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Naturalized compassion: a critique of Nussbaum on literature as education for compassionate citizenry

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Martha Nussbaum and others claim that the study of literature can make a significant contribution to political education by nurturing empathic capacities. In Nussbaum's reading of the situation, the need to promote the creation of bonds of compassion-based solidarity between co-citizens provides material for an argument to restore the study of novels, in particular the realist social novel, to its former place near the centre of the curriculum in higher education. This paper argues that the unrivalled educational value that Nussbaum ascribes to the study of novels in this regard is compelling only when one fails to appreciate that rich imaginative involvement in another's aversive state is only one of many other psychological routes to compassion. The paper begins by sketching out Nussbaum's curricular proposal. After explaining how it presupposes what is labelled the perspective-taking/compassion hypothesis, I go on to catalogue the various psychological processes which are recognized in social psychology as playing a mediating role in the experience of compassion. In closing, I argue that the educational imperative of building up of bonds compassion-based solidarity between co-citizens calls for a curricular response more varied than Nussbaum's.

Why should literature be on the curriculum? As William Casement once speculated, if one were to ask this question to any teacher prior to the cultural upheavals of the twentieth century she would give you the same confident answer: the study of literature is for moral education. Books worth reading are those which, in Casement's words, 'deepen [the reader's] understanding of the true nature of man and what is in fact proper and improper for human beings to do in the living of their lives' (1987, p. 101). Other educational goods literature might bring – enculturation and cultural renewal, the development of the imagination, personal enjoyment, literacy, familiarity with techniques of the writer's craft – were viewed as being either ancillary or incidental to literature's primary didactic role of conveying universal moral truths about human nature, the human predicament and the meaning of a life well lived (pp. 101–102).

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Whether or not Casement's statement is historically accurate, few would doubt that literature has long made bad weather of pressure to defend its value (cf. e.g. Ducasse, 1937; cited in Casement, 1987, p. 111, n. 9). Entreaties like Casement's, which call for the reunion of literature and moral education have, with the noteworthy exception of similar proposals voiced from the more traditionalist quarters of the character education movement in the USA (cf. esp. Lickona, 1991; Bennett, 1993), fallen on deaf ears. Arguments for literature's educational worth, more in line with the pragmatic spirit of the times, make inevitable reference to the 'soft skills' that the study of literature promotes – facility and clarity of written expression, imagination, critical and analytic abilities and the like. The notorious objection to this suggestion is that there seems to be no shortage of alternative educational content that might do the job just as well if not better.

It is therefore a curiosity, if not cause for celebration, to find Martha Nussbaum in her recent tome *Upheavals of thought* (2001) providing a sustained and indeed highly compelling argument against the curricular sidelining of literary studies. Here is a proposal which at once eschews narrow educational practicalities and gives new life to the traditional didactic curricular foundation of literature in moral education. The inclusion of literature in the curriculum, in particular the study of realist social novels, is integral to education for public life, Nussbaum claims, because it fosters between co-citizens bonds of solidarity forged of compassion.¹ This paper tries to make the case that the unparalleled status that Nussbaum assigns to the study of the realist social novel as an avenue to compassionate citizenry turns on a common misconception about the psychology of compassion. After sketching out Nussbaum's argument in the first section I try, in the second section, to show that it falls prey to what I call the perspective-taking/compassion hypothesis, a persistent moral-psychological folk belief according to which it is only by imagining oneself in the position of a suffering person that one can come to have feelings of compassion towards that person. The third section provides direct evidence against the perspective-taking/compassion hypothesis by presenting a summary review of the psychological literature on the various reactive (i.e. cognitively basic) and introspective (i.e. cognitively more advanced) psychological processes that mediate experiences of compassion. Without doubting that Nussbaum's ideal of compassionate citizenry should be high on the agenda in education for public life, one should concede, as I argue in the last section, that the multi-facetedness of compassionate responding calls for a more varied curricular response than the one Nussbaum advocates.

1. The realist social novel, literary imagination and compassionate citizenry

It cannot be emphasized too strongly that what I am advocating, what I want from art and literature is not erudition; it is empathy and the extension of concern. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of thought* (p. 432).

Nussbaum's argument to restore literature's central place in education for public life, principally expressed in *Upheavals of thought* (2001), both extends and brings together previous work on literature and political education in *Poetic justice* (1995)

and her own particular eudaimonistic conception of social obligation as developed, for instance, in *Women in human development* (2000) (cf. also Nussbaum, 1992). Her ambitious aim with regard to the latter is, in essence, to propose an alternative to minimalist and largely negative conceptions of citizenship obligations favoured by liberalism and long on the defensive in face of persistent critical pressure to come clean about its own clandestine substantive ethical suppositions (cf. e.g. MacIntyre, 1981; Sandel, 1982). Her more substantive alternative outlines basic social entitlements grounded in a conception of fundamental preconditions of a flourishing human life. She formulates these entitlements in terms of a set of ten 'central human capabilities'. The list includes such familiar items as life and bodily health and integrity but also identifies various sorts of possibilities of attachment to other human beings, concern for the natural world and even 'play', or the ability to 'laugh [...] and enjoy recreational activities' (2001, pp. 416–417).

To arrive at a precise formulation of the role Nussbaum thinks compassion plays in the promotion and protection of these ten capabilities requires some extrapolation. It draws on her carefully delineated cognitive view of compassion, which she calls variously 'appropriate compassion' and 'rational compassion'. In general terms, her characterization of compassion parallels that of Blum (1980) and others (e.g. Nagel, 1970; Wispé, 1986) in picturing compassion as an ethical achievement that consists in viewing the suffering of others as something to be relieved. In two different formulations, Nussbaum characterizes compassion as 'valuing another person as part of one's own circle of concern' (2001, p. 336) and as a state of 'concern to make the lot of the suffering as good, other things being equal, as it can be – because that person is an object of one's concern' (2001, p. 342). Compassion, on her account, depends further on 'empathy and the judgement of similar possibilities' (pp. 425–426), where empathy is the 'imaginative exercise of putting oneself in that person's place' (p. 342), or what is commonly known as perspective-taking. For its part, the judgement of similar possibilities is cognisance that the state of suffering is something that could happen to anyone and especially to oneself (cf. Blum, 1980 and Nussbaum, 2001, p. 342). Having a cognitive core in fallible beliefs, compassion is susceptible to misdirection and inappropriateness. In particular, Nussbaum says, when compassion goes awry it can usually be accounted for in terms of one of three judgements typically connected with compassion. The first is the judgment of 'seriousness' or mistaking trivial suffering for serious suffering (p. 415). The second is 'non-desert' or the belief that people who are suffering deserve it (p. 419), an idea with obvious parallels to the well-documented just-world hypothesis. Finally, she identifies the question of 'extended concern', the difficult and controversial issue of the degree of concern people owe to others in virtue of the special relationships – as family members, neighbours, co-citizens, co-workers, etc. – that pertain between them (p. 420). Compassion is an important ingredient of good citizenship, for Nussbaum, because compassion towards one's co-citizens is an important ingredient in (if not a precondition of) appreciating the fact that a *lack* of the basic human capacities she identifies constitutes a 'tragic predicament' (2001, p. 418) or 'catastrophe' for an individual in the sense of seriously hampering the

possibility of doing well *qua* human being (cf. 2001, p.453). In other words, compassion plays a *moral-perceptive* role in helping citizens see that there are such basic human goods. But it also plays a *moral-motivational* role of enabling one to appreciate that we owe each other the provision and protection of the conditions of human flourishing. It is these realizations, or something like them, that compassion towards one's co-citizens helps to bring to light in Nussbaum's view. The education of compassion for citizenship implies the cultivation of appropriate judgements, but also the support of extension of concern through the strengthening of the 'psychological mechanisms' of empathy and the judgement of similar possibilities (pp. 425–426). And it is in its potential for this that the study of literature holds educational pride of place.

The focal point of Nussbaum's pedagogical proposal is the 'extension of concern' and it is hard to deny that this is well-founded. Her working assumption, consistent with both common sense and contemporary knowledge in empirical psychology (cf. esp. Hoffman's review in 2000, pp. 206–213), seems *not* to be that education for rational compassion is needed as a bulwark against a generalized state of apathy, anomie or a pandemic of exaggerated self-concern. The danger, instead, is that citizens will fail to extend their natural propensity for compassion towards their kith and kin – those whom they know personally and those with whom they otherwise identify – to the strangers with whom they also share the broader social world. Basically normally functioning people, the assumed subjects of standard education (cf. Reichenbach & Oser, 1995, p. 192), in other words, need no special assistance to recognize and be motivated by the demands that their fellows' needs place on them. The pressing educational question is rather how to encourage similar (yet of course appropriate) appreciation for the needs of strangers as well.

While conceding that socialization in families will inevitably and rightly play a crucial role in the extension of concern, Nussbaum proposes that additional public support via education is in order as well. The specific curricular approach she has in mind consists partly in the promotion of empathizing conceived of as a so-called soft skill but also and unmistakably in didacticism. In this, it echoes Casement's ideal of a marriage between literature and moral education, referred to above. First, studying literature develops 'empathy': the faculty of what Kohut (1959) called other-directed vicarious introspection and what is usually referred to as perspective-taking, the ability to arrive at a comprehension of another person's experience by imagining oneself in that person's situation.² Reading stories in general (cf. 2001, pp. 426–429) and novels in particular, Nussbaum claims, 'exercises the muscles of the imagination, making people capable of inhabiting for a time the world of a different person, and seeing the meaning of events in that world from the outsider's viewpoint' (2001, p. 431). The second, more didactic orientation of the approach, begins, she says, by asking what groups student-citizens 'are likely to understand easily and what groups might need more mental exercise before empathy can take hold' (p. 430). The answer to this question provides the educator with a criterion for selecting novels which encourage the creation of 'bonds of identification and sympathy' (1995, p. 7) with the groups with whom pupils are less likely to empathize.

While recognizing that music, especially the Blues, can be ‘powerful sources of compassionate imagining’ (2001, p. 431) she argues convincingly that the artistic form of the novel, especially in its realist social mode – such classics as Dickens’ *Hard times*, Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible man*, Steinbeck’s *The grapes of wrath* and Richard Wright’s *Native son* – is especially well suited to the task. To give a sense of the kind of empathic engagement that novels encourage, she explains how a reader of *Hard times* might respond to Dickens’s account of the lives of factory workers in nineteenth-century England. The reader, she says, would see that, while the lives of factory workers in her own society is less harsh than in the past, in some equally important respects they are very much the same, in particular in respect of ‘certain very general norms of human flourishing’ and a corresponding evaluation of ‘what is serious damage to a life and what is not’ (1995, p. 7). As she summarizes the idea in *Poetic justice* (1995), social realist novels:

[...] present persistent forms of human need and desire realized in specific social situations. These situations frequently, indeed usually, differ a good deal from the reader’s own. Novels, recognizing this, in general construct and speak to an implicit reader who shares with the characters certain hopes, fears and general human concerns, and who for that reason is able to form bonds of identification and sympathy with them, but who is also situated elsewhere and needs to be informed about the concrete situation of the characters. In this way, the very structure of the interaction between the text and its imagined reader invites the reader to see how the mutable features of society and circumstances bear on the realization of shared hopes and desires. (p. 7)

By reading the right books and through the connected exercise of the imagination the reader is able to become in one sense a participant in the protagonists’ social struggles. This constitutes the provision of a form of moral perception or insight that the dry didactic learning of ‘facts about classes, races, nationalities, sexual orientations’ – that is, the usual substance of political, social and economic history (2001, p. 432) – does not so readily afford.

This, in brief, is the ‘vital political function’ (p. 433) that the arts play in Nussbaum’s assessment: first, they cultivate the imaginative or empathic abilities central to political life and, through the reading of judiciously selected realist social novels, support the extension of concern. The bonds of sympathy and identification that reading these books helps to create between otherwise estranged and compassionately detached citizens give substance to the very idea of the obligations of citizenship as Nussbaum conceives them: that our views about human freedom, functioning and flourishing, ideas that so readily and spontaneously generate demands on us in the case of our kith and kin, make similar demands on us in the case of all citizens (2001, pp. 432–433). No mere recital of facts and statistics can achieve this. Only literature, Nussbaum claims, is up to the task.

2. The perspective-taking/compassion hypothesis: a folk belief?

Compassion is not a simple feeling-state, but a complex emotional attitude toward another, characteristically involving imaginative dwelling on the condition of the other person. [...]. The degree of imaginative reconstruction need not be great. [...]. But [for

another person to feel compassion towards me] she must at least dwell in her imagination on the fact that I am distressed. So some imaginative representation is a necessary condition for compassion. Lawrence Blum (1980), *Compassion*, pp. 509–510.

However attractive Nussbaum's proposal might be on first blush, it does make some controversial if not downright rosy suppositions. First, it raises the problem of transference – namely, whether, as she assumes, compassion towards characters in novels will translate into compassion for real and living members of whatever groups that its characters are meant to represent. Second, there is the practical difficulty of the judicious choice of novels. In all but the most homogeneous – and therefore increasingly rare – social contexts, generalizations about any group of students' prejudices are rarely forthcoming. Moreover, it cannot be taken for granted that literary expression which deals with a case of inter-group alienation is accessible and extant. Where, for instance, is a teacher to turn when in her classroom the most salient sources of social division are between African-Americans and Koreans, or between conservative and moderate Sikhs? Third, just how any particular student reacts to a literary work is unpredictable. In the worst-case scenario, reading about struggles for social justice in realist social novels might in fact deepen pre-existing antipathies among some students. Social realist novels are not reputed for their impartial treatment of controversial socio-historical issues because their authors almost always take them on *primarily* as normative rather than descriptive projects. Consequently, students who are not already disposed to sympathize with the novels' protagonists might perceive this type of literary study as an exercise in the confirmation of prejudices. In my own experience instructing in courses which address social issues with teenagers, students have described this kind of course content as 'manipulative', admittedly not a felicitous word choice. What they mean by this and what they claim is that it further entrenches their own views (views many people would consider to be reactionary or even openly racist) because, as they perceive it, it not only fails to fairly represent 'their' or 'our' side of the story but, adding insult to injury, pretends to adopt a neutral stance. Their main concern is not for themselves, as it turns out, but for the education of the other students in the class. Their ignorance of matters leaves them vulnerable to nefarious influence of the teacher whose authority enables him to pass off his personal opinion as if it were gospel truth. But, alas, the more common response to literature is no response at all.

Nussbaum does not face these problems and I wish merely to register them here, preferring to pursue another concern. That is, why does she invest *books* with this particular power to foster compassion? Why, in other words, does she opt for a literary approach and not one that, say, attempts to foster bonds of sympathy with *actual human beings* qua members of whichever group to which one judges concern needs to be extended rather than with *fictional characters* representing those groups in books? Why not skip the middle man, as it were?

One suspects, perhaps, that Nussbaum is recommending the reading of realist social novels as just *one of many ways* to publicly support empathy and the extension of concern. This, however, does not seem to be her position. She does not deny that other forms of narrative such as histories, biographies and film and expressive media

such as music, dance, theatre and poems and even ‘economic treatises’ (1995, p. 4) make a contribution to compassionate citizenry (cf. e.g. 1995, pp. 4–7; 2001, pp. 428, 431–432). There is no doubting, however, that the realist social novel holds an incomparable pride of place in her schema. The reason for this is plain: none of these other forms of expression have as much potential to develop the ability to perspective take, or imagine oneself in another person’s position. She calls this ability ‘empathy’, as we saw, and considers empathizing in this sense to be part and parcel of experiencing compassion towards another human being. Indeed, Nussbaum remarks that even when literature lacks explicitly political content, it still serves a ‘vital political function’ because it cultivates empathy, this imaginative ability she considers central to political life (p. 433). What makes the realist social novel so attractive for Nussbaum is that it is here, in the *realist social* novel, that the form of the novel, with its rich capacity to draw the reader into the lives and world of its character, converges with narratives of struggles for social justice, making for a powerful educational cocktail indeed (cf. also 1995, especially Ch. 2 and related comments in Nussbaum, 1990).

As sympathetic as one might be towards Nussbaum’s broader project to restore literature and the arts to the centre of education for public life, her proposal seems to suffer from a decisive flaw. Namely, it overestimates the role of perspective taking as a psychological mechanism which mediates compassion. Nussbaum’s assignment of the pride of place to literature and the social realist novel in this schema rests on her uncritical acceptance of what could be called the perspective-taking/compassion hypothesis – i.e. that the principal psychological mechanism which mediates experiences of compassion is other-directed vicarious introspection or ‘empathy’. To put the point counterfactually, if compassion did not suppose a process of perspective-taking with a person *qua* object of compassion, as she assumes, the grounds for her prioritisation of literature over other narrative expressive forms would be lost. The properly directed stimulation of imaginative development is the royal road to compassionate citizenship only if compassion actually has rich imaginative content.

Before going on to substantiate the claim that compassion is not always and is by no means necessarily an imaginatively much less a cognitively complex affair, it would not seem entirely out of place to briefly draw attention to the apparent scale of Nussbaum’s oversight. Far from just being some isolated, understandable error on Nussbaum’s part, the notion that perspective taking is *the* genetic psychological process behind experiences of compassion, I wish to claim, is an erroneous intuitive or pre-psychological attribute ascription – that is to say, it is a bit of folk psychology – which has been endemic to philosophical discussions of compassion from at least Adam Smith to the present. This is not the appropriate forum in which to attempt to do justice to the presumptuous claim that one would be hard-pressed to find a published philosophical discussion of compassion that fails to either presuppose or explicitly argue that perspective taking is a psychological *sine qua non* of the experience of compassion. So as a poor substitute let me instead float by the reader a small number of key references which s/he may pursue at leisure and inclination:

Adam Smith (1790/1976), author of what is generally considered to be the most sophisticated moral sense theory in the English-language philosophical tradition; Lawrence Blum (1980) whose work is widely cited in the field of moral psychology and philosophy of the emotions; and, finally, Robert Gordon, a cognitive theorist of some repute who has written extensively on ‘mental simulation’ (i.e. perspective taking) with an eye, ironically, to arguing that the overestimation of its role in social-psychological processes is itself a reflection of folk psychology (cf. Gordon, 1986, 1995, 1996).

3. Psychological mechanisms mediating compassion: reactive and introspective processes

To summarize, empathic distress is a multidetermined, hence reliable human response. The three preverbal modes are crucial in childhood especially in face-to-face situations, but they continue to operate past childhood and provide an important involuntary dimension to empathy throughout life. They not only enable a person to respond to whatever cues are available but they also compel him or her to do that – instantly, automatically, and outside of conscious awareness. (Hoffman, 2000, p. 61)

The previous section argued that the unrivalled educational value that Nussbaum ascribes to the study of realist social novels as a means of promoting compassionate citizenry is compelling only if one supposes that perspective taking is the principal psychological mechanism which mediates compassion. There, I also made an unsupported assertion that this is a moral-psychological folk belief; this section aims to substantiate this claim.

As it is normally construed, the term ‘folk belief’ applies generally to any unreflective or intuitive attribution. While the term connotes falsehood, the main criterion qualifying a belief as a folk belief, however, is not that it is mistaken but rather that it is held without evidence; folk beliefs can and have withstood empirical scrutiny. A question may be raised regarding whether some intuitively held commitment might be too technical to count as a genuine folk belief. For example, whether or not we accept Gilbert Harman’s (1999) case, based allegedly on the results of the famous Hartshorne and May studies of the 1920s, that ‘there is no empirical basis for the existence of character traits’ (p. 315) all but a small minority versed in contemporary social psychology would without hesitation assent that people do have the kinds of dispositions of thought and action associated with character. In contrast, the belief that perspective-taking is necessarily involved in experiences of the moral emotion referred to variously as ‘compassion’, ‘sympathy’ and ‘empathy’ – whatever it is called, that emotional attitude wherein another’s suffering is perceived as something to be removed (cf. Blum, 1980; Wispé, 1986; Nagel, 1970) – is perhaps less susceptible to being considered folk moral psychology if only because, were one to ask the proverbial man on the Clapham omnibus his opinion on the matter, chances are that he would admit to never really ever having thought about that before. The question of whether the perspective-taking/compassion hypothesis is a genuine folk belief on the grounds that it might be too

technical will remain open, but there seems little doubt that subjecting it to reflection and scrutiny shows that, if it is, it needs rectification.

The claim that the perspective-taking/compassion hypothesis is a moral-psychological folk belief is not of course that compassion *never* involves imaginative reconstruction. No great psychological acumen, however, seems required in order to see that it is at least *not obvious* that experiences of compassion always or even characteristically rally its insights. As the most cursory reflection seems to confirm, it is quite difficult to say with certainty whether, for instance, the pang of compassion one might feel viewing that famous picture of Emmett Till's hysterical mother standing over her murdered son's open casket involves – or, more precisely, is somehow the emotional issue of – a cognitive process of perspective-taking where one imagines what it would be like to be her. Might it not be explainable instead by appeal to some process of 'labelling' – that is, on the basis of common knowledge about a mother's feelings at the loss of a child – by reference to something intangible in the pained look on her face and how it contrasts with the expression of everyday happiness on their faces in the small photo of them together pinned above the coffin, or by thinking about how one feels about one's own children and what it would be like to be in her position? Most likely, of course, any compassion that this photograph might inspire is traceable to a *combination* of such factors. These doubts would seem to call for a more nuanced account of the psychological processes associated with compassion which, happily, is provided for amply in reviews of empirical literature on the cognitive processes involved in empathy and sympathy by Hoffmann (2000), Eisenberg *et al.*, (1991) and Davis (1994). These authors identify at least seven interrelated processes: conditioning, mimicry, direct association, language-mediated association, cognitive networking, labelling and finally perspective taking. These processes can, in turn, be analysed in terms of two broad categories according to whether the experience of compassion evoked is best understood as a response or reaction to some particular feature, element or characteristic of the object of compassion or his circumstances or whether they are based on the empathiser's beliefs about the object of compassion's internal states – i.e. her feeling, thoughts, perceptions, etc. For this reason, I label the first category 'reactive processes' and the latter 'introspective processes' and this distinction frames the brief discussion of these processes that follows.

Reactive processes

One relatively elementary way that human beings may come to have feelings of compassion is via conditioning. In cases where a person's own distress in the past has become linked with certain stimuli – for instance, the sight of blood, a frowning face or the sound of weeping – these cues can elicit distressing feelings (cf. e.g. Afronreed, 1968; Lanzetta & Orr, 1986, Hoffman, 2000). As Eisenberg *et al.*, (1991) are careful to point out, conditioned distress responses cannot be considered compassion unless the observer links them with another's state or condition; a sharp feeling of aversion at the sight of blood and distressed expressions at the scene of an accident is only

compassion where the viewer interprets his feelings as feelings *for* the accident victims rather than his own direct aversive reaction to the cues themselves (p. 68).

Mimicry, the physical imitation of another person's emotional expression, is another rather rudimentary and automatically occurring process that may provoke compassion. Mimicry is a phenomenon widely associated with empathy in the broader sense; who has never caught herself involuntarily imitating through subtle changes in facial expression or posture while intensely involved in another person's situation? The question of interest here, however, is not whether such mimicry is the *result* of vicarious introspection or compassion but rather the somewhat counter-intuitive proposal that it might *trigger* empathic feelings. The phenomenon of 'afferent feedback' (i.e. that imitation produces feelings in the imitator that affectively match those of the imitated), anticipated in William James' and Carl G. Lange's idiosyncratic 'feeling theory' of the emotions (cf. James, 1884), was the subject of a number of studies conducted from the mid-1970s to the early 1990s which aimed to isolate the effect of sheer physical position of the face on affective perception (cf. e.g. Adelman & Zajonc, 1989; Hatfield, Cacioppo & Rapson, 1992). They all seemed to provide good evidence, in Hoffman's (2000) estimation, that 'people's emotional experience tends to be influenced by the facial expressions they adopt' (p. 41).³

The last process to be discussed under the heading of reactive processes underlying compassion is what Hoffman (2000) calls 'direct association'. As the name indicates, this process triggers feelings of compassion via an associative connection between either a particular feature of another person's experience of suffering or the situation generally and some traumatic or distressing event in the observer's own past. To illustrate the latter variety, Hoffman (2000) cites a student's interpretation of her having gone to great lengths to help a man who had fallen and hit his head in terms of very intense feelings of sympathy evoked by being reminded of her own similar accident (p. 48; cf. also Humphrey, 1922). Clearly, direct association is a sub-class of conditioning, the difference residing in the characterization of direct association as involving the pairing of distress scenarios or distress cues with the empathizer's own past similar experiences rather than discrete stimuli such as a facial expression or blood.

Introspective processes

As noted above, the introspective processes connected with compassion have the common feature of being centrally, to borrow Kohut's (1959) term, 'information gathering activities' – i.e. compassion evoked is a response to insight into another person's inner states.

What Hoffman (2000) calls 'verbally mediated association' and what Davis (1994) refers to as 'language mediated association' refer to a very broad set of situations in which spoken or written language (as opposed to, say, so-called body language or other visual or audio cues) plays a central role in communicating a person's feelings or her empathy-evoking situation. However, as Hoffman (2000)

seems to suggest, language-mediated association goes beyond the mere involvement of language since emotionally charged words – words, say, like ‘holocaust’, ‘cancer’ and ‘failure’ – might trigger empathic responses via conditioning or direct association (cf. p. 49). Rather, Hoffman (2000) thinks that typical instances of mediated association involve some form of narrative in which ‘the victim’s emotionally distressed state is communicated through language’ (p. 49). Naturally, in the presence (actual or virtual) of the sufferer the empathiser may pick up expressive cues such as facial expressions, tone of voice and posture through conditioning, association and mimicry. Thus, the most unalloyed instances of mediated association – in the sense of minimizing the intervention of other arousal modes – would appear to be the interpretation of texts.

As for the ‘association’ dimension of language-mediated association, the question of whether and if, in Hoffman’s view, language-mediated association has a unique identity *vis-à-vis* other arousal modes is not clear. Given what we have seen about direct association, one would expect that language-mediated association would constitute something parallel to what Blum (1980) refers to as ‘identification’ where compassion is amplified by the fact that the empathiser has had some similar traumatic personal experience or possibly has some other salient point in common with the sufferer, thoughts of which the sufferer’s narrative evoke (pp. 509–510). Gibbs suggests a safe solution to this problem: language-mediated association refers to situations where a person’s distress or distressing condition is communicated via language (merely as opposed to some other means) while bearing in mind that such communication can coincide with or set off other arousal modes such as perspective taking or ‘identification’ (cf. 2003, p. 82).

Eisenberg never fails to caution against overestimating the role of perspective taking in discrimination of others’ emotional states and, in a related way, against the assumption that such introspection is necessarily a cognitively complex affair (cf. Eisenberg *et al.*, 1991; Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987; Eisenberg, Murphy & Shepard, 1997). A case in point, as Eisenberg *et al.* (1991) see it, is ‘labelling’, the process in which an inference about a person’s inner state draws on, in their words, ‘a basic knowledge of the meanings associated with perceptual cues’ (p. 68). So, for instance, a person’s assessment of the inner state of someone attending a funeral may reflect the view that people attending funerals are generally sad or, extending the idea to groups of people, the average denizen of a Western society may view, say, a Roma family on the streets of Paris or Barcelona to be in a state of despair given what is generally believed about the socio-economic conditions of the Roma. Like conditioning, mimicry and direct association labelling is presumed to be largely involuntary and unreflective (p. 68).

Eisenberg *et al.* (1991) identify a second process mediated by ‘elaborated cognitive networks’, by which inferences about another’s inner states are drawn independently of perspective taking. Quoting Kariol (1982), these authors define elaborated cognitive networking as a process whereby ‘the observation of social stimuli such as another person’s behaviour in a given setting initiates cognitive processes in which the observer attempts to match the observed event with some pre-stored chunk of

stereotyped knowledge' (p. 69). As Eisenberg *et al.* (1991) have it, the 'social stimuli' in question can be perceptual or linguistic – i.e. the actual sight of some event or action or narrative accounts – and the 'chunks of knowledge' commonly take the form of social scripts. Thus, for example, the sight of a person lying in the street surrounded by onlookers triggers inferences about how the various players feel and what actions people are inclined to take in such a situation. As the authors suggest, in addition to being a common basis for adults' beliefs about others' inner states, cognitive networking and labelling enable young children whose cognitive capacities do not, as yet, permit them to engage in perspective taking to introspect and thus possibly to experience compassion. As Nelson (1981) has shown, three-year-olds are able to recount familiar social scripts on which such inferences could be based.

Lastly we arrive at perspective taking. But since, I take it, it is agreed that perspective taking can sometimes be involved in experiencing compassion my remarks will be restricted to a point for clarification. The branch of social psychology specifically concerned with the question of how human beings come to accurately (and inaccurately) infer other people's feelings, intentions and thoughts has itself gone under the name of 'perspective-taking', 'social perspective-taking', 'role-taking' (see e.g. Shantz, 1975; Selman, 1980; Flavell, 1992) and – its latest avatar – 'empathic accuracy' (Ickes, 1997). It is therefore essential to observe that all the 'introspective processes' discussed above would be components of this basic perceptive faculty. For the sake of forestalling confusion, let us stress that my use of 'perspective taking' is inconsistent with this schema. Here, perspective taking is understood rather as one process among the other processes of labelling, mediated association and cognitive networking by which people come to make inferences about another's viewpoint, responses or inner states. What is unique about perspective taking in this sense is that it uses what Eisenberg, Murphy and Shepard (1997) call 'mental simulation' (p. 77) – imagining oneself in another's position – rather than making reference to knowledge of social scripts and past experiences. Further, one should note that perspective taking in both the broader and this narrower sense of vicarious introspection has no necessary emotional dimension but may perform only an information-gathering function connected with other people's inner states. One may, for instance, simply register another's emotional state without getting emotionally involved in it oneself. Indeed, even where one does become so emotionally involved, perspective taking by no means necessarily issues in sympathy, a fact to which emotions such as *Schadenfreude* attest.

4. A closing word on correctives to Nussbaum's proposal

Let your pupil know the fate of man and the miseries of his fellows, but do not let him witness them too often. (Rousseau (1979), *Emile*, p. 231)

Let us return now to Nussbaum's curricular proposal for promoting the extension of concern through literature and consider what the foregoing account of empathic arousal seems to suggest in regard to how it might need to be rectified.

To recap, Nussbaum's basic educational problem is how to address the extension of compassion, which she understands to be important if not indispensable to the ideal of universal appropriate compassion. This, in turn, is in her view an important ingredient in the ability of citizens to recognize their obligations to their co-citizens, obligations that exist in relation to a set of rights and entitlements conceived of as a delineation of the essential preconditions of basic human well-being. What stands in the way of such extended concern, it is implied, is the well-documented 'familiarity bias' of compassion: that people tend to have stronger feelings of empathic distress towards those whom they know or with whom they otherwise identify. Her response is to encourage the formation of such 'bonds of identification and sympathy' (1995, p. 7) with groups in young people's social context with whom they would otherwise resist empathizing. This is achieved through the reading of realist social novels which, by dint of their dramatic structure, among other things, invite them to empathize with characters in those novels representing the target groups.

In general terms, the weakness in Nussbaum's account is that, by focussing exclusively on language-mediated association, it does not recognize the multidimensionality of empathic arousal. The primary importance of the multidimensionality of empathic arousal is that it makes observers susceptible to a wide variety of cues, enabling them to respond empathically to whatever 'distress cues' happen to be available in a set of circumstances (Hoffman, 2000). Furthermore, the primitive reactive modes enable human beings with vastly different cognitive abilities to respond empathically. Most notably, conditioning, mimicry and direct association make compassion possible among young children and provide them with a stock of basic empathic experiences that may later be drawn on once the more cognitively advanced modes come on line (p. 59). Moreover, the reactive processes, operating as they do 'instantly, automatically, and outside of conscious awareness' (p. 61) impede what Hoffman (2000) calls 'empathic avoidance' (p. 61); even if one attempts to avoid exposure to the stimuli that trigger automatic empathy (e.g. by closing one's eyes or the book or focussing one's attention on something else) compassion might be triggered by some other cue in the situation. The fact that the 'reactive' empathy arousing processes are involuntary responses to immediate situational and personal cues goes some distance towards explaining, in Hoffman's assessment, what he calls the 'here-and-now bias' of compassion (p. 209): people's widely-recognized tendency to respond with greater emotional intensity to the present versus absent suffering of others (cf. also Slote, 2003). For their part, the introspective processes, especially language-mediated association and perspective taking, in addition to expanding the number of avenues of empathic stimulation, also broaden the possible range of objects of compassion to include not just people who are not present but people in situations that are entirely imaginary – characters in stories (Hoffman, 2000, p. 61, 91). Finally, given the fact that typically both the primitive and more cognitively advanced arousal mechanisms come into operation and are mutually supporting in any particular experience of compassion (see Hoffman, 2000, pp. 59–60), according to Hoffman, the multifacetedness of the empathic arousal modes

serves the adaptive function of virtually compelling a caring response to a person in a situation of distress (p. 61).

The limitations of restricting educational attempts to elicit feelings of solidarity and identification with co-citizens through language-mediated means in Nussbaum's project are apparent. It fails to draw on the full range of psychological mechanisms connected with empathic arousal. In particular, it neglects the potential contribution that the reactive mechanisms have to make in compassion-eliciting experiences. Owing to this, Nussbaum treats childhood primarily as a period of latency where the principal achievement is the development of the imagination viewed as a 'soft skill' in preparation for fully-fledged compassion which comes only at a later stage (2001, cf. pp. 426–428). This underestimates children's capacity for compassion and identification for reasons already elaborated upon.

More to the point, perhaps, recall that Nussbaum is concerned with the promotion of compassion primarily as a means of overcoming students' failure to extend concern to certain social groups with whom they would be unlikely to fully empathize. In this regard, the familiarity bias of compassion which appears as an obstacle to be overcome in Nussbaum's schema, could in fact be viewed in another sense as a *resource* in the promotion of a compassionate citizenry, especially among children, who due to immature cognitive abilities are unlikely to form strong bonds of identification via language mediation and other cognitively demanding avenues. More promise resides, certainly, in the use of habitual face-to-face encounters. Both quasi-curricular means – service learning, visiting speakers and the like – as well as more radical institutional measures – affirmative action and serious attempts to minimize segregation in schools along social, economic and ethnic lines would seem to be further ways that public support can be given to appropriate compassion as a prophylactic against restricted concern towards co-citizens. In this connection, the ideal of extended concern holds interest as a cosmopolitan alternative to proposed identity-based nationalist grounds for the promotion of the civic virtue of solidarity (e.g. Kymlicka, 1999), and could be developed in the justification of the claim that the requirements of citizenship in liberal democracies necessitate universal common schooling at least at some point in the educational process (cf. also Gutmann, 1987; Callan, 1995). That said, it must be acknowledged that in the liberal-democratic context such proposals would also be subject to what Barrows (1975) once referred to disparagingly as the 'Manfred syndrome': qualification in the name of individual negative freedom (pp. 177–178).

In the case of students approaching maturity and who need educational support for the extension of concern – Nussbaum's implicit principal target group – there seems to be no reason to deny that attempts to foster empathy for certain social groups using narratives of their struggles to create bonds of sympathy and identification have a unique contribution to make to the extension of concern. But the multidimensionality of compassionate arousal and, again, its reactive dimension in particular would suggest that if one was forced to identify *one single* medium of communication that is of outstanding value in its potential to foster the appreciation of certain groups' historico-social situations as 'tragic predicaments' à

la Nussbaum we might have a more promising candidate in the realist social *film* – films such as *Philadelphia*, *Schindler's list*, *Norma Rae* and *Dead man walking* – not the realist social novel. That said, the length of novels and the opportunities for character development and rich identification and the opportunity for imaginative development they provide are advantages novels have over films. The truth of the matter, surely, is that even within a relatively homogeneous group of human beings as, for instance, in 200-seat lecture hall brimming with undergraduates, one will find a variety of abilities and dispositions. To put the point in terms used in Gardner's (1983) not uncontroversial theory of multiple intelligences, for those with strong linguistic-verbal intelligence, one can reasonably suppose that the most effective avenue to appropriate compassion is the realist social novel. For interpersonally intelligent people, it is likely to be things like service learning and other face-to-face experiences. For visually-spatially oriented minds, it might be the visual and plastic arts, theatre or the synaesthetic experience of a contemporary feature film. Among those with musical-rhythmic intelligence, much could be said in favour of listening to and even performing music. Finally, and though it might be difficult for the literary-minded to appreciate, the logical or mathematically minded might be most deeply moved by the facts and statistics that populate the pages of textbooks on sociology and economic development. In short, the fact that a broad palette of psychological processes is genetically involved in experiences of compassion, coupled with the fact that human beings, even within the same age and developmental ranges, have widely differing psychological capacities for compassion, speaks in favour of using a rich variety of approaches to the promotion of a compassionate citizenry and strongly against any one-sided diets.

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Notes

1. Both Greene (1995) and Noddings (1998) have argued along similar lines but Nussbaum's (1995; 2001) treatment is by far the most clear-sighted, structured and theoretically rich. Rumblings of a revival of the didactic justification for the curricular inclusion of literature are perceivable in neo-Aristotelian educational circles. See, for instance, Carr (2005) and Walton (2002).
2. Here the waters of terminological confusion run deep since different commentators in different fields both habitually use the same term, most frequently 'empathy', to designate the analytically distinct psychological phenomena of (i) coming to have beliefs about other's inner

states ('Bob is sad') (e.g. Rogers, 1975) and (ii) emotional responses connected with such beliefs ('I feel sad because Bob is sad') (Batson, Sympson & Hindman, 1996; Hoffman, 2000). If that weren't sufficiently confounding, one can also discern the use of different terms to refer to the same phenomenon. For instance, feelings of involvement in another person's suffering are referred to as 'empathy', as already indicated, but also 'sympathy' (e.g. Smith, 1790/1976 and Nagel, 1970) and 'compassion' (e.g. Nussbaum, 2001 and Blum, 1980). Insight into other's states, for its part, is referred to as 'mental simulation' (e.g. Gordon, 1996), 'empathic accuracy' (Ickes, 1997), 'perspective-taking' or 'social perspective-taking' (Selman, 1980) and 'other-directed vicarious introspection' (Kohut, 1959). To make matter even worse, the failure to clearly distinguish between the two is not uncommon, as seems to be the case in Adam Smith's work in particular and in contemporary social psychology in general. For discussions of these issues see Eisenberg & Strayer (1987), Wispé (1986) and Verducci (2000). For obvious reasons, I follow here Nussbaum's use of 'compassion' and the use in ordinary language of 'perspective-taking', but see my qualification on this point below.

3. One particularly memorable experiment, conducted by Strack, Martin and Stepper in 1988, involved taping golf tees to either side of the foreheads of a group of hapless undergraduates and, in an effort to have them hold their faces in an unwitting frown, instructing them to 'move the tees together'. Their emotional responses to photographs of starving children and other sad scenes were then measured and the test group, those with the golf tees taped to their foreheads, were judged by the investigators to have perceived the scenes as sadder than had the control group (see Hoffman, 2000, p. 41).

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