism that makes life the life we know—unfair, uneven, full of war, full of me-first nationalism and divided loyalty. So, if that ordinary erotic humanity is unjust, get rid of it. But can we live like this, once we see the goal with Marcus’s naked clarity? Isn’t justice something that must be about and for the living?

4

Let me proceed on the hypothesis that Marcus is correct: extirpating attachments to the local and the particular delivers us to a death within life. Let me also proceed on the hypothesis that we will reject this course as an unacceptable route to the goal of justice, or even as one that makes the very idea of justice a hollow fantasy. (This is Adam Smith’s conclusion as well: enamored as he is of Stoic doctrine, he thinks we must reject it when it tells us not to love our own families.) Where are we then?

It looks as if we are back where Aristotle and Adam Smith leave us: with the unreliability of compassion, and yet the need to rely on it, since we have no more perfect motive.

This does not mean that we need give up on the idea of equal human dignity, or respect for it. But insofar as we retain, as well, our local erotic attachments, our relation to that motive must always remain complex and dialectical, a difficult conversation within ourselves as we ask how much humanity requires of us, and how much we are entitled to give to our

14 One might compare the imagery of ancient Greek skepticism. Pyrrho, frightened by a dog (and thus betraying a residual human attachment to his own safety) says, “How difficult it is entirely to divest oneself of the human being.” Elsewhere he speaks of the skeptic as a eunuch, because he lacks the very source of disturbance.

13 Translation from Hadot/Chase.
own. Any such difficult conversation will require, for its success, the work of the imagination. If we don’t have exceptionless principles, if, instead, we need to negotiate our lives with a complex combination of moral reverence and erotic attachment, we need to have a keen imaginative and emotional understanding of what our choices mean for people in many different conditions, and the ability to move resourcefully back and forth from the perspective of our personal loves and cares to the perspective of the distant. Not the extirpation of compassion, then, but its extension and education. Compassion within the limits of respect.

The philosophical tradition helps us identify places where compassion goes wrong: by making errors of fault, seriousness, and the circle of concern. But the ancient tradition, not being very interested in childhood, does not help us see clearly how and why it goes especially wrong. So to begin the task of educating compassion as best we can, we need to ask how and why local loyalties and attachments come to take in some instances an especially virulent and aggressive form, militating against a more general sympathy. To answer this question we need a level of psychological understanding that was not available in the ancient Greek and Roman world, or not completely. I would suggest (and have argued elsewhere) that one problem we particularly need to watch out for is a type of pathological narcissism in which the person demands complete control over all the sources of good, and a complete self-sufficiency in consequence.

Nancy Chodorow long ago argued that this narcissism colors the development of males in many cultures in the world. Recent studies of teenage boys in America, particularly the impressive work of Dan Kindlon and Michael Thompson in their book *Raising Cain*, have given strong local support to this idea. The boys that Kindlon and Thompson study have learned from their cultures that men should be self-sufficient, controlling, dominant. They should never have, and certainly never admit to, fear and weakness. The consequence of this deformed expectation, Kindlon and Thompson show, is that these boys come to lack an understanding of their own vulnerabilities, needs, and fears – weaknesses that all human beings share. They don’t have the language to describe their own inner worlds and are by the same token clumsy interpreters of the emotions and inner lives of others. This emotional illiteracy is closely connected to aggression, as fear is turned outward, with little understanding of the implications of aggressive words and actions for others. Kindlon and Thompson’s boys become the sports fans who chant “U-S-A” at the ump, who think of all obstacles to American supremacy and self-sufficiency as opponents to be humiliated.

So the first recommendation I would make is that every school should make for a culture of respectful compassion is a Rousseauian one: it is, that an education in common human weakness and vulnerability should be a very profound part of the education of all children. Children should learn to be tragic spectators and to understand with subtlety and responsiveness the predicaments to which human life is prone. Through stories and dramas, they should learn to decode the suffering of others, and this decoding should deliberately lead them into lives both near and far, including the lives of distant humans and the lives of animals.

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As children learn to imagine the emotions of another, they should at the same time learn the many obstacles to such understanding, the many pitfalls of the self-centered imagination as it attempts to be just. Thus, one should not suppose that one can understand a family member, without confronting and continually criticizing the envy and jealousy in oneself that pose powerful obstacles to that understanding. One should not imagine that one can understand the life of a person in an ethnic or racial group different from one's own, or a sex different from one's own, or a nation, without confronting and continually criticizing the fear and greed and the demand for power that make such interactions so likely to produce misunderstanding and worse. What I am suggesting, then, is that the education of emotion, to succeed at all, needs to take place in a culture of ethical criticism, and especially self-criticism, in which ideas of equal respect for humanity will be active players in the effort to curtail the excesses of the greedy self.

At the same time, we can also see that the chances of success in this enterprise will be greater if the society in question does not overvalue external goods of the sort that cause envy and competition. The Stoics are correct when they suggest that overvaluation of external goods is a major source of destructive aggression in society. If we criticize the overvaluation of money, honor, status, and fame that Seneca saw at Rome and that we see in America now, then we may encourage people to pursue other, less problematic external goods, including love of family, of friends, of work, even, to a certain extent, of country. If people care primarily for friendship, good work, and — let's even hope — social justice, then they are less likely to see everything in terms of the hockey match and more likely to use Marcus's image of the common project. Because my vision is not a Stoic one, there will still be important sources of good to be protected from harm, and there will still be justified anger at damage to those good things. But a lot of occasions for anger in real life are not good or just, and we can do a lot as a society to prune away the greedy attachments that underpin them.

After Raising Cain, Kindlon wrote a book on rich teenagers in America. It is an alarming portrait of the greed and overvaluations of a certain class in our nation, and its tales of children who humiliate others because they don't go on the same expensive ski vacations or have the same expensive designer clothes are a chilling illustration of how overvaluation is connected to destructive violence. There is a great deal to say about how education could address such problems, but I shall not go into that here.

Instead, I want to turn back to Euripides, reflecting, in concluding, on the role of tragic spectatorship, and tragic art generally, in promoting good citizenship of the sort I have been advocating here. Tragedies are not Stoic: they start with us 'fools' and the chance events that befall us. At the same time, they tend to get their priorities straight.

Thus, the overvaluations I have just mentioned are usually not validated in tragic works of art. The great Athenian tragic dramas, for example, revolve around attachments that seem essentially reasonable: to one's children, city, loved ones, bodily integrity, health, freedom from pain, status as a free person rather than a slave, ability to speak and persuade others, the very friendship and company of others. The loss of any of

these is worthy of lamentation, and the tragic dramas encourage us to understand the depth of such loss and, with the protagonists, to fear it. In exercising compassion the audience is learning its own possibilities and vulnerabilities – what Aristotle called “things such as might happen” – and learning that people different in sex, race, age, and nation experience suffering in a way that is like our way, and that suffering is as crippling for them as it would be for us.

Such recognitions have their pitfalls, and I have identified some of them in talking about The Trojan Women. We always risk error in bringing the distant person close to us; we ignore differences of language and of cultural context, and the manifold ways in which these differences shape one’s inner world. But there are dangers in any act of imagining, and we should not let these particular dangers cause us to admit defeat prematurely, surrendering before an allegedly insuperable barrier of otherness.

When I was out in the rural areas of Rajasthan, visiting an education project for girls, I asked the Indian woman who ran the project (herself an urban woman with a Ph.D.) how she would answer the frequent complaint that a foreigner can never understand the situation of a person in another nation. She thought for a while and said finally, “I have the greatest difficulty understanding my own sister.”

There are barriers to understanding in any human relationship. As Proust said, any real person imposes on us a “dead weight” that our “sensitivity cannot remove.” The obstacles to understanding a sister may in some instances be greater than those to understanding a stranger. At least they are different. All we can do is trust our imaginations, and then criticize them (listening if possible to the critical voices of those we are trying to understand), and then trust them again. Perhaps out of this dialectic between criticism and trust something like understanding may eventually grow. At least the product will very likely be better than the obtuseness that so generally reigns in international relations.

As Euripides knew, terror has this good thing about it: it makes us sit up and take notice. Tragic dramas can’t precisely teach anything new, since they will be moving only to people who at some level already understand how bad these predicaments are. But they can awaken the sleepers by reminding them of human realities they are neglecting in their daily political lives.

The experience of terror and grief for our towers might be just that – an experience of terror and grief for our towers. One step worse, it could be a stimulus for blind rage and aggression against all the opposing hockey teams and bad umpires in the world. But if we cultivate a culture of critical compassion, such an event may, like Hecuba’s Trojan cry, possibly awaken a larger sense of the humanity of suffering, a patriotism constrained by respect for human dignity and by a vivid sense of the real losses and needs of others.

And in that case, it really would turn out that Euripides was right and Hecuba was wrong: the name of the Trojan land was not wiped out. It lives, in a work of the imagination to which we can challenge ourselves, again and again.