

GUDRUN VON TEVENAR

Nietzsche's Objections to Pity and Compassion

[1]

Most of us are aware that there is a difference of some sort between pity and compassion, though we usually find it difficult to describe this difference with any precision. This is not surprising as these two attitudes overlap extensively due to the fact that both are based on our capacity for empathy which can, in appropriate circumstances, give rise to sympathy with the misfortunes and suffering of others. Sympathy can be expressed in varying ways depending on circumstances and the personalities and attitudes of agents, and it is here, I suggest, that most of the differences separating pity from compassion are to be found. As I have examined this topic at length elsewhere,¹ I will give here just a brief and much simplified summary.

It is generally agreed that both pitying and compassionate agents have sympathy with the suffering of others and are distressed by it. But while pity concentrates mainly on the suffered condition, say, famine or homelessness, compassion shows in addition also attentive and benevolent concern for the way persons endure their suffering. In other words, compassion focuses on persons who suffer while pity focuses on the condition suffered. But focusing just on the suffered condition tends to make persons suffering the condition feel unaddressed and thus alienated and this, in turn, allows a gap of distance, of separation, of otherness, to develop in the relation of pitying agents and the pitied which can easily lead to feelings of superiority and contempt on the part of pitying agents and to feelings of alienation, shame, and inferiority on the part of the pitied. Compassion, by contrast, with its attentive and benevolent concern for persons who suffer, is based on awareness of our common humanity² and thus, at its best, is able to bridge the damaging gap of separation and otherness with its associated negative feelings.

Yet, while it is indeed difficult to distinguish precisely pity from compassion in theory, in practice most people most of the time display a sensitive awareness of that distinction in their everyday use of these terms. They might, for instance, describe the patience, attentiveness, and kindness shown to someone in need as compassionate, while using the term pity to convey the unstable mixture of distress and unease which leads agents to the impulsive doing of something of help so as to be able to leave it behind. But practical awareness of a difference between pity and compassion is found most tellingly in the fact that the ascription of pity allows an extension utterly inappropriate in the ascription of compassion, inasmuch as we can use the term pity not just to describe an attitude of sympathy and distress at the suffering of others but also to convey superiority and even contempt. Consider here the ambiguity of a simple statement such as 'I pity you'. Without further details of context, these three words can with equal plausibility express sympathy as well as contempt for a person – they can even express disgust. Such ambiguity is not found in the ascription of compassion. Or consider whatever it is a person rejects when she exclaims 'I don't want your pity!' Does she reject the genuine sympathy available in compassion, or the superficiality of some sentimental gesture or phrase possible in pity?

So, while it is generally agreed that both pity and compassion are expressions of sympathy with the misfortunes and suffering of others, pity can do so in ways which permits also the expression of non-sympathetic attitudes of condescension and contempt. Hence it follows that only pity, and not compassion, is open to the much voiced objection of allowing, and perhaps even fostering, feelings of superiority and contempt and thus of shaming and humiliating its recipients.³

[2]

Due to the fact that there is only one German word, namely *Mitleid*, for pity and compassion, it is frequently not immediately obvious from an original text whether the author is talking about pity or compassion without careful consideration of context. Yet in the case of Nietzsche, context alone is often not conclusive, hence the variations

in translation, and close scrutiny of the kinds of objections voiced by Nietzsche against *Mitleid* is necessary. And here one can distinguish three different kinds of objections. These are (1) psychological objections; (2) detrimental to recipients objections; and (3) detrimental to givers objections.

(1) Psychological Objections:

Schopenhauer, famously, celebrated *Mitleid* as the greatest of all virtues and as the sole basis of genuine morality. He argued that *Mitleid* alone is able to overcome our naturally selfish inclinations and thus to motivate agents to act solely for the well-being of others, this being the characteristic of morally worthy actions. Nietzsche vehemently rejected this elevation of what he considered to be one of the more regrettable outcomes of slave morality. And while objections against Schopenhauer's promotion of *Mitleid* are voiced throughout Nietzsche's work, *Daybreak* 133 is notable for its strong polemic against Schopenhauer's psychological explanations of it. In *D* 133 Nietzsche alleges that Schopenhauer could not possibly have had much relevant experience of *Mitleid* because 'he had observed [it] so imperfectly and described [it] so badly'. And Nietzsche utterly dismisses as 'mere inventions' Schopenhauer's psychological foundations of *Mitleid* such as its supposed motivational purity of selflessness. Nietzsche derides the superficial evidence of selflessness and claims in opposition that subconsciously we are always and throughout concerned solely with our own selves. He tells us that:

In truth: in *Mitleid* [...] we do no longer think consciously of our selves, but are doing so very strongly unconsciously: as when, if our foot slips [...] we perform the most purposive counter-movements [...] [D 133] 7

Initially, this example is quite puzzling as the analogy of a slipped foot does not seem to hold when used for *Mitleid*, since it describes the restoration of lost balance without reference to an external cause, which in the case of *Mitleid* would be the perception of someone suffering. However, I believe this is precisely Nietzsche's rather subtle point: he claims that consciously *Mitleid* may be selflessly concerned with external facts – the suffering of others – unconsciously, however,

acting on the impulse of *Mitleid* is nothing but an intricate, purposive manoeuvre to restore our own internal balance. So the selflessness of *Mitleid* is only pretence; *Mitleid* is just part of our effort to recover psychological balance. Nietzsche further claims that we harbour a whole clutch of motives for *Mitleid*, which includes 'hoping to present ourselves as the more powerful and as a helper, being certain of applause, wanting to feel how fortunate we are by contrast, or to relieve boredom'. And he even goes as far as claiming that *Mitleid* can be just a case of 'subtle self-defence or even a piece of revenge' [D 133].

(2) The detrimental to recipients objections:

Nietzsche gives the title *Being Pitied to Daybreak* 135 and there provides us with a particularly flamboyant detrimental to recipients objection. He states that the mere idea of being pitied 'evokes a moral shudder' in savages, because to savages, being still, we are meant to assume, uncorrupted by conventional morality, 'to offer pity is as good as to offer contempt'. Indeed, should a defeated enemy weep and plead then savages will, out of *Mitleid* and contempt, let him live, humiliated like a dog, while those who endure suffering with defiant pride repulse *Mitleid* and thus earn their admiration and praise. There are two points here: note that mere pleading for *Mitleid* already exposes one as weak and contemptible, and this is compounded with humiliation should these pleas be successful and one is actually shown *Mitleid* in response. For now one is no longer a defeated enemy who can retain some dignity and add to the glory of the victor when killed, now one is just a wretched dog – not worthy of such a death. For the next example of a detrimental to recipients objection let us turn to *Daybreak* 138, which, because of its deep insights and impressive psychological observations, deserves to be quoted (almost) in full.

Becoming more tender [Das Zärtlicherwerden]

If we love, honour, admire someone, and then afterwards discover that he is suffering [...] our feeling of love, reverence and admiration changes in an essential way: it becomes more tender [zärtlicher] [...] Only now does it seem possible that we might be able to give something back to him, while previously he lived in our imagination as too elevated [erhaben] for our gratitude. This capacity to give back something gives us great joy and exultation [Erhebung]. We seek to find out what will ease his pain, and give this to him; should he

want consoling words and looks, attentions, services, presents – we give them; – above all however, should he want us to suffer at his suffering, we will give ourselves out as suffering, but have in all this the enjoyment of active gratitude: which is, in short, benevolent revenge [...]. From all this it follows that even in the most favourable case, there is something degrading in suffering and something elevating [Erhöhen] and conducive to superiority in pitying [Mitleiden] [D 138].

Here Nietzsche invites us to retrace the steps, each seemingly easy and harmless, by which the slow and degrading reversal of status of a sufferer is accomplished. The key words are 'tender' [zärtlich] and variations on 'elevation' [Erhebung, erhaben etc]. Remember that outside of the domain of romantic love, we are tender or become more tender to those perceived as vulnerable either because of neediness or suffering or because they are fragile or very young. And we show our tenderness by being gentle, considerate, protective. Yet note how this can all too readily slide, according to Nietzsche, into a somewhat different attitude where vulnerability is now seen as making the other more accessible, nearer, smaller than before, so that, in an insidiously erosive way, it becomes tempting and easy to invade his space and undermine his dignity. In this way, Nietzsche claims, the 'tenderness' of *Mitleid* can belittle recipients and diminish their status.

As a further consequence of the pitying relation we have reversal of the respective positions of participants. Prior to being pitied, the sufferer was admired and revered, now, however, he is belittled and made dependent, while the pifier, who previously looked up to him, now occupies the elevated position of superiority. Thus, when looking at the process of *Mitleid* in the way Nietzsche suggests here, one cannot but concede some plausibility to his claim that what actually goes on is a kind of revenge.

(3) The detrimental to givers objections:

The most widely known detrimental to givers objection is the claim that in the 'suffering-with' of *Mitleid* two now suffer and one of them needlessly and uselessly. Regardless of the dubious validity of this claim because of the phenomenological distinctness of the two kinds of suffering, Nietzsche goes into rhetorical overdrive and predicts that if *Mitleid* were to rule for just one day, humanity would perish im-

mediately.⁵ But Nietzsche has other arguments too. Thus Zarathustra declares, in the by now familiar detrimental-to-recipients tone, that he badly wronged a sufferer's pride when he helped him. But, importantly, Zarathustra also declares that he washes his hand and also wipes clean his soul because he has helped a sufferer, and he admits, furthermore, that he feels ashamed because of the sufferer's shame.⁶ These latter statements show quite conclusively that Nietzsche believed agents pollute and degrade themselves when they show *Mitleid* and that *Mitleid* is therefore detrimental to its givers. The claim that *Mitleid* is shaming and thus degrading to givers as well as receivers seems surprising given that Nietzsche held, as in D 138 discussed above, that the giving of *Mitleid* actually fosters feelings of superiority. This apparent contradiction can be dissolved by noting that it is Zarathustra who speaks here: because Zarathustra, being the exemplar and teacher of a noble kind of morality, has no need for the supposedly devious and underhand methods of *Mitleid* inherited from, and still reeking with the stench of, their origin in slave morality's resentment⁷ in order to feel superior. Zarathustra, as portrayed by Nietzsche, is superior and hence is supposed to feel shame when having recourse to the paradigm virtue of slave morality — namely *Mitleid*.

Variations of the psychological and detrimental to recipients objections described above are widely known and much used even in our ordinary, everyday reactions to instances of pity. But the detrimental to givers objection is, I believe, distinctly Nietzschean and we will see later on how this kind of objection is informed by distinctly Nietzschean views of the role and significance of suffering.

[3]

On examining the three kinds of objections with the pity/compassion distinction as briefly outlined at the beginning of this essay in mind, we find that Nietzsche's objections are almost exclusively concerned with *Mitleid* understood as pity and not as compassion. Notice that *Mitleid* as described by Nietzsche is either contaminated from the beginning with contempt and shame as in the examples of the savages and Zarathustra, or *Mitleid* seems preoccupied mainly with the mental state of the agent and not with the sufferer. But understanding *Mitleid* merely as pity is, I suggest, the main reason why Nietzsche's objec-

tions, though highly sophisticated and eminently plausible, nonetheless somehow miss their target as far as Schopenhauer is concerned. Because Schopenhauer, when elevating *Mitleid* as the highest virtue, emphasizes different aspects from those singled out by Nietzsche. Thus Schopenhauer claims that agents with *Mitleid* can act selflessly and solely for the weal of sufferers precisely because they see in sufferers someone like themselves. In other words, *Mitleid* for Schopenhauer cannot be other than compassion because, as described by him, there is no gap of distance and otherness between agents and sufferers and hence no associated negative feelings of alienation and shame. This is not to say, of course, that Schopenhauer had no idea of *Mitleid* understood as pity. Indeed, he takes great pains to distinguish his kind of *Mitleid*, i.e. compassion, from various deviations and aberrations such as those that Nietzsche later concentrates on. Thus Schopenhauer admits that we do at times 'benefit' others from motives other than genuine *Mitleid*, for instance from the motive of malice, as

when I do good to one man in order to annoy another whom I do not benefit, or to make the other man's sufferings more acute, or even to put to shame a third who does not benefit the first, or, finally, by my action to humiliate the man whom I benefit.⁸

Naturally, Schopenhauer refused to grant these kinds of actions any moral value whatsoever, since he regards the moral value of compassion as entirely dependent on the motive to act purely for the weal of others. We can see, then, that Schopenhauer could willingly and wholeheartedly agree with most of Nietzsche's objections and yet keep his own theory intact, since he elevates compassion while Nietzsche denigrates pity.

This conclusion, though interesting, is also quite puzzling and leads to two closely related questions: first, did Nietzsche truly believe that mere pity is all there is to *Mitleid*? Second, if so, was that because he lacked 'inner understanding' of the misery and contingency of suffering as Nussbaum claims?⁹ I suggest the answer to both these questions is 'no'.

[4] Yet before we can answer these questions in detail, we must gain an understanding of Nietzsche's attitude towards suffering, one's own and the suffering of others. Nietzsche was highly critical of the attitude towards suffering prevalent at his time, and indeed now, where suffering, particularly the suffering of others, of the multitude of others, mattered and mattered greatly. He blamed Christianity for this and also, more narrowly because applying only to the educated, Schopenhauer. Nietzsche observed how both Christianity and Schopenhauer ascribe to our suffering empirical as well as metaphysical significance. Christian dogma links empirical suffering here on earth to both original and personal sin and promises release via purification and atonement as well as salvation via Christ; while Schopenhauer states that our empirical suffering is but the inevitable outcome of a metaphysical reality governed by a blind, relentless drive to life – the Will. Thus both theories offer an explanation why suffering is so pervasive and the seemingly inescapable lot of each and everyone. Indeed, considering the nature of these explanations, one can readily come to see why both theories value and promote *Mitleid* as they see in it an appropriate because somewhat soothing and consoling response to suffering. Yet Nietzsche utterly rejects this response, particularly because of its openness to passivity and its easy slide to resignation. Nor is that all. Even more abhorrent, because more threatening to Nietzsche's revaluation project, are the wider consequences of the Christian and Schopenhauerian views, inasmuch as both drain value out of this our earthly lives. Christianity postulates life on earth as a mere testing station and hence just preliminary to the real life to come in the beyond; and Schopenhauer, with his well-known pessimism, goes even further by claiming that it would be better for us not to be born, thus rejecting life altogether. Given that one of Nietzsche's most urgent aims was the affirmation and, indeed, re-affirmation of life, it is not surprising that the combination of *Mitleid* and negative significance of suffering should be seen by him as a threat and odious obstacle to this aim.

Against *Mitleid* and against the negative significance of suffering Nietzsche puts forward his own proposals. He argues in *On the Genealogy of Morals*¹⁰ that suffering and particularly the suffering of

others, i.e. the suffering of the sick, weak, and misshapen multitude of the herd, must not be allowed to obstruct the life of the strong – those lucky, talented, healthy few who must be promoted because needed as blueprint for future men. He therefore warns us against what he calls 'the conspiracy of the sufferers against the well-formed and victorious'¹¹ and makes his famous, or perhaps infamous, claim that the weak pose the greatest danger to the strong, and that the strong and healthy have to be shielded from polluting contact with the sick and their secret resentment and veiled pleas for *Mitleid*. On a more positive note, Nietzsche urges us to accept our suffering as an integral part of a worthwhile life, to actively and purposefully master it and not just passively 'suffer' it. Active acceptance and mastering are not just better ways of coping with suffering, they function at the same time as an affirmation of life. Hence Nietzsche despised the feeble resignation and impotent resentment with which member of the herd fail to accept their suffering, thus fail to cope, thus fail to affirm.

But while Nietzsche despised wretched suffering, he greatly admired the 'noble' suffering of those who were able to overcome their suffering, even their very severe suffering, and thereby turn suffering into a heightened sense of power, creativity, and distinction. Endured like this, suffering can become a merit of such magnitude as to lift the sufferer high above those not so distinguished. Listen to Nietzsche in BGE 270:

[...] this spiritual and silent arrogance of sufferers, this pride of the selected in knowledge, of the 'initiated', of the almost sacrificed, needs all forms of disguise to protect itself from the touch of intrusive and prying hands and of everything else that is not like itself in pain. Profound suffering makes noble, it separates [BGE 270].

[5]

With the above in mind, let us now turn to the second of our two questions and Nussbaum's claim that Nietzsche lacked 'inner understanding' of the misery and contingency of suffering. Nussbaum accuses Nietzsche of insensitivity for the way suffering can be erosive of human well-being. She argues that Nietzsche had no grasp of the simple truth that one functions badly when one is hungry and that stoic

self-command is just not possible when suffering from what she terms 'basic vulnerability'. Nussbaum contrasts 'basic vulnerability', which comprises deprivations of resources utterly central to human mental, physical, and intellectual functioning, from 'bourgeois vulnerability' with its relatively comfortable pains of loneliness, ill health, bad reputation, and so on. These latter pains, Nussbaum argues, are indeed painful enough but not such as to impair human functioning altogether. She insists that Nietzsche simply ignored 'basic vulnerability' since he apparently believed that even a beggar could be a stoic hero so long as socialism and *Mitleid* did not keep him weak. Thus Nussbaum concludes that despite all his famous unhappiness Nietzsche was without 'inner understanding of the ways ~~contingency-matters~~ matters for virtue'.¹²

These are powerful and thought provoking objections. However, I suggest that they somewhat miss their point because Nietzsche was not interested in virtue, did not address himself to the multitude, and did not, therefore, envisage the possibility of members of the herd growing into stoic heroes. Moreover, there is ample evidence throughout his writings as well as in his letters that he was not insensitive to the fact that deprivation — mental and physical — stunts growth and that severe pain and misery not only hurts but also harms people. Yet Nietzsche nonetheless, and here lies the novel and controversial nature of his thought, refused to grant suffering, even severe suffering, the kind of significance assigned to it through the influence of Christianity and Schopenhauer. For this leads, almost inevitably, to *Mitleid* and hence, Nietzsche feared, to erosion of the will to power of those precious, privileged few by undermining their confidence in themselves and in their lives. The truly objectionable feature of suffering, Nietzsche holds, is not the well-acknowledged fact that it hurts and harms people, but the non-acknowledged and deeply deplorable fact that so many sufferers simply fail to respond appropriately to their suffering and thus allow themselves to become feeble, impaired, wretched; in other words, they allow themselves to 'suffer' hurt and harm. One can conclude, then, that Nietzsche was not insensitive to the misery and contingency of suffering but simply refused to accept its alleged wider significance.

[6] Regarding the question whether Nietzsche truly believed that mere pity is all there is to *Mitleid*, one must concede that much speaks for such a conclusion since, as we have seen, most of the objections put forward by Nietzsche against *Mitleid* apply to *Mitleid* understood merely as pity and not as compassion. Because of this some commentators¹³ as well as translators¹⁴ believe that pity is all there is to Nietzsche's *Mitleid* and thus to doubt that Nietzsche had any inking of the existence and power of compassion. In what follows I will argue that Nietzsche was aware of the existence of compassion and, indeed, feared its power.

To see why this is so, let us focus again on the difference between pity and compassion with the help of Nietzsche's own words. Zarathustra declares:

But I am a giver: gladly give I as a friend to friends. But strangers and the poor may help themselves to the fruit of my trees: it shames less that way.¹⁵

Let us leave aside the question of shame and concentrate solely on the attitude of the speaker who describes himself as a giver. He gladly gives to friends — presumably out of friendship, and also gives to strangers and the poor — presumably out of *Mitleid*. So Zarathustra gives to both, but note the difference in his attitude towards them! With the first group Zarathustra identifies because of the bond of friendship, he is attentive to them as someone like himself — as a friend to friends. But the second group, the strangers and poor, he keeps at a distance, a distance defined by their condition of strangeness and poverty. This is precisely the distance we have earlier defined as characteristic of the attitude of pity. It separates the needy by defining them — as with a label — by their condition of strangeness and poverty thus failing to attend to them as persons, as someone like oneself. One consequence of keeping strangers and the poor in this way separate and at a distance is that, after opening the gates to one's orchard, nothing stops one now from happily continuing one's own pursuits such as, perhaps, feasting with one's friends while the needy are away in the orchard.

Contrast this with what Nietzsche writes in *On the Genealogy of Morals*⁶ where he speaks of the danger the weak pose for the strong as well as of the danger of 'great *Mitleid*'. Nietzsche informs us that 'the failed, downcast, and broken' are the ones 'who most dangerously poison and call into question our confidence in life, in man, in ourselves'. Thus he warns us against what he calls 'the conspiracy of the sufferers' and against a time when the weakest

[...] might succeed in showing their own misery, all misery generally into the conscience of the happy: so that they would one day begin to be ashamed of their happiness and perhaps say to each other: 'it is a disgrace to be happy! there is too much misery!' [GM III, 14].

But how do the weak manage to show their misery into the conscience of the happy? They do it by inducing in them 'great *Mitleid*'. It begins, according to Nietzsche, with the 'veiled look' in the eyes of the wretched which produces in the strong a 'deep sadness'. Nietzsche eloquently describes that 'veiled look' as a dangerous mixture of pain and secret resentment: dangerous, because the resultant 'deep sadness' in the strong is just the beginning. For Nietzsche predicts that this sadness will eventually grow into guilt and shame until, in the end, the happy begin to doubt their very right to happiness in face of 'too much misery'. In other words, the misery and wretchedness of the weak has potentially serious consequences for the strong inasmuch as it undermines their hitherto unquestioned confidence in the superior value of themselves and their lives.

Please note that the objection to *Mitleid* in GM III, 14 is also of the detrimental-to-givers kind, but, unlike Zarathustra earlier, the agent now experiences and succumbs to 'great *Mitleid*', and is thus not able to simply cleanse herself of its effects by 'washing her hands and wiping her soul'. Why not? The reason why she cannot simply cleanse herself of the effects of 'great *Mitleid*' is, I suggest, because the difference between great and ordinary *Mitleid* is precisely the difference between compassion and pity. Pity is usually episodic; it arises in response to a distressing incident and once the psychological balance is restored again, things return to normal. Not so with compassion or great *Mitleid*. Compassion has the capacity, eloquently

described by Nietzsche, to permanently alter one's outlook to life. So, while the effects of pity can be wiped away, the effects of compassion cannot.

Lets go into this in more detail. We defined general *Mitleid* as distress at the suffering of others. There is ample everyday evidence that in the case of pity this distress usually leads to action that can relieve, at one and the same time, both the suffering of others and the distress of agents. This is precisely the case with Zarathustra: feeling pity for the hungry, he opens the gates of his orchard (or makes a credit card donation) thus relieving the hungry (or contributing to the relief of the hungry) and his own distress. And now he can switch off, as it were, and continue untroubled with his previous lifestyle. Not so, however, with the agent Nietzsche describes in GM I Having looked deeply into the eyes of the wretched, that agent now experiences a 'deep sadness'; a sadness, moreover, which Nietzsche believes will eventually undermine her previous enjoyment and affirmation of life. In other words, after looking deep in the eyes of pain, even if they also harbour secret resentment, things no longer remain the same as the agent is now troubled by doubt about her previously unquestioned right to happiness, unsettled by the thought that 'it is a disgrace to be happy! there is too much misery!' So, unlike Zarathustra, this agent will not be able to merrily feast with her friends while the hungry are away in the orchard.

So what is the difference? The difference is, firstly, that Zarathustra feels *Mitleid* merely as pity while the deeply sad agent feels what Nietzsche calls 'great *Mitleid*', which we can now confidently translate as compassion. By allowing the pain of others to move her in such a way as to feel solidarity with them, the compassionate agent bridges the gap of separation and otherness by acknowledging them as persons with whom she has a common bond. And that very acknowledgement prevents her now from continuing to enjoy the kind of self-affirming outlook that Nietzsche believes is – and wants to maintain as – the birthright of the strong. So that, unlike mere pity, great *Mitleid* or compassion tends to have long lasting consequences for one's outlook on life. We have seen that merely pitying agents can move on once they have relieved, or seemed to have relieved, the distress of the sufferer and thereby also their own distress. This is not the case with

compassionate agents. As Nietzsche clearly grasped, their 'great sadness' results in uncertainty towards their right to happiness in face of the suffering of others and thus leaves an indelible mark on their future attitude to life. Secondly, acknowledging solidarity with sufferers also initiates the dreaded slide into 'degeneration', since Nietzsche believed that once tempted by compassion to succumb to sadness and feelings of guilt, the agent has forfeited, as it were, her right to membership of the strong since she now identifies with miserable members of the herd.

It is this very power to tempt the strong to identify with the weak, thus subverting confidence in their own superiority, that, I suggest, Nietzsche most fears about 'great *Mitleid*' or compassion. Hence the polemic, hence the passionate rhetoric of his objections. For Nietzsche certainly has no objections to feeding the hungry! Indeed, it would be a great mistake to conclude, as Nussbaum seems to have done, that Nietzsche rejects feeding the hungry when he rejects *Mitleid*. Feeding the hungry is perfectly all right as long as it is done from an overflow of strength, from an abundance of power,¹⁷ and not from *Mitleid*, especially not from 'great *Mitleid*' – that's simply too dangerous!

Thus we can give an unequivocal 'no' in answer to the question whether Nietzsche believed that pity is all there is to *Mitleid*, since, quite obviously, Nietzsche was well aware of at least some of the distinctive features of compassion. As we have seen, the distinctive feature Nietzsche gives particular attention to is the effect compassion can have on its givers when it tempts them to succumb to 'deep sadness'. This particular feature Nietzsche believed to be extremely dangerous. Indeed, he considered its danger so great that he devotes much of *GM III*, 14 to illustrate and warn against it. Such as:

But there could not be a greater or more disastrous misunderstanding than that the happy, the well made, the powerful of body and soul should thus start to doubt their *right to happiness* [...] away with this disgraceful softening of feelings! That the sick *do not* make the healthy sick [...] should surely be the highest viewpoint on earth [...] but that requires above all else that the healthy remain *separated* from the sick, protected even from the sight of the sick so that they do not misidentify themselves with the sick [...] the higher *must* not degrade itself into a tool of the lower; the paths of distance *must* in all eternity also keep their tasks apart.

[7] Now, commonsense intuition, saturated as it is, according to Nietzsche, with values of slave morality, generally gives a positive gloss to *Mitleid* despite its occasional misgivings over pity. Nietzsche, however, dismisses compassion even more vehemently than he dismisses pity. This is, of course, not surprising given that pity is, for Nietzsche, a useless, misdirected, and, seen from the perspective of the strong, quite inconsequential outcome of slave morality, while compassion, by contrast, is much more dangerous, as we have just seen. And in order to bring home his dismissal of 'great *Mitleid*' or compassion most forcefully, the only two times Nietzsche mentions 'great *Mitleid*' in *GM III*, 14 is in conjunction with 'great disgust' or 'great nausea' [*Ekel*]. Thus, fairly near the beginning he states:

What is to be feared, what has a disastrous effect like no other disaster, that would not be the great fear of but the great *disgust* [*Ekel*] at man, likewise the great *compassion* [*Mitleid*] with man. Suppose, that these two should make one day, then unavoidably something most sinister and uncanny would immediately come into this world, the 'last will' of man, his will to nothingness, nihilism.

And right at the end of *GM III*, 14 Nietzsche urges in a conspiratorial tone:

So that we may, my friends, defend ourselves at least a while longer against the two worst plagues that may have been kept just for us – against the *great disgust* at man! against the *great compassion* with man!...

The great potential for danger and doom built by Nietzsche into this weird and unsettling combination of disgust and compassion is, I suggest, targeted directly against two of Schopenhauer's most distinctive legacies: his doctrine of compassion and his pessimism. On substituting disgust for pessimism (not a difficult thing to do), it becomes apparent why the combination of compassion with disgust-cum-pessimism can so readily lead to similar results in the philosophy of both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Giving due regard to their respective metaphysical assumptions, it can be seen without too much difficulty how easily the attitudes of compassion and disgust can combine to form a broad road leading directly to nihilism. Yet note how divergent

are the interpretations accompanying this broad road to nihilism! Schopenhauer endorses compassion, denies this world, and sees in nothingness bliss and release; while Nietzsche negates compassion, affirms this world, and dreads the very prospect of nothingness. So, while the function and potential of compassion is acknowledged by both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, they disagree, profoundly, about the desirability of what they both see as one of compassion's most distinctive results.

We can conclude, then, that unlike the case of pity which Schopenhauer could reject because not an instance of genuine *Mitleid*, both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche talk about the same thing when they talk about compassion. Obviously this does not prevent them from giving it opposing value. According to Schopenhauer, compassion is a right attitude because it reflects a true state of affairs, namely, the merely phenomenal distinctness of individuals. So that, if I give alms to a beggar, I do so, in a way, because I recognize, however vaguely, that here in front of me is someone like myself.¹⁸ But according to Nietzsche, compassion is mistaken because it leads to a weakening of the strong and thus to a levelling of distinctions by narrowing 'the pathos of distance'. And this levelling, in turn, leads to decadence and rejection of life: all of which Nietzsche deeply abhors, hence his vociferous protests in *GM* III, 14.

[8]

We have set out to answer two questions: 1) is Nietzsche's utter rejection of any form of *Mitleid* due to the fact that he is unaware of, or insensitive to, the suffering of others? and 2) does he believe that there is no more to *Mitleid* than mere pity? We have answered both questions negatively. Firstly, Nietzsche was not insensitive to the suffering of others but dreaded what he believed to be highly deplorable consequences of giving suffering a wide significance. Not, to be sure, because he was unmindful of the fact that hurt and harm are painful and damaging, but because he feared that excessive emphasis on suffering, pervasive as that is to life itself, might lead to disgust [*Ekel*], pessimism, and nihilism. Secondly, Nietzsche showed by his use of the three different kinds of objections that he was aware that there is a difference between *Mitleid* understood merely as pity and *Mitleid*

understood as compassion. And his most distinctive objection, the detrimental to givers objection, is aimed particularly at compassion as described by Schopenhauer and endeavours to prevent what Nietzsche believed to be compassion's most regrettable effect: the temptation to give in to 'deep sadness' by identifying with suffering members of the herd.

Naturally, while admiring the subtlety and initial persuasiveness of Nietzsche's objections, this is not the same as admitting that one cannot doubt the correctness of some of Nietzsche's conclusions. Criticism of Nietzsche could note, for instance, the absence of any consideration whether compassion might not at times actually benefit its recipients; or critics could ask whether 'deep sadness' is the only possible lasting effect of compassion; or, indeed, critics might wonder whether 'great disgust' and 'great compassion' do invariably go hand-in-hand. Yet, while one might rightly disagree with some of Nietzsche's conclusions, there can be no doubt that he was extraordinarily astute and profound in his observations and displayed great psychological skill in pointing out some of the less desirable consequences of pity and compassion. He well observed, for instance, that pity can be detrimental to its recipients while nonetheless being relatively safe to its givers, since nothing detrimental or demanding usually accrues to givers when the needy are kept safely at a distance. Nietzsche also noted that compassion, by contrast, can be very demanding on its givers – and thus might be deemed detrimental to them – since allowing oneself to acknowledge a common bond with sufferers might seriously undermine one's previous, and perhaps happy and self-affirmative, outlook on life.

References

For a general bibliography of Nietzsche's works in German and English see end of this volume.

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Notes

- 1 Gudrun von Tevenar: *Pity and Compassion*, University of London, 2001.
- 2 To stress the feeling for 'common humanity' in compassion is not to say that compassion cannot also be felt for other sentient beings. It can, and is indeed endorsed and promoted as such by most advocates for compassion.
- 3 On the difference between pity and compassion with regard to Schopenhauer and Nietzsche see also Cartwright [1988]. Blum [1980] has also done very insightful work on this topic. Blum states that 'compassion involves a sense of shared humanity, of regarding the other as a fellow human being. This means that the other person's suffering [...] is seen as the kind of thing that could happen to anyone, including oneself'. And Blum distinguishes this from pity where 'one holds oneself apart from the afflicted person and from their suffering, thinking of it as something that defines that person as fundamentally different from oneself. In this way the other person's condition is taken as given, whereas in compassion the person's affliction is seen as deviating from the general conditions of human flourishing. That is why pity (unlike compassion) involves a kind of condescension, and why compassion is morally superior to

- 4 pity' [pp. 511-12]. See also Arendt [1965]. Arendt's account is particularly interesting, in as much as she describes various differences between pity and compassion and relates these to public (political) and private spheres. Arendt claims, moreover, that these differences are such as to raise doubt whether pity and compassion are indeed related. 'For compassion, to be stricken with the suffering of someone else as though it were contagious, and pity, to be sorry without being touched in the flesh, are not only not the same, they may not even be related'. One of the reasons this may be so is that, according to Arendt, compassion is a passion, while pity is a mere sentiment [pp. 85-9].
- 5 All quotations from Nietzsche are my own translations.
- 6 *Daybreak* 134.
- 7 *Zarathustra II, Of Pitiers.*
- 8 *GM I, 14.*
- 9 Schopenhauer: *On the Basis of Morality*, introduction by D.E. Cartwright, Berghahn Books, Providence & Oxford, 1995; p. 164.
- 10 See Nussbaum in Schacht (ed), p. 161.
- 11 *GM III, 14.*
- 12 see Nussbaum in Schacht (ed) 1994.
- 13 For instance Cartwright in *Schopenhauer Jahrbuch* 69, 1988, pp. 557-67.
- 14 For an exception to always translating Nietzsche's *Mitleid* as pity, see reference above to Maudemarie Clark where it is translated as compassion. Yet, this too has problems, as not all the instances of *Mitleid* cited in *GM* are, on my reading, therefore, to consider using *Mitleid* as a technical term and not to translate it.
- 15 *Zarathustra II, Of Pitiers.*
- 16 *GM II, 14.*
- 17 *BGE* 260.
- 18 see Schopenhauer's metaphysical explanation of compassion in the appendix to his *On the Basis of Morality*.