

# Eleos, Misericordia, and the Moral Imagination

## *Classical Compassion, Modern Empathy, and Why the Anti-Empathy Thesis Fails*

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### **Abstract**

The ancient Greeks had no word for what we now call empathy, yet their moral philosophy was saturated with sophisticated concepts of compassion, fellow-feeling, and the ethical demand to attend to suffering. This paper traces the genealogy of compassion from the Greek *eleos* and *sympatheia* through the Roman *misericordia*, *clementia*, and *humanitas*, demonstrating that classical moral thought developed a rich phenomenology of other-directed concern that operated without the modern concept of empathic projection. The paper then examines the contemporary anti-empathy movement—principally the work of Paul Bloom, Jesse Prinz, and allied cognitive scientists—which argues that empathy is cognitively biased, innumerate, and morally corrosive. While acknowledging certain valid observations within this critique, the paper argues that the anti-empathy thesis rests on a fundamental conceptual confusion: a conflation of affective empathy with cognitive empathy and compassion, a reliance on artificially narrow experimental paradigms, and a misunderstanding of how moral motivation actually operates in embodied human agents. Drawing on the classical tradition, Lacanian psychoanalysis, contemporary phenomenology, recent neuroscience, and the critical interventions of Žižek, Butler, Mouffe, and Badiou, the paper contends that the attempt to extirpate empathy from moral life is not merely impractical but philosophically incoherent, and that the classical synthesis of reason and compassionate attention remains the most defensible account of ethical responsiveness.

### **1. Introduction: A Concept Without a Name**

The English word “empathy” is, by philosophical standards, remarkably young. It entered the language only in 1909, when the psychologist Edward Titchener coined it as a translation of the German *Einfühlung*—literally “feeling into”—a term that had itself been developed in the late nineteenth century within German aesthetic theory by Robert Vischer and Theodor Lipps. The Greeks, who gave Western philosophy most of its foundational vocabulary, had no equivalent term. The Greek word *empathēia* (ἐμπάθεια)

existed, but it meant something closer to “passionate intensity” or “physical affliction”—a state of being *in* passion, not of projecting oneself into another’s experience.

This absence has sometimes been taken, erroneously, to suggest that the ancients were indifferent to the inner lives of others. Nothing could be further from the truth. The classical world developed an extraordinarily sophisticated set of concepts for what we might broadly call compassionate moral attention: *eleos* (ἔλεος, pity or compassion), *sympatheia* (συμπάθεια, fellow-feeling), *oikeiōsis* (οἰκείωσις, appropriation or affinity), and *philanthropia* (φιλανθρωπία, love of humanity). The Romans extended and transformed these concepts into *misericordia*, *clementia*, and *humanitas*. What is striking about the classical tradition is that it theorised compassion without assuming the kind of imaginative self-projection that defines modern empathy. The ancients asked not “How would I feel in your position?” but rather “What does your suffering demand of me?”

This distinction has become newly relevant in the context of a contemporary movement that might loosely be called “anti-empathy.” Spearheaded by the psychologist Paul Bloom in his influential 2016 book *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*, and supported by work from Jesse Prinz, Peter Singer, and others, this position holds that empathy—understood as the capacity to share or simulate another’s emotional states—is a poor guide to moral action. Empathy, Bloom argues, is biased, innumerate, and parochial: it makes us care more about identifiable individuals than statistical masses, more about those who resemble us than those who do not, and more about vivid suffering than systemic injustice. Better, these thinkers suggest, to rely on “rational compassion”—a cool, deliberative concern for others’ welfare uncontaminated by emotional contagion.

This paper argues that the anti-empathy thesis, while containing a kernel of legitimate insight, is fundamentally misconceived. It errs in its taxonomy of moral emotions, in its understanding of how moral motivation operates, and in its implicit model of the human moral agent. Moreover, examining the anti-empathy thesis through the lens of classical thought, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and contemporary left-wing critical philosophy reveals its limitations with particular clarity. The Greeks and Romans

developed a model of compassionate moral attention that was neither naïvely emotional nor coldly rational—a model that the anti-empathy movement, in its eagerness to discredit fellow-feeling, has failed to surpass.

## 2. Eleos and Sympatheia: The Greek Architecture of Compassion

### 2.1 Eleos in Tragedy and Philosophy

The most significant Greek term for our purposes is *eleos* (ἔλεος), variously translated as pity, mercy, or compassion. It occupied a central place in both dramatic theory and moral philosophy. In Aristotle's *Poetics*, *eleos* is one of the two emotions—alongside *phobos* (fear)—that tragedy is designed to arouse and through which it achieves *katharsis*. Aristotle's analysis of *eleos* in the *Rhetoric* (2.8) is even more philosophically instructive<sup>1</sup>. There he defines it as “a feeling of pain at an apparent evil, destructive or painful, which befalls one who does not deserve it, and which a person might expect to befall himself or one of his friends, and when it seems near.”

Several features of this definition merit attention. First, *eleos* is cognitively structured: it involves a judgement about desert (“one who does not deserve it”) and a recognition of shared vulnerability (“which a person might expect to befall himself”). It is not raw emotional contagion; it requires the perceiver to assess the sufferer's situation and to recognise a common human susceptibility to misfortune. Second, it contains a proximity condition—“when it seems near”—which Aristotle understands both temporally and relationally. We feel *eleos* more readily for those whose suffering we can imaginatively approach. Third, and crucially, *eleos* is not empathy in the modern sense. Aristotle does not ask us to simulate the sufferer's subjective experience from the inside. Rather, he asks us to recognise that the sufferer's predicament is one that could be our own—a recognition of shared fragility, not an act of imaginative projection.

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<sup>1</sup>Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 2.8 (1385b13–1386b8). The translation given here is from the Loeb edition (J. H. Freese, 1926); for a more recent and philosophically attentive rendering, see also S. Halliwell's commentaries in his work on Greek literary theory. The classic modern study of *eleos* in its full ancient context is D. Konstan, *Pity Transformed* (London: Duckworth, 2001), which traces the term's distinctively Greek career and its eventual translation into Roman *misericordia*.

This distinction is philosophically profound. Modern empathy, as theorised by thinkers from Lipps to contemporary simulation theorists, involves a kind of mental mimicry: I represent your mental states in my own cognitive system, “feeling what you feel.” Aristotelian *eleos* involves something different: a recognition of structural similarity between one’s own potential situation and another’s actual situation, mediated by a judgement about justice and desert. It is, in Martha Nussbaum’s useful phrase, a “eudaimonistic judgement”—a recognition that the other’s suffering matters because it touches upon elements that are important in any human life.

The role of *eleos* in Greek tragedy is equally revealing. When Sophocles’ chorus in *Oedipus at Colonus* expresses pity for the broken, exiled king, or when the audience of Euripides’ *Trojan Women* confronts the systematic degradation of Hecuba and her daughters, the dramatic mechanism is not empathic identification in the modern sense. The audience does not “become” Oedipus or Hecuba. Rather, the tragic form invites recognition of the universal vulnerability that links the audience to the characters: the awareness that fortune is unstable, that the powerful may fall, and that suffering may visit the undeserving. This is compassion grounded in ontological humility, not in psychological simulation.

## 2.2 Stoic Sympatheia and Oikeiōsis

The Stoics developed a different but complementary framework. Their concept of *sympatheia* (συμπάθεια) originally denoted a cosmological principle: the interconnectedness of all parts of the universe through the pervasive rational principle (*logos*) that structures reality. Marcus Aurelius writes in the *Meditations* (6.38): “Frequently consider the connection of all things in the universe. We should not say ‘I am an Athenian’ or ‘I am a Roman,’ but ‘I am a citizen of the universe.’”<sup>2</sup> This cosmic sympathy

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<sup>2</sup>Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 6.38 (translation modified slightly from G. Hays, 2002). For the broader Stoic doctrine of *sympatheia* in its cosmological and ethical registers, see A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (Cambridge, 1987), vol. 1, §54; and B. Inwood, *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985). The cosmic and the moral senses of *sympatheia* are sometimes treated as if they were simply the same concept; they are not, though they are clearly related, and the slippage between them is part of what gives Stoic ethics its distinctive shape.

had direct ethical implications: if all rational beings participate in a common logos, then each has a natural concern for the others that flows from the structure of reality itself.

The related Stoic concept of *oikeiōsis* (οἰκείωσις)—variously translated as appropriation, affinity, or endearment—provides the developmental mechanism through which this cosmic concern becomes personal. Hierocles, the second-century Stoic, articulated the famous image of concentric circles of concern: the self at the centre, then family, then extended kin, then fellow citizens, then all humanity. The ethical task, he argued, is to “draw the circles somehow towards the centre,” progressively extending the sense of affinity that we naturally feel for those closest to us until it encompasses all rational beings<sup>3</sup>.

What is notable about this model is its combination of natural sentiment and rational cultivation. *Oikeiōsis* begins with instinct—the natural self-concern of every living creature and the immediate attachment of parent to offspring—but it reaches its ethical fulfilment only through deliberate rational expansion. The Stoics did not ask us to feel what others feel; they asked us to recognise that others are *oikeioi*—“one’s own,” belonging to the same rational community. This is a form of moral attention that is neither purely cognitive nor purely affective, but a structured disposition that integrates recognition, concern, and rational judgement.

It is important, however, to note the Stoic ambivalence about *eleos* itself. Orthodox Stoicism classified pity as a *pathos*—a passion, and therefore a cognitive error involving a false judgement about what is truly good or evil. Seneca, in *De Clementia*, explicitly distinguishes *miser cordia* (pity), which he condemns as a weakness, from *clementia* (clemency), which he praises as a rational virtue. The wise person, Seneca argues, will act to relieve suffering—but from rational principle, not from emotional disturbance. This Stoic position anticipates, in striking ways, certain features of the modern anti-

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<sup>3</sup>Hierocles, *Elements of Ethics*, preserved principally in Stobaeus, *Eclogae* 4.671–3 (Hense). The fullest accessible translation and commentary is in A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, vol. 1, §57G; for philosophical discussion see J. Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), ch. 12. The image of the concentric circles, though often quoted, is in fact a brief passage; its disproportionate later influence reflects how clearly it captures something central to the Stoic ethical project.

empathy argument. But as we shall see, it also exposes that argument's deepest difficulties.

## **2.3 Plato and the Spirited Part of the Soul**

Plato's contribution to this tradition is often underestimated. In the *Republic*, the tripartite division of the soul assigns to the *thymos* (θυμός)—the spirited element—a role that is neither purely rational nor purely appetitive. The *thymos* is the seat of indignation, shame, and moral anger; it is the part of the soul that responds with outrage to injustice and with concern to the suffering of those within its circle of care. Properly trained and directed by reason, *thymos* becomes the ally of justice. Untrained, it becomes cruelty or sentimentality.

This Platonic insight—that moral responsiveness requires the cultivation of an emotional capacity that is neither reducible to reason nor opposed to it—provides a framework that neither the pro-empathy nor the anti-empathy camps have adequately acknowledged. The question is not whether we should feel or think in response to suffering, but how feeling and thinking can be integrated in a well-ordered moral agent.

## **3. Misericordia, Clementia, Humanitas: The Roman Transformation**

### **3.1 Cicero and the Duties of Shared Humanity**

The Roman reception of Greek compassion ethics produced a distinctive synthesis. Cicero, who more than anyone else shaped the Latin moral vocabulary, developed the concept of *humanitas* into a comprehensive ethical ideal. In *De Officiis*, he argues that nature has implanted in human beings a fundamental sociability (*societas*) that generates obligations of justice and beneficence toward all other members of the human species. His famous formulation—“*Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto*” (I am a human being; I consider nothing human foreign to me)—is in fact a quotation from

Terence's comedy *Heautontimorumenos*, but Cicero elevates it into a philosophical principle<sup>4</sup>.

Cicero's *humanitas* is not sentimentality. It is a structured moral disposition that combines cultural refinement, intellectual curiosity, and practical concern for others' welfare. It involves the recognition that shared rationality and shared vulnerability create genuine moral bonds between all human beings—bonds that generate specific duties of justice, honesty, and mutual aid. In the *Tusculan Disputations*, Cicero wrestles with the Stoic condemnation of *miser cordia*, partially accepting the argument that pity can be excessive while insisting that a total absence of fellow-feeling would be inhuman—literally contrary to *humanitas*. His position represents a practical Roman compromise between Stoic rigour and the demands of social and political life.

### 3.2 Seneca: The Paradox of Stoic Compassion

Seneca's treatment of compassion is the most philosophically complex in the Roman tradition and, for our purposes, the most instructive. In *De Clementia*, addressed to the young Emperor Nero, Seneca draws a sharp distinction between *miser cordia* and *clementia*. *Miser cordia*, he argues, is a defect—a sickness of the soul (*vitium animi*) in which the agent is passively overwhelmed by another's suffering. *Clementia*, by contrast, is a rational virtue: the disposition to moderate punishment and to treat others with appropriate mildness, exercised from strength and guided by judgement, not wrung from the agent by emotional contagion.

Seneca's distinction anticipates, with remarkable precision, the central move of the modern anti-empathy argument. Paul Bloom's distinction between "empathy" (emotional sharing, which he condemns) and "rational compassion" (cool concern for others' welfare, which he endorses) maps almost exactly onto Seneca's distinction between *miser cordia* and *clementia*. But Seneca's own text reveals the difficulty of

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<sup>4</sup>The line is from Terence, *Heautontimorumenos* 77. Cicero discusses it (and the broader concept of *humanitas* it grounds) most fully in *De Officiis* 1.50–59, where the duties of justice and beneficence are derived from the recognition of shared humanity. The classic later discussion is Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* 13.17, where Gellius distinguishes *humanitas* in its full philosophical sense from its debased everyday use as mere cultural polish—a passage I return to below in §3.3.

maintaining this sharp dichotomy. In *De Clementia* 2.6, he writes that the wise person, while not experiencing *misericordia* as a passion, will nonetheless “give the appearance” of pity and will act “as if” moved by compassion. The wise person’s face will become sad, their voice will soften, and they will weep with those who weep—not from emotional weakness, but because reason directs these responses as appropriate to the situation.

This remarkable passage reveals the internal tension in any attempt to sever compassionate action from compassionate feeling. If the wise person acts exactly as a compassionate person would act, displays exactly the same affective responses, and is moved by exactly the same situations—but allegedly from “reason” rather than “emotion”—then the distinction begins to look more verbal than substantive. As Martha Nussbaum has argued, the Stoic sage who weeps at suffering while insisting that this weeping is “rational” rather than “emotional” is performing a philosophical sleight of hand that conceals rather than resolves the relationship between cognition and affect in moral life.

### **3.3 Humanitas as Moral Practice**

Beyond these philosophical debates, the Roman concept of *humanitas* as a practical virtue deserves attention. In its fullest sense, *humanitas* combined three dimensions: cultural education (*paideia*), moral sensitivity to others’ suffering and dignity, and practical beneficence. Aulus Gellius, in the *Noctes Atticae* (13.17), insists on distinguishing the true meaning of *humanitas*—which he glosses as the Greek *philanthropia*, “a kind of friendly spirit and good feeling towards all people without distinction”—from its debased popular usage as mere cultural polish. The ideal of *humanitas* thus encoded an assumption that moral sensitivity and intellectual cultivation are not merely compatible but mutually reinforcing: that to become more fully human is simultaneously to become more responsive to the humanity of others.

## **4. The Anti-Empathy Thesis: Anatomy of an Argument**

### **4.1 Bloom’s Case Against Empathy**



Paul Bloom's *Against Empathy* (2016) has become the locus classicus of the anti-empathy position, and its arguments deserve careful reconstruction. Bloom distinguishes between "empathy"—which he defines narrowly as the act of experiencing what one takes another person to be experiencing, a kind of emotional mirroring or vicarious affect—and "compassion" or "concern," which he understands as caring about another's welfare without necessarily sharing their emotional state. His case against empathy proceeds through several claims.

First, empathy is biased. Experimental evidence demonstrates that we empathise more readily with those who are similar to us—in race, gender, age, and social group—and that empathic responses track physical attractiveness and perceived similarity. Second, empathy is innumerate: it responds to identifiable individuals but fails to scale to large numbers. Bloom invokes the well-documented "identifiable victim effect" and Stalin's apocryphal remark that a single death is a tragedy while a million deaths are a statistic. Third, empathy is exhausting and leads to burnout. Fourth, empathy can motivate aggression: feeling another's pain can generate not helping behaviour but retaliatory anger against the perceived cause of that pain. Fifth, and most fundamentally, Bloom argues that empathy functions as a "spotlight" that illuminates specific targets while leaving everything else in darkness, making it structurally unsuited to the impartial concern that morality requires.

#### **4.2 Allied Critiques: Prinz, Singer, and the Rationalist Turn**

Bloom's position is bolstered by complementary arguments from other quarters. Jesse Prinz has argued that empathy is neither necessary nor sufficient for moral judgement, citing evidence from psychopathy research (psychopaths can identify others' emotions without being moved by them) and from cases where empathic engagement leads to morally questionable outcomes (such as lenient treatment of attractive defendants). Peter Singer's long-standing argument for effective altruism—the view that charitable giving should be directed by cost-effectiveness calculations rather than emotional resonance—provides a practical framework for the anti-empathy position. If a dollar can save more lives when directed to deworming programmes in sub-Saharan Africa than to

a photogenic child with a rare disease in one's own community, then empathy (which would draw us toward the latter) is actively harmful.

More recently, critics have extended these arguments into the domain of politics, arguing that empathy-driven policy leads to emotional manipulation, moral panic, and poorly designed interventions. On this view, the morally mature response to suffering is not to feel it but to analyse it—to deploy reason, data, and impartial cost-benefit analysis in the service of maximally effective amelioration.

## **5. Why the Anti-Empathy Thesis Fails**

### **5.1 The Taxonomic Confusion**

The most fundamental problem with the anti-empathy thesis is that it attacks a concept it has itself constructed—a straw empathy, as it were. Bloom's definition of empathy as the vicarious experience of another's emotional states isolates one component of what is in reality a multidimensional psychological capacity. Contemporary affective science, drawing on the work of Jean Decety, Tania Singer, and others, routinely distinguishes at least three phenomena that have been grouped under the empathy umbrella.

*Affective empathy* (or emotional contagion) is the automatic, often involuntary, mirroring of another's emotional state—catching someone's distress, as it were. *Cognitive empathy* (or perspective-taking) is the capacity to understand another's mental states without necessarily sharing them—what philosophers call “theory of mind.” *Empathic concern* (or compassion) is the motivational state of caring about another's welfare, which may be triggered by either affective or cognitive empathy but is distinct from both.

Bloom's critique targets primarily affective empathy—the first of these three components—while his recommended alternative, “rational compassion,” corresponds closely to empathic concern stripped of its affective origins. But this manoeuvre is problematic for several reasons. It presupposes that affective empathy, cognitive empathy, and empathic concern are cleanly separable in actual psychological processing—a claim that the neuroscientific evidence does not support. Tania Singer and Olga Klimecki's neuroimaging work has shown that while compassion and empathic

distress activate partially distinct neural networks (compassion engages ventral striatum and medial orbitofrontal cortex; empathic distress engages anterior insula and anterior midcingulate cortex), these networks are functionally interconnected and typically co-activate in real-world moral perception<sup>5</sup>. The idea that one can simply train up compassion while training down affective empathy—as Bloom sometimes seems to suggest—oversimplifies the actual architecture of moral cognition.

## 5.2 The Motivational Gap

The second problem is motivational. Even if we grant, for the sake of argument, that purely rational compassion would produce better moral outcomes than empathically driven action, we must ask: what motivates the rational compassion? The anti-empathy theorists tend to treat moral motivation as unproblematic—as if, once reason identifies the right course of action, the agent will simply execute it. But this is precisely the assumption that the entire history of moral philosophy, from Plato's discussion of *akrasia* to contemporary work on the intention-action gap, has shown to be false.

David Hume's dictum that "reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions" states the point too strongly, but it captures a genuine difficulty. Moral knowledge without moral motivation is ethically inert. The effective altruist who calculates that deworming programmes save more quality-adjusted life-years per dollar than guide dogs for the blind has performed a useful piece of moral arithmetic. But what moves them to perform this calculation in the first place? What sustains their commitment to act on its results over months and years, in the face of competing demands, fatigue, and the persistent pull of self-interest? The anti-empathy theorists owe us an account of moral motivation that does not, at some level, rely on the capacity to be affectively moved by the suffering of others—and they have not provided one.

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<sup>5</sup>T. Singer and O. Klimecki, "Empathy and Compassion," *Current Biology* 24, no. 18 (2014): R875–R878; cf. their earlier methodologically rigorous study, O. Klimecki and T. Singer, "Empathic Distress Fatigue Rather Than Compassion Fatigue?" in B. Oakley et al., eds., *Pathological Altruism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). The neuroimaging findings reported in these papers do not, contra a frequent popularising misreading, support the cleanly compartmentalised picture of compassion-vs-empathy that the anti-empathy thesis requires; what they show is that the two systems are partially distinct but heavily interconnected, and that interventions which differentially modulate one tend to affect the other.

The classical tradition understood this point well. Aristotle's account of virtue as a disposition (*hexis*) involving both correct judgement and appropriate feeling—his insistence that the virtuous person must not only do the right thing but do it with the right emotional orientation—reflects a deep insight about the psychology of moral agency. A person who gives to charity from pure rational calculation, feeling nothing for the recipients, is not, on Aristotle's account, acting virtuously—they are merely performing a virtuous action. The disposition that makes one a generous person, rather than merely a person who occasionally gives, requires the integration of reason and affect.

### **5.3 The Epistemological Function of Empathy**

The anti-empathy thesis also fails to reckon with empathy's epistemological role. Empathic engagement—including its affective dimension—serves not merely as a motivator of moral action but as a source of moral knowledge. When we empathise with another's suffering, we do not merely mirror their distress; we gain information about their situation, their needs, and the moral significance of what is happening to them that would be unavailable to a purely detached observer.

Iris Murdoch made this point with characteristic precision in *The Sovereignty of Good*: moral progress consists not primarily in choosing differently but in *seeing* differently—in the patient, loving attention to reality that reveals what is actually there. Empathy is part of the perceptual apparatus through which this moral seeing occurs. To extirpate it in the name of rational efficiency is to systematically impoverish the moral agent's epistemic resources.

### **5.4 The Bias Objection Reconsidered**

Bloom's most powerful argument—that empathy is biased—deserves more careful treatment than it typically receives from empathy's defenders. The evidence that empathic responses track similarity, attractiveness, and proximity is robust and important. But the conclusion Bloom draws—that empathy should therefore be abandoned as a moral guide—does not follow. Every cognitive capacity that human beings possess is subject to bias. Reason is biased by motivated reasoning, confirmation

bias, and the Dunning-Kruger effect. Perception is biased by prior expectations, attentional focus, and perceptual set. Memory is biased by reconstruction, suggestion, and emotional valence. In no case do we conclude that reason, perception, and memory should be abandoned; we conclude instead that they should be corrected, calibrated, and supplemented.

The same principle applies to empathy. The fact that empathic responses are parochially biased is an argument for cultivating wider empathy—for deliberately extending empathic attention to those who are dissimilar, distant, and unfamiliar—not for abandoning empathy altogether. This is precisely what the Stoic doctrine of *oikeiōsis* recommends: the progressive expansion of the circle of concern from those nearest to all rational beings. The Stoics understood that natural affective responses require rational cultivation, not rational replacement.

Moreover, the rationalist alternative that Bloom proposes is itself subject to distinctive biases that he does not adequately acknowledge. “Rational compassion” directed by cost-benefit analysis is biased toward what can be measured and quantified, toward outcomes that fit neatly into utilitarian calculus, and toward interventions whose effects can be expressed in dollars per quality-adjusted life-year. It is systematically biased against goods that resist quantification—dignity, solidarity, the particular value of personal attention and care—and against forms of suffering whose moral significance lies precisely in their qualitative, experiential dimension. An exclusive reliance on rational compassion would constitute not an escape from bias but a different and arguably more dangerous set of biases: the illusion of objectivity masking a systematic devaluation of everything that cannot be counted.

## **5.5 The Phenomenological Objection: Against Disembodied Morality**

Finally, the anti-empathy thesis rests on an implausible model of the moral agent. It presupposes what we might call a “disembodied” conception of moral cognition: the idea that the moral agent can effectively separate their cognitive and affective responses, retaining the former while suppressing the latter. But this picture is at odds with virtually everything we know about how human beings actually process moral information.

Antonio Damasio's somatic marker hypothesis, developed through decades of research on patients with ventromedial prefrontal cortex damage, demonstrates that effective moral reasoning depends constitutively on affective signals<sup>6</sup>. Patients who lose the capacity for emotional engagement do not become more rational moral agents; they become worse ones, unable to learn from experience, unable to weigh competing considerations effectively, and unable to sustain the commitments that moral life requires. The lesson of this research is not that emotion is a useful supplement to reason; it is that moral reasoning is an inherently affective-cognitive process, and that the attempt to separate its components is not a refinement but a mutilation.

## 6. The Lacanian Supplement: Imaginary Empathy, Symbolic Reason, and the Real of Suffering

Lacanian psychoanalysis offers a distinctive intervention in the empathy debate—one that initially appears to strengthen the anti-empathy case but ultimately undermines the rationalist alternative with equal force. Lacan was famously hostile to empathy in the clinical setting, warning analysts against the seduction of *compréhension*—the illusion that one can grasp the analysand's experience from the inside. But his reasons for this hostility are radically different from Bloom's, and they point toward a far more searching critique of the entire empathy–reason dichotomy.

### 6.1 Empathy as Imaginary Capture

For Lacan, what Bloom calls “affective empathy”—emotional mirroring, feeling what the other feels—operates in the register of the *Imaginary*. It is a product of the mirror stage logic: I see my own image in the suffering other, I identify with them narcissistically, and what I take to be compassion is actually a circuit of self-relation. When I “feel your pain,” I am, in Lacanian terms, encountering not *you* but *my own ego projected onto you*. The

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<sup>6</sup>A. R. Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Putnam, 1994), esp. chs. 8–10 on the case of Elliot and the wider implications of ventromedial prefrontal cortex damage. The hypothesis is developed and refined in *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999) and *Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain* (New York: Pantheon, 2010). The philosophical implications are most directly drawn out in the later book, where Damasio argues explicitly against the dualistic picture his neuroscience refutes.

ancient Greeks' lack of a concept of empathic projection may reflect, from this angle, a genuine philosophical advantage: Aristotelian *eleos* does not require me to simulate your interiority—it requires me to recognise a structural fact about human vulnerability. It operates closer to the *Symbolic* register: a culturally and rationally mediated judgement about shared finitude, not an imaginary fusion of egos.

So far, Lacan appears to strengthen the anti-empathy case. But here is where the analysis becomes more revealing.

## **6.2 Rational Compassion as Fantasy of Mastery**

Bloom's proposed alternative—"rational compassion," cool cost-benefit analysis, quality-adjusted life-years per dollar—is, in Lacanian terms, not an escape from the Imaginary but a flight into a different fantasy: the fantasy of the *subject supposed to know* (*sujet supposé savoir*). The rational moral calculator who has transcended emotional bias occupies a position of imagined mastery—a fantasy of complete Symbolic capture of suffering, where everything that matters about the other's pain can be translated into quantifiable units and processed algorithmically. Lacan would see this as a defence mechanism, specifically a defence against the *Real* of suffering—that dimension of the other's experience which resists symbolisation, which cannot be captured by either empathic simulation *or* rational calculus.

Bloom's rationalism does not overcome the problem of narcissism; it displaces it from emotional identification to intellectual mastery. The moral agent who says "I don't need to feel your suffering, I can calculate the optimal response" is, from a Lacanian perspective, performing precisely the kind of disavowal (*Verleugnung*) that keeps the subject safely insulated from genuine ethical encounter. The pretension to occupy a view from nowhere—to assess suffering without being marked by it—is the quintessential Imaginary fantasy dressed in Symbolic clothing.

## **6.3 Das Ding and the Ethics of the Real**

This is where Lacan's framework becomes genuinely productive for the paper's argument. In Seminar VII (*The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*), Lacan develops an ethics centred not on empathic identification or rational calculation but on the confrontation with *das*

*Ding*—the Thing, the irreducible kernel of the Real that inhabits the heart of the other's experience and that no symbolic or imaginary operation can fully domesticate. True ethical engagement, on this account, requires tolerating an encounter with what *cannot* be understood, what *cannot* be felt vicariously, what *cannot* be optimised away. It requires what Lacan calls not ceding on one's desire (*ne pas céder sur son désir*)—maintaining one's position in relation to the Real rather than retreating into the comforting closures of either emotional fusion or rational mastery<sup>7</sup>.

This maps powerfully onto the classical material. Aristotle's *eleos* contains a proximity condition—"when it seems near"—that Lacan would read as the moment when the Real of the other's suffering breaches the subject's defences and forces a response that is neither pure feeling nor pure thought but something more fundamental: an acknowledgement that the other's suffering exceeds my capacity to process it, and that this excess is precisely what generates the ethical demand. The Senecan paradox of the weeping sage becomes, in Lacanian terms, the impossibility of fully symbolising one's own ethical responsiveness—the sage *must* weep because the Real insists, even as the Symbolic framework insists the weeping is "rational."

#### **6.4 The Discourse of the Other and the Opacity of Suffering**

Lacan's insistence that the unconscious is structured as the discourse of the Other adds a dimension that neither Bloom nor the classical thinkers fully articulate: our relation to the suffering other is never transparent. Neither empathic simulation ("I feel what you feel") nor rational assessment ("I know what you need") can claim full access to the other's experience, because the other is constituted by the same opacity, the same unconscious, that constitutes us. The ethical demand is therefore not to *understand* the other (Imaginary) or to *calculate* for the other (Symbolic) but to *remain open to* the other as irreducibly other—as a subject whose desire exceeds our comprehension. This is

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<sup>7</sup>J. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*, trans. D. Porter (New York: Norton, 1992), esp. sessions 4–7 (on *das Ding*) and the closing sessions on "not ceding on one's desire." The reading of Seminar VII offered here is closer to S. Žižek's appropriations of it (*The Sublime Object of Ideology*, *Less Than Nothing*, etc.) than to a strictly philological reading of the seminar itself; the appropriation is, I take it, defensible, but the reader should be aware that it is an appropriation.



closer to what Iris Murdoch calls “attention” and what the Greek tradition encodes in the recognition of shared fragility than it is to anything in the anti-empathy programme.

The Lacanian contribution, then, is to show that the empathy–reason binary is itself a symptom—a defensive structure that protects the moral subject from the anxiety of genuine ethical encounter. Both pure empathy and pure rationalism are ways of avoiding the Real of the other’s suffering. The classical tradition, with its insistence on the integration of feeling and judgement within a framework of acknowledged human limitation, comes closer to the kind of ethical stance that Lacanian analysis would endorse.

## **7. Compassion, Ideology, and Systemic Violence: Contemporary Critical Perspectives**

The empathy debate cannot be adequately assessed without attending to the interventions of contemporary critical philosophy, which reframe the question in terms that neither the cognitive scientists nor the classical tradition fully address. Where Bloom asks whether empathy produces good individual moral decisions, thinkers such as Žižek, Butler, Mouffe, and Badiou ask a prior question: what ideological function does the discourse of empathy and compassion serve within the structures of contemporary capitalism and liberal governance?

### **7.1 Žižek: Compassion as Ideological Supplement**

Slavoj Žižek’s critique of compassion is the most immediately relevant to our discussion, not least because it draws explicitly on the Lacanian framework outlined above. In *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (2008), Žižek distinguishes three forms of violence: subjective violence (the visible acts of crime, terror, and cruelty that attract our horrified attention), objective or symbolic violence (the violence embedded in language, in systems of meaning, in the very categories through which we organise social life), and systemic violence (the catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of economic and political systems). His central argument is that our empathic horror at subjective violence functions ideologically to blind us to the objective and systemic violence that sustains the social order within which that empathy operates.

Žižek reserves particular scorn for what he calls “liberal communists”—philanthropic capitalists who build the cost of assuaging their consumers’ guilt directly into the price of their products. The fair-trade coffee, the humanitarian donation built into the purchase price, the corporate social responsibility programme—these, Žižek argues, are mechanisms through which compassion is commodified and rendered compatible with the very system that produces the suffering it purports to address. Compassion becomes, in his formulation, the humanitarian mask that conceals the face of economic exploitation<sup>8</sup>.

This analysis is bracing and contains important truths. But it is crucial to distinguish what Žižek is actually critiquing. He is not arguing, as Bloom does, that empathy produces individually biased moral decisions. He is arguing that the entire discourse of empathy and compassion, when deployed within a liberal-capitalist framework, functions to sustain systemic violence by substituting affective responses to individual suffering for structural analysis of its causes. The problem is not that we feel too much but that our feeling is enlisted in the service of ideological reproduction—that compassion becomes a substitute for, rather than a spur to, political transformation.

Yet Žižek’s position is more nuanced than a simple dismissal of compassion. Drawing on Agota Kristof’s novel *The Notebook*, he develops the figure of the “ethical monster without empathy”—the agent who acts with what he calls a “monstrously cold reflexive distance” that cuts through misplaced sentiments and humanistic impulses to do what a situation genuinely demands. But this figure is presented as a provocation, not a prescription. Žižek’s deeper point is that genuine ethical action requires confronting the uncomfortable Real that both sentimental compassion and technocratic rationalism conspire to avoid: the structural violence of the system itself. In this, his position converges with the Lacanian argument that the empathy–reason dichotomy is a defence

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<sup>8</sup>S. Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008), esp. the opening chapters on “liberal communism” and the discussion of charity and humanitarianism that runs throughout the book. The argument is anticipated in *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008) and developed further in his later work; the ideological-supplement thesis is one of the most consistent features of Žižek’s political writing across decades.

against the Real, and with the classical insight that ethical responsiveness requires not merely feeling or calculating but attending to the full complexity of the moral situation.

## **7.2 Butler: Precariousness, Grievability, and the Political Distribution of Compassion**

Judith Butler's work on precariousness and vulnerability provides a different but complementary critical perspective. In *Precarious Life* (2004) and *Frames of War* (2009), Butler develops an ontology of the body that understands embodied life in terms of its constitutive vulnerability and interdependency. All human beings, Butler argues, are fundamentally precarious—exposed to injury, dependent on others for sustenance and recognition, susceptible to loss. This shared precariousness is an ontological condition, not a contingent misfortune.

But—and here Butler's analysis becomes politically decisive—while precariousness is universal, *precarity* is differentially distributed. Certain populations are rendered systematically more vulnerable by political and economic arrangements, and the same arrangements determine whose suffering is visible, whose lives are “grievable,” and whose deaths are mourned. The “frames” through which we perceive the world—media representations, political rhetoric, cultural norms—actively determine which lives register as human and which do not. Butler thus exposes a dimension of the empathy problem that Bloom entirely misses: empathy is not merely individually biased (as Bloom argues); it is *politically structured*. The reason we empathise more with some sufferers than others is not simply a cognitive quirk to be corrected by reason; it is a product of power relations that determine the very conditions of perceptibility. A politics of empathy that does not address the structural conditions of grievability is, in Butler's terms, complicit with the violence it claims to oppose.

Butler's analysis powerfully reinforces the case against Bloom's rationalist alternative. If the frames through which we perceive suffering are politically constituted, then “rational compassion” is no less susceptible to these frames than empathic engagement. The rational calculator who directs resources to efficiently measurable outcomes is working within a framework of perceptibility that has already determined which forms of suffering count as data. Butler's concept of shared ontological

vulnerability resonates strikingly with Aristotle's account of *eleos*: both ground ethical responsiveness in the recognition of a shared human condition of fragility, rather than in psychological simulation or rational optimisation. But Butler adds the crucial political dimension that Aristotle lacks: the recognition that access to compassion is itself a site of political struggle.

### **7.3 Mouffe: Against the Empathic Consensus**

Chantal Mouffe's agonistic theory of democracy offers yet another angle on the empathy question. Mouffe argues that democratic political theory has long been informed by an idealised view of human sociability—one that treats empathy and reciprocity as the natural foundations of political order and consensus as the telos of democratic deliberation. Against this, Mouffe insists on the ineradicability of antagonism: there is always an irreducible conflict at the heart of political life that no amount of empathic fellow-feeling can dissolve. The task of democratic politics is not to achieve consensus through mutual empathy but to transform destructive antagonism into productive agonism—to convert enemies into adversaries who share a commitment to democratic principles while disagreeing about their interpretation.

Mouffe's critique is primarily directed at deliberative democrats like Habermas and Rawls, but it has direct implications for the empathy debate. If political conflicts are genuine—rooted in incompatible interests, values, and forms of life—then the call to “empathise more” with one's political opponents is not merely naïve but ideologically charged. It presupposes that political disagreements are ultimately misunderstandings that deeper empathic engagement could resolve, rather than genuine conflicts that must be negotiated through power, persuasion, and institutional design. Empathy, deployed as a political programme, risks becoming what Mouffe would call a depoliticising strategy: a way of translating political antagonisms into a moral register that renders them apparently soluble while leaving the underlying power relations untouched.

Mouffe's point resonates with research showing that empathic identification does not spontaneously transcend ideology or political antagonism. Studies demonstrate that people across racial groups tend to perceive those facing greater hardship as tougher

and less sensitive to pain—a finding that suggests our empathic apparatus is not a pristine moral faculty corrupted by prejudice but is already saturated with ideological content. Mouffe's insight, like Žižek's, is that empathy cannot be understood in abstraction from the political field in which it operates.

#### **7.4 Badiou: Beyond the Ethics of Victimhood**

Alain Badiou's critique of contemporary ethics, developed in *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (1998), provides perhaps the most radical challenge to both the empathy and anti-empathy positions. Badiou argues that the prevailing ethical consensus of Western liberalism is structured around the recognition of evil rather than the pursuit of good: human rights are rights against suffering, ethical principles are prohibitions against harm, and the paradigmatic ethical subject is the victim. In this framework, good is derived from evil—defined as its negation—rather than conceived independently.

For Badiou, this “ethics of victimhood” reduces the human being to what he calls its “animal substructure”—the fragile flesh-and-bones body that can be harmed, starved, tortured, and killed. Both empathy and rational compassion, on this view, operate within this reductive framework: they respond to suffering, whether emotionally or calculatively, but they do not address the human capacity for what Badiou calls “truth processes”—the active engagement with scientific, artistic, political, or amorous events that constitutes genuine subjectivity. Humanitarian ethics, whether empathic or rational, remain imprisoned within a paradigm that sees people primarily as potential victims to be protected rather than as potential subjects capable of transforming their situations.

Badiou's critique reveals a blind spot shared by both Bloom and his opponents: neither adequately addresses the question of what compassion is *for*—what kind of ethical life it is meant to enable. The entire debate, viewed through Badiou's lens, is confined to the management of suffering within existing social arrangements, never raising the question of whether those arrangements themselves demand transformation. However, Badiou's position is not without its own difficulties. His dismissal of the “animal” dimension of human existence—the embodied vulnerability that is the ground of all compassionate response—risks reproducing, in a different

philosophical register, precisely the disembodied rationalism that the anti-empathy thesis promotes. The classical tradition's insistence that ethical responsiveness begins with the recognition of shared embodied fragility—Aristotle's "which a person might expect to befall himself"—provides a necessary corrective to Badiou's tendency to transcend the body in pursuit of truth.

### **7.5 Synthesis: What the Left-Wing Critique Reveals**

Taken together, these critical perspectives reveal something that neither the classical tradition nor the cognitive science debate fully articulates: that empathy and compassion are never purely psychological phenomena but are always already embedded in political, economic, and ideological structures. Žižek shows that compassion can function as an ideological supplement to systemic violence. Butler shows that the very conditions of empathic perceptibility are politically constituted. Mouffe shows that empathy deployed as political programme can depoliticise genuine conflicts. And Badiou shows that an ethics centred on suffering, whether empathic or rational, risks reducing the human subject to its animal vulnerability.

Yet none of these critiques entails the abandonment of compassion or fellow-feeling. What they demand is a compassion that is politically informed, structurally aware, and alert to its own potential co-optation. This is, in a sense, what the classical tradition was already attempting: an ethically cultivated, rationally disciplined, but affectively grounded attentiveness to the demands of human solidarity. The difference is that contemporary critical philosophy adds a dimension of structural and ideological analysis that the ancients, operating within relatively unexamined frameworks of slavery, patriarchy, and imperial domination, could not provide. The task, then, is not to choose between classical compassion and contemporary critique but to develop forms of ethical responsiveness that draw on both—compassion that is neither naïvely empathic nor coldly rational, but politically lucid and structurally transformative.

## **8. The Political Economy of Compassion: A Marxist Reading**

The critical perspectives examined in the preceding section operate, for the most part, within Lacanian and post-structuralist frameworks. A sustained Marxist reading

reframes the empathy debate more fundamentally, shifting attention from the psychology and phenomenology of moral feeling to the material conditions within which such feeling is produced, distributed, and politically deployed. If Žižek and Butler reveal the ideological and political dimensions of compassion, Marxist analysis exposes its economic infrastructure—the ways in which the mode of production determines not merely what we feel but what it is possible for us to feel.

### **8.1 The Class Structure of Classical Compassion**

The most orthodox Marxist intervention would begin by observing that the entire empathy debate—Bloom versus his critics, cognitive scientists versus phenomenologists—proceeds as if moral emotions were transhistorical psychological capacities that human beings simply possess, to be deployed well or badly. A historical materialist would insist that the very structure of compassionate response is materially conditioned. The Greek *eleos* did not simply exist as a psychological given; it existed within a slave economy where the “shared vulnerability” Aristotle invokes explicitly excluded the majority of the population. When Aristotle says *eleos* requires recognising that the sufferer’s predicament “might befall oneself,” he is addressing a community of free male citizens for whom certain categories of suffering—the suffering of slaves, of barbarians, of women in their subordination—fall structurally outside the scope of compassionate recognition. The Roman *humanitas* similarly operated within an imperial framework where “humanity” was a property of the civilised, not the colonised.

This is not merely a historical footnote. It is the fundamental Marxist point: compassion has always been class-structured. What counts as suffering worthy of response, who counts as a subject capable of suffering, and what forms of response are available are all determined by the material relations of production and the ideological superstructure they sustain. The paper’s preceding sections treat the classical concepts as philosophical achievements to be recovered; a Marxist reading treats them as ideological formations to be explained—products of specific class societies that encoded the interests of their ruling classes in the very grammar of moral feeling. The Stoic expansion of the circle of concern from family to all rational beings appears, from this perspective, less as a moral advance than as the ideological expression of a

cosmopolitan ruling class—the administrative elite of the Roman Empire—whose interests were served by a universalist ethic that legitimated imperial governance while leaving the material conditions of exploitation untouched.

## **8.2 Empathy as Commodity Fetishism**

Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism in Volume I of *Capital* provides a surprisingly precise lens for understanding the contemporary empathy debate. In commodity fetishism, social relations between persons appear as relations between things—the exploitation embedded in the production process is concealed by the apparent neutrality of market exchange. A Marxist reading would argue that empathy, in its modern liberal form, performs an analogous mystification: structural relations of exploitation appear as individual encounters with suffering. When I empathise with a homeless person, or a sweatshop worker, or a casualised labourer, I am responding to the visible surface of a structural relation—my empathy registers the *effect* (suffering) while occluding the *cause* (the extraction of surplus value, the commodification of labour, the enclosure of commons). Bloom is therefore partially right that empathy is a “spotlight”—but the Marxist point is that the spotlight illuminates individual victims precisely in order to keep the structural machinery in darkness.

Bloom's proposed alternative—rational compassion guided by cost-effectiveness calculations—is, from the Marxist standpoint, even worse. It is commodity fetishism raised to the second power. The effective altruist who calculates quality-adjusted life-years per dollar has fully accepted the logic of capital: suffering itself has been commodified, rendered calculable, subjected to the same cost-benefit rationality that produced it. Singer's effective altruism does not transcend the limitations of empathy; it internalises the logic of capital accumulation within the moral domain itself. The unit of moral analysis becomes the dollar—the currency of the very system that generates the suffering it purports to ameliorate.

## **8.3 The Dialectic of Compassion: From Feudal Mercy to Neoliberal Optimisation**



A more sophisticated Marxist reading—drawing on the Frankfurt School tradition of Adorno and Horkheimer—would trace the historical dialectic through which compassion has been progressively instrumentalised. In precapitalist societies, compassionate relations were embedded in concrete social bonds: kinship, clientage, feudal obligation, religious community. These were deeply unequal relations, but they were recognised as relations—the lord who showed mercy to the serf was exercising power within an acknowledged structure of domination and dependence. Seneca’s *clementia*, addressed to the emperor, is precisely this: a theorisation of compassion as an exercise of sovereign power within an openly hierarchical order.

The bourgeois revolution shattered these concrete bonds and replaced them with the abstract universalism of rights, contract, and market exchange. Compassion was simultaneously universalised (everyone deserves moral consideration in principle) and emptied of structural content (moral consideration no longer entails any specific obligation or material redistribution). The result is what Adorno and Horkheimer, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, might call the compassion of instrumental reason: a concern for the other that has been stripped of all concrete content and reduced to a formal principle compatible with any material arrangement—including arrangements that systematically produce the suffering it formally deplores.

The anti-empathy movement represents, on this reading, the latest stage of this dialectic: the explicit theorisation of compassion as a rational-calculative operation, fully compatible with and indeed modelled on market rationality. Bloom’s “rational compassion” is the moral counterpart of the neoliberal subject—the entrepreneurial self who optimises their portfolio of charitable interventions just as they optimise their investment portfolio. The Frankfurt School would recognise in this the characteristic gesture of late capitalism: the colonisation of the moral lifeworld by instrumental rationality. What is presented as a liberation from the biases of empathy is in fact the completion of a centuries-long process through which capital has subordinated every dimension of human experience—including the experience of the other’s suffering—to the logic of the commodity form.

#### **8.4 Alienation and the Impossibility of Empathy Under Capitalism**

Perhaps the deepest Marxist critique draws on the early Marx's concept of alienation. In the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844, Marx describes four dimensions of alienation under capitalism: alienation from the product of one's labour, from the process of labour, from one's species-being (*Gattungswesen*), and from other human beings. The fourth form is directly relevant. If capitalism systematically alienates human beings from one another—if our relations are mediated by commodity exchange, competition, and what Marx called the "cash nexus"—then empathy in any robust sense is structurally impossible under capitalist conditions. Not because of cognitive bias (Bloom's argument) or narcissistic capture (Lacan's argument) but because the material conditions for genuine fellow-feeling have been destroyed by the mode of production itself<sup>9</sup>.

On this reading, the entire debate between empathy's defenders and its critics is taking place on a terrain that has already been constituted by alienation. Empathy advocates are trying to cultivate a capacity that capitalism has structurally undermined; anti-empathy rationalists are proposing to replace it with the very form of instrumental reason that destroyed it. Neither side grasps that the problem is not psychological but material. The Marxist answer to the question "Should we rely on empathy or reason?" is: one cannot solve at the level of moral psychology a problem that is constituted at the level of political economy.

## 8.5 Species-Being and the Recovery of Genuine Fellow-Feeling

However—and this is where Marx intersects most interestingly with the classical tradition—the concept of *Gattungswesen* (species-being) suggests something very close to what the Stoics meant by *oikeiōsis* and Cicero meant by *humanitas*: a natural affinity between human beings grounded in their shared species-nature, which capitalism has

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<sup>9</sup>K. Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. M. Milligan (New York: International Publishers, 1964); the four dimensions of alienation are set out in the section "Estranged Labour" (pp. 106–119 in the Milligan edition). The concept of *Gattungswesen* is developed further in the *Sixth Thesis on Feuerbach*, where Marx famously formulates that "the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations." The continuity between the early and late Marx on this point is contested; for the purposes of the present argument I am taking the early formulation as philosophically substantive on its own terms.

distorted but not destroyed. For Marx, the overcoming of alienation would not produce Bloom's "rational compassion" but something closer to what the young Marx called the "real appropriation of the human essence"—a form of social organisation in which one's relation to the other is no longer mediated by commodity exchange but is directly expressive of shared humanity. This is not sentimental; Marx was as hostile to "sentimental socialism" as Seneca was to *miser cordia*. But it suggests that the recovery of genuine fellow-feeling is inseparable from the transformation of the material conditions that make genuine fellow-feeling impossible.

The convergence between *Gattungswesen* and the classical concepts is more than a coincidence. Marx was educated in the classical tradition—his doctoral dissertation was on Epicurean and Democritean philosophy—and the concept of species-being represents, in part, a materialist reworking of the Aristotelian and Stoic insight that human beings are naturally social creatures whose flourishing depends on their relations with others. The difference is that Marx insists on the material preconditions for this flourishing: where Aristotle assumed the *polis* and the Stoics invoked the cosmos, Marx demands a specific form of economic organisation—one in which the productive powers of humanity are collectively owned and democratically directed—as the condition for the realisation of species-being. Compassion, on this account, is not a psychological faculty to be trained up or trained down but an expression of a social relation that can only be fully realised under conditions of material equality and collective self-determination.

## **8.6 Hegemony, Structure of Feeling, and the Production of Empathy**

Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony extends the analysis into the domain of what we might call affective governance. For Gramsci, ruling-class domination operates not merely through coercion but through consent—through the production of a "common sense" that makes existing arrangements appear natural and inevitable. A Gramscian reading would see the contemporary empathy industry—the TED talks about compassion, the corporate mindfulness programmes, the neuroscience of mirror neurons popularised in self-help literature—as a hegemonic apparatus that produces a specific structure of moral feeling compatible with neoliberal governance. Empathy is

not merely ideologically captured (as Žižek argues); it is actively *produced* as a form of affective labour that reproduces the conditions of capitalist accumulation.

Raymond Williams's concept of "structures of feeling" is instructive here. Williams argued that each historical period has its own characteristic emotional and experiential texture—a pattern of affective responses that is not merely superstructural but constitutive of lived social reality. The contemporary "structure of feeling" around empathy and compassion—the specific combination of individual moral concern and political passivity, of emotional intensity about individual cases and numbed indifference to structural causes, of therapeutic self-care and systemic acquiescence—is the affective signature of neoliberal capitalism<sup>10</sup>. The call to "empathise more" becomes, in what Mark Fisher called "capitalist realism," the demand that we manage our emotional responses to a system whose transformation has been placed beyond the horizon of political possibility.

Yet the Gramscian framework also points toward a more hopeful possibility. If hegemony is never total—if it must be constantly reproduced and is always vulnerable to counter-hegemonic challenge—then the structures of feeling associated with compassion are themselves sites of political contestation. The question is not whether to feel compassion but whether compassion can be wrested from its hegemonic function and redirected toward structural transformation. This is what Gramsci meant by the "war of position": the patient transformation of the cultural and affective common sense through which domination is sustained. A counter-hegemonic politics of compassion would not abandon fellow-feeling but would insist that genuine compassion—compassion adequate to the scale and nature of actually existing suffering—demands not charity but solidarity, not individual moral improvement but collective political

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<sup>10</sup>R. Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), ch. 9, "Structures of Feeling." The concept is among Williams's most cited and most often misused: it is not a synonym for "prevailing emotional climate," nor a euphemism for ideology, but a careful technical proposal about the texture of social experience as it is in the process of being lived rather than after it has been fully articulated. The applicability of the concept to the contemporary empathy-discourse is, I take it, evident; the formal argument for the applicability would require an essay of its own.

action, not the optimisation of aid budgets but the transformation of the productive relations that make aid necessary.

### **8.7 The Marxist Contribution: What the Materialist Critique Adds**

The Marxist reading thus adds several indispensable dimensions to the argument of this paper. First, it historicises the classical concepts that the preceding sections have treated as philosophical resources, revealing their embeddedness in specific relations of production and domination. Second, it identifies commodity fetishism as the mechanism through which structural violence is translated into individual suffering and thereby rendered amenable to empathic (or rational-compassionate) response without threatening the system that produces it. Third, through the concept of alienation, it provides a materialist account of why empathy is so difficult under capitalism—an account that is complementary to, but more fundamental than, the cognitive and psychoanalytic explanations offered by Bloom and Lacan respectively. Fourth, through *Gattungswesen*, it suggests a normative horizon—the recovery of unalienated species-being—that connects the classical aspiration for *humanitas* with a concrete programme of social transformation. And fifth, through Gramsci and Williams, it reveals the production of empathy itself as a site of hegemonic contestation, opening the possibility of a counter-hegemonic politics of compassion that is irreducible to either Bloom's rational optimisation or the liberal-humanitarian status quo.

The limitation of the Marxist reading, like any strictly materialist account, is its tendency to treat moral emotions as epiphenomenal—as expressions of underlying economic relations rather than as partially autonomous dimensions of human experience. The classical tradition's insistence on the cultivation of moral feeling as an end in itself, and the phenomenological tradition's attention to the irreducible structure of empathic experience, provide necessary correctives to this tendency. The most adequate account will draw on both: a politically lucid compassion that is grounded in material analysis and directed toward structural transformation, but that also honours the particular, irreducible encounter with the suffering other that no structural analysis can fully capture.

## 9. The Classical Synthesis Reconsidered: Reason, Feeling, and Moral Attention

What the classical tradition offers, and what the anti-empathy movement lacks, is a model of moral responsiveness that integrates affective engagement and rational evaluation without reducing either to the other. The Aristotelian account of *eleos* is instructive precisely because it is both emotional and cognitive: it involves a felt response to suffering that is simultaneously a judgement about desert, vulnerability, and shared humanity. The Stoic model of *oikeiōsis* provides a developmental account of how natural affective bonds can be rationally extended without being rationally replaced. And the Roman ideal of *humanitas* demonstrates that moral sensitivity, intellectual cultivation, and practical beneficence can form a unified disposition rather than competing psychological programmes.

The anti-empathy movement's fundamental error is its inheritance of a Cartesian dualism between reason and emotion that the classical world, for all its internal disagreements, had the philosophical resources to resist. Even the Stoics, who came closest to advocating the extirpation of passion, recognised (as Seneca's embarrassment about the weeping sage reveals) that the moral life cannot in practice dispense with affective responsiveness. The question was never whether to feel but how to feel well—how to cultivate the kind of compassionate attention that is responsive to genuine need, appropriate in its intensity, and directed by sound moral judgement.

The Lacanian and critical-philosophical interventions examined in the preceding sections enrich this classical synthesis without displacing it. Lacan reveals that both pure empathy and pure rationalism are defensive structures—ways of avoiding the Real of the other's suffering—and that genuine ethical encounter requires tolerating what exceeds our capacity for either feeling or calculation. Žižek and Butler reveal that compassion is always politically situated, and that any adequate ethics of fellow-feeling must attend to the structural conditions that determine whose suffering is visible and whose is not. Badiou reminds us that an ethics of suffering alone is insufficient and must be supplemented by an affirmative conception of human possibility. Mouffe cautions against the depoliticising effects of treating empathy as a universal solvent for social

conflict. And the Marxist tradition, from the early manuscripts through the Frankfurt School to Gramsci and Williams, insists that the very terrain on which the empathy debate takes place is constituted by alienation and commodity fetishism—that genuine fellow-feeling presupposes material conditions that capitalism has systematically destroyed, and that the recovery of compassion is inseparable from the transformation of those conditions.

Contemporary virtue ethics, particularly in the hands of philosophers like Nussbaum, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Michael Slote, has recovered important elements of this classical synthesis. Nussbaum's account of compassion as a "rational emotion"—an emotion whose cognitive content (judgements about severity, non-desert, and eudaimonistic significance) is constitutive of the emotion itself, not a separable rational veneer over raw affect—represents perhaps the most sophisticated modern development of the Aristotelian tradition. On this account, the choice between empathy and reason is a false dilemma. Properly constituted compassion *is* a form of moral reasoning—embodied, affect-laden, and fallible, but genuinely cognitive nonetheless.

## **10. Conclusion: What the Ancients Still Teach Us**

The Greeks did not have empathy. What they had was something arguably more profound: a philosophically articulated understanding of why the suffering of others makes moral claims upon us, grounded not in psychological simulation but in the recognition of shared vulnerability, shared rationality, and shared humanity. This understanding was not uncritical or naïve; the Greeks and Romans debated fiercely about the proper role of feeling in moral life, the dangers of excessive pity, and the relationship between compassion and justice. But at their best, they achieved a synthesis of reason and compassionate attention that acknowledged both the indispensability and the fallibility of moral feeling.

The contemporary anti-empathy movement has identified real problems with undisciplined emotional engagement: the parochialism of empathic responses, the danger of empathic burnout, the possibility that empathic identification can motivate aggression rather than care. These are genuine concerns, and they echo criticisms that

the Stoics raised two millennia ago. But the anti-empathy movement's proposed solution—the separation of compassionate action from compassionate feeling, the replacement of empathic engagement with rational calculation—represents not progress beyond the classical tradition but regression behind it. It purchases a specious clarity by imposing a dichotomy between reason and emotion that neither the phenomenology of moral experience nor the neuroscience of moral cognition supports.

The Lacanian, critical-philosophical, and Marxist traditions reveal further dimensions of this failure. The empathy-reason binary is not merely analytically inadequate; it is a symptom—a defensive structure that protects the moral subject from the unsettling encounter with the Real of the other's suffering, and that obscures the political, ideological, and economic structures within which all compassionate response is situated. The Marxist critique is especially trenchant: the entire debate takes place on a terrain already constituted by alienation, and neither empathic fusion nor rational mastery can substitute for what genuine ethical encounter demands: an attentiveness to the other that is informed by affect, disciplined by reason, aware of its own political and material conditions, and directed toward the transformation of the structures that produce and distribute suffering.

The path forward lies not in choosing between empathy and reason but in the hard, ongoing work of cultivating what the ancients called practical wisdom (*phronesis*): the capacity to perceive moral situations accurately, to respond to them with appropriate feeling, and to act effectively on the basis of both perception and feeling—while remaining alert to the structural conditions that shape what we can perceive and feel in the first place. This is the task that Aristotle's *eleos*, Hierocles' expanding circles, Cicero's *humanitas*, Lacan's confrontation with the Real, Butler's ontology of precariousness, and Marx's vision of recovered *Gattungswesen* all, in their different ways, point toward. It is more demanding than either the uncritical celebration of empathy or its rationalist dismissal. But it is the only account of moral responsiveness that does justice to the complexity of being a feeling, thinking, politically situated, materially conditioned, embodied creature in a world that is full of suffering and that demands not merely our attention but our transformative action.



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