SELF-TRANSCENDENCE THROUGH SHARED SUFFERING: AN INTERSUBJECTIVE THEORY OF COMPASSION

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ABSTRACT: The value of compassion has often been appraised in terms of its benefits to the recipient, or its contribution to civil society. Less attention has been paid to the positive effect it may have upon the protagonists themselves, partly because compassion ostensibly appears to involve mainly dysphoric emotions (i.e., sharing another’s suffering). However, driven by the question of why traditions such as Buddhism and Christianity esteem compassion so highly, in this article, a theory of compassion is proposed that focuses on its transformative potential. In particular, I argue that compassion inherently involves a process of self-transcendence, enabling people to enter into an intersubjective state of selfhood. Drawing on Buddhist and Christian ideas, I then suggest that this intersubjective state is not only an antidote to the protagonists’ own suffering, but can accelerate their psychospiritual development. Thus, the article offers a new perspective on compassion that allows us to fully appreciate its transpersonal and transformative potential.

KEYWORDS: compassion, suffering, intersubjectivity, development, spirituality.

Compassion has an enigmatic, sphinx-like quality. On the one hand, its etymology defines it as a negative emotional state, deriving as it does from the Latin terms *com* (with) and *pati* (to suffer). As Schulz et al. (2007, p.6) put it, compassion involves “a sense of shared suffering, combined with a desire to alleviate or reduce such suffering.” This would seem to identify compassion as a dysphoric experience, energising the person into striving to reduce or eliminate this state. And yet, it is not uncommon to find compassion heralded in affirmative terms as a desirable quality. For instance, in Compton’s (2005, p.4) *Introduction to Positive Psychology*, compassion sits happily in an ‘A-Z’ of topics alongside undeniably ‘positive’ qualities and outcomes such as happiness, creativity and savouring. Going further, many religious and spiritual traditions, from Christianity (St. Thomas Aquinas, 1273/1981) to Buddhism (H.H. the Dalai Lama, 1997), exalt compassion in the highest possible terms as the most important and elevated of human qualities. The question driving this article then is, given its seemingly dysphoric qualities, why is compassion so valorised by most major religious and spiritual traditions? Certainly, it is generally recognised in society that compassion is conducive to civic harmony and the upholding of the social contract (Porter, 2006). However, when Buddhism is expressly defined as a “religion of compassion” (Price, 2010, p.53), clearly compassion holds some deeper significance beyond simply contributing to the creation and maintenance of a lawful society.
In this article then, one explanation for the significance of compassion is offered, based around the issue of personal identity. In essence, I argue that feelings of compassion serve to shift one’s sense of identity from an individualised locus to a more ‘intersubjective’ mode of being. This shift is of crucial significance for the esteem in which compassion is held, for the following sequence of reasons: (a) traditions like Buddhism regard individualised modes of selfhood as the fundamental cause of unhappiness, with attachment to and pre-occupation with one’s limited ‘ego’ being the root of suffering, (b) overcoming or transcending this narrow sense of selfhood is therefore the key to alleviating such suffering, (c) cultivating compassion – i.e., identifying with another person and sharing in their feelings – is a powerful and direct way of overcoming/transcending such selfhood, and (d) therefore, while ostensibly involving negative emotions, at a deeper level, compassion serves to alleviate one’s own suffering, and engenders psychospiritual development. This theory will be elucidated here over the course of three sections. In the first section, I examine some of the ways in which compassion has been conceptualised, both in contemporary academia and in religious/spiritual traditions. The second section then introduces various models of selfhood, and suggests that in contrast to the ‘individualistic’ sense of self that many people commonly experience, compassion allows one to experience self-transcendence and enter into a more ‘intersubjective’ mode of identity. Finally, I explore how self-transcendence and consequent intersubjective selfhood may be beneficial to wellbeing, with potentially profound consequences in terms of psychospiritual development.

**COMPASSION**

This first section elucidates various perspectives on compassion, to better understand the nature of the concept. I begin by highlighting contemporary academic perspectives, before engaging with views from religious/spiritual traditions such as Buddhism and Christianity (since, as emphasised above, the key question driving the formulation of this article is why these traditions place such great emphasis on compassion). Most contemporary psychological models of compassion construe it as being multifaceted. For example, Neff (2003, p. 224), a prominent theorist on compassion, defines it as “being open to and moved by the suffering of others, so that one desires to ease their suffering.” Unpacking this definition, one can see that compassion is understood as comprising multiple components. For instance, Ozawa-de Silva, Dodson-Lavelle, Raison, Negi, Silva, and Phil (2012) suggest that compassion includes (a) cognition (the ability to empathically recognise emotions in others), (b) emotion (experiencing sympathetic distress), (c) motivation (the will to reduce the other’s suffering); and (d) behaviour (a consequent action). Thus, according to this formulation, compassion not only encompasses conceptually related qualities such as empathy (“an emotional reaction in an observer to the affective state of another individual” [Blair, 2005, p.699]) and sympathy (“feelings of sorrow or concern for another’s welfare” [Eisenberg & Miller, 1987, p.92]), but is arguably more comprehensive in that it also involves motivation and behaviour (Eisenberg, 2002). (I say arguably since some models
of empathy also include behavioural components e.g., Morse, Anderson, Bottorff, Yonge, O’Brien, Solberg, & McIlveen [1992].) Thus, in compassion, one suffers with the other, and acts to relieve his or her suffering as if it were one’s own (which, in a sense, it is, since one is sharing in their suffering).

A large proportion of the academic work on compassion is focused on simply accounting for and justifying its existence. Much of this work defines its task in the context of evolutionary theory, a perspective which theorists are frequently compelled to address. That is, for many scientists and philosophers, compassion is a perplexing phenomenon, since it appears to challenge the evolutionary principle of universal egoism (Batson, 1991), which holds that living beings have only managed to thrive in evolutionary terms by focusing on their own self-serving interests. From a strict evolutionary biology point of view, caring for others who do not share our genes goes against one’s reproductive prerogatives (Workman & Reader, 2014), as famously encapsulated in Dawkins’ (1976) notion of the selfish gene. Some models purport to explain this seeming paradox through the overlapping notion of rational choice theory (Ostrom, 1998): as with evolutionary biology, this theory also views human behaviour as ultimately motivated by self-interest; compassion is thus understood and explained as ultimately serving some self-interest. For example, Cialdini, Schaller, Houlihan, Arps, Fultz, and Beaman (1987) argue that people act compassionately primarily to reduce their own feelings of distress (evoked by the other’s pain). Similarly, Trivers (1971) argues that compassionate acts can be self-serving since they help the actor to cultivate a good reputation, thereby increasing the likelihood that the actor will be reciprocally rewarded in future.

However, such rational choice explanations are undermined somewhat by the very existence of the compassionate impulse; that is, even if people are motivated to help others in order to reduce their own distress, as Cialdini et al. (1987) contend, this interpretation does not explain why they feel distress in response to the other’s suffering in the first place. As Batson (1991) points out, with compassion people are first and foremost genuinely moved by another’s distress, even if other motives subsequently contribute to their decision to respond. The existence of this primordial empathy is reflected in the recent discovery of mirror neurons (Gallese, 2001) – here researchers have found that brain regions that are activated when a person experiences an emotion are likewise activated when the same emotion is observed in another person (Preston & De Waal, 2002). Recognising the primacy of empathic concern, Batson (1991) has formulated an ‘empathy-altruism’ hypothesis; this position holds that, in contrast to the universal egoism model, people can and do genuinely care for the wellbeing of others, regardless of whether it benefits them personally. This perspective can still be interpreted in evolutionary terms, albeit in a way that diverges from the classical universal egoism stance; as Goetz, Keltner, and Simon-Thomas (2010, p.351) put it (in the context of a recent theoretical review), it appears that “compassion evolved as a distinct affective experience whose primary function is to facilitate cooperation and protection of the weak and those who suffer.” As will be discussed below, this benign view of human nature is shared by traditions such as Buddhism, which
sees people as being fundamentally compassionate (H.H. the Dalai Lama, 2002, p.70) – even if this nature can get corrupted or obscured.

However, even if it could be argued that compassion was a natural and inherent feature of humanity, this in itself would not be sufficient to justify the recommendation that one should be compassionate. Claims to naturalness are not in themselves grounds for valorisation; after all, many undesirable traits, such as aggression, can likewise be construed as ‘natural’ (Book, Starzyk, & Quinsey, 2001). Furthermore, one can even find theorists who argue against the utility and value of compassion. For instance, there is an ‘anti-compassion’ tradition in philosophy, associated most prominently with Nietzsche, (1887/1969), who argued that it is ultimately detrimental to both giver and recipient (since it hinders the latter from developing self-sufficiency). Expressing a different concern, drawing on the examples of the American and French revolutions, Arendt (1963) cautioned that compassion (e.g., for people marginalised by the powerful) could easily morph into violence (against the powerful). Then there are those who simply highlight the potential burden of compassion upon the giver – so-called ‘compassion fatigue.’ Here there is a wealth of literature revealing the potential emotional strain borne by people in long-term caring roles, from those looking after family members (Figley, 1997) to people in the helping professions (Schulz et al., 2007). While the latter concern does not undermine the value of compassion – rather, it shows the importance of carers themselves receiving compassion and support – it still gives pause for thought in terms of arguing that one should be compassionate.

However, contrasting these cautionary perspectives, one can find numerous voices – from diverse areas of enquiry and scholarship – advocating for the value of compassion. The most obvious argument in favour of compassion is that it benefits the recipient, as highlighted in empirical studies from applied disciplines, from medicine (Scott, 2013) to management (Frost, 1999). A related point – one that is arguably even more fundamental from a societal perspective – is that compassion may be one of the key conditions for civilisation itself. For instance, Schopenhauer (1840/1995) saw compassion as the foundation for all morality, and the solution to the “great mystery of ethics” (p.144). Schopenhauer disagreed with philosophers such as Kant (1785/2002), who suggested that morality was upheld through people rationally assenting to a system of laws, as reflected in Kant’s notion of the categorical imperative (i.e., act in ways that you would will to become a general law). In contrast, Schopenhauer felt that the only viable foundation for a moral framework was the blunt fact that people care in some basic way about the wellbeing of others.

Building on Schopenhauer’s insights, Ozawa-de Silva et al. (2012, p.158) identify compassion as “the most stable foundation for a secular ethics,” since it is based on the “fundamental human aspiration” towards happiness, and thus “transcends religious, cultural, and philosophical divides.” Moreover, Ozawa-de Silva et al. have developed a practical form of ‘cognitively-based compassion training’ to help engender exactly this kind of ethical sensibility. Indeed, recent years have seen the development of a number of compassion training
programmes, and of major research centers specialising in compassion, like Stanford’s Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education. This center has created a nine-week Compassion Cultivation Training (CCT) intervention, which a randomised controlled trial found to be effective in promoting the three main ‘domains’ of compassion (compassion for others, self-compassion, and receiving compassion) (Jazaieri et al., 2013). Other relevant programmes include Compassion Meditation Training (Ruchelli, Chapin, Darnall, Seppala, Doty, & Mackey, 2014) and Loving-Kindness Meditation (Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, & Finkel, 2008).

However, from a motivational perspective, somewhat more intriguing and potentially powerful are indications that compassion also benefits the giver too. Reporting on the same CCT randomised controlled trial as Jazaieri et al. (2013), Jazaieri, McGonigal, Jinpa, Doty, Gross, and Goldin (2014) found that CCT resulted in participants experiencing increased happiness, as well as decreased worry. Indeed, Galante, Galante, Bekkers, and Gallacher (2014) conducted a meta-analysis of 22 randomised controlled trials of compassion-based meditation techniques and found that these were effective at reducing self-reported depression and enhancing positive emotions in the protagonist. Going further, while compassion may involve empathic feelings of distress, it is possible that it may, at the same time, also be pleasurable in a paradoxical way. For instance, it has been noted that many dramatic forms, such as Greek tragedy, draw their power from articulating themes of suffering; while these themes can elicit a compassionate response from viewers, at the same time they may facilitate a type of catharsis that can be deeply relieving and redemptive (Stanford, 2014).

Relating to this latter point, perhaps the most powerful articulation in favour of compassion can be found in religious and spiritual traditions, such as Buddhism and Christianity. In these, compassion is not only upheld as a strong basis of morality, as per Schopenhauer (1840/1995), but is asserted as being of fundamental benefit and importance to the giver themselves (in a way that seems to go far beyond the utility suggested by Galante et al. (2014)). Taking Buddhism first, the importance of compassion (karunā in Pali) is underlined by the fact that it is one of the four core qualities (brahma-viharas – literally ‘divine abidings’) upheld as being central to psychospiritual development, alongside loving-kindness (mettā), sympathetic joy (muditā), and equanimity (upekkha) (Hofmann, Grossman, & Hinton, 2011). Moreover, compassion is often constructed as being pre-eminent among these four virtues. For example, Buddhism is often described as a “religion of compassion” (Price, 2010, p.53), with H. H. the Dalai Lama calling compassion the ‘essence’ of Buddhism (Barad, 2007). Why this may be the case will be explored in the third section of this article; for now though, we might briefly note the words of H. H. the Dalai Lama (1999, p.75), who suggested that if we cultivate compassion, we “will discover that when we reach beyond the confines of narrow self-interest, our hearts become filled with strength. Peace and joy become our constant companion[s].”

Compassion is likewise exalted in Christianity. For instance, in his Epistle to the Corinthians, St. Paul wrote that the three great theological virtues were faith, hope and charity. Now, although charity was chosen by the translators of
the King James Bible as an equivalent of the Greek *agape*, as Hitchens (2011) and others have suggested, *agape* is arguably better rendered as compassionate love. Similarly, St. Thomas Aquinas (1273/1981) presents compassion (*compassio*) – frequently used interchangeably with its synonym mercy (*misericordia*) – as the ‘interior effect’ of agape. That is, since *agape* is a ‘theological virtue’ – i.e., “a virtue infused by God into a person” (Barad, 2007, p.11) – compassion would be the human manifestation of the infusion of this virtue. Moreover, as with Buddhism, compassion is presented as pre-eminent among the theological virtues. As St. Paul memorably put it, “So faith, hope, love [agape] abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version, 1952; 1 Corinthians 13:13). Likewise, Aquinas (1273/1981, II-II, q.31, a.4) writes, “in itself, mercy takes precedence of other virtues” (cited in Barad, 2007, p.20).

However, the question remains, why is compassion so valued here? As with Buddhism, this will be addressed in the third part of the article. However, for now, let us note the somewhat cryptic explanation offered by Aquinas (1273/1981, II.II q.30 a.2), who suggested that compassion involves a “union of the affections,” such that we see the suffering other “as another self” (cited in Barad, 2007, p.14). Similarly, consider the statement attributed to Jesus, when he urged: “Love your enemies, and pray for those that persecute you, so that you may be children of your father in heaven” (Matthew 5:44). The last phrase, “so that you may be children of your father” [my italics], seems very charged; the conditional ‘so’ appears to imply that, by being compassionate, a person might be changed in some significant way, as if ushered into a new way of being – even, as a believer might put it, sharing in the divinity of God (Smith, 2011). Although these phrases may sound unfamiliar to our 21st century ears, it is clear that such teachings are implying that, through compassion, something remarkable may happen to the giver. One way to interpret these teachings is in terms of contemporary psychological theories of identity; in particular, it could be argued that by cultivating compassion, one might experience significant changes in one’s sense of self, as the next section explores.

**INTERSUBJECTIVITY**

In the first section, it was suggested that one key reason why compassion might be so important and valuable – at least to traditions such as Buddhism and Christianity – is because it may possibly lead to transformative changes in one’s sense of self. In order to fully explore this proposal in the third part of the article, this second section lays the groundwork by introducing some key ideas pertaining to identity and selfhood. One must be careful in entering this territory: the concept of the self – and related terms like identity, ego, and subjectivity – is one of the most contested and perplexing constructs in the history of thought (Gallagher, 2011). As such, it is beyond the scope of this article to give a full and comprehensive account of the various ways in which identity and selfhood have been conceptualised even within psychology (let alone in other academic fields, or throughout history). Nevertheless, one way of approaching this complexity is to suggest that there are two broad stances on
selfhood into which most (if not all) theories or perspectives fall, namely individualism and intersubjectivism (Kagitçibasi, 1997). There are two brief points to make before introducing these two stances. First, the latter term is more commonly referred to as ‘collectivism’ (Hofstede, 1980). However, ‘intersubjectivity,’ associated with the phenomenological philosophy of Husserl (1931/1999), is arguably a more useful term here, as will be argued below. Second, there are a small minority of theories/perspectives which fall outside the compass of these two stances; these include postmodern ‘fragmented’ models of selfhood that essentially deny the idea of any coherent sense of self, such as Gergen’s (2001) notion of multiphrenia; however, these theories/perspectives have been in the minority throughout history and across cultures, and thus I will limit myself to analysis of the two dominant stances of individualism and intersubjectivism. So, I begin this section by exploring individualism – generally regarded as the predominant conception of selfhood in the West (Taylor, 1995) – before going on to introduce the notion of intersubjectivism.

It is frequently asserted that the ‘Western world’ – to the extent that it is legitimate to speak of such a construct (which is debatable, as will be discussed below) – is characterised by an ideology of individualism (Becker & Marecek, 2008). This term is used to capture a particular view of the self that is thought to have emerged over the course of the last few centuries in Western societies, namely, the notion that the self exists as an autonomous, discrete unit, complete unto itself. This stance regards the self as “a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe” (Geertz, 1983, p.59) and “a centre of monological consciousness” (Taylor, 1995, p.60). From this perspective, the person is regarded as being constituted by a private, ‘inner space,’ in which he/she alone exists, over which he/she alone has control, and through which he/she alone acts. Of course, such perspectives generally acknowledge that other people exist (excepting philosophies such as solipsism [Pears, 1996]), but only either as external objects or interior mental representations. This view of selfhood dominates contemporary psychology, as reflected in the myriad constructs prefixed by the term ‘self,’ from self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 2006) to self-esteem (Cast & Burke, 2002), and all the related discourses of self, from authenticity (Taylor, 1991) to autonomy (Mele, 1995). With this individualist bias in academic psychology, it is not just that the main object of concern is the individual; rather, people are fundamentally seen as existing as separate individuals – unique, autonomous, and self-contained. The social, to the extent that it is recognised at all, tends to simply be constructed as an aggregation of individuals (Harrington, 2002).

For people living in a contemporary Western context, such individualism might seem like a natural, common sense, uncontentious way of describing the self. However, as Taylor (1995) elucidates in his influential text Sources of the Self, individualism is a construction that is particular to our current age and cultural context. As Taylor and others have suggested (see e.g., Heller & Brooke-Rose, 1986), this individualist conception of the self emerged during the extraordinary periods of cultural ferment and intellectual development in the West that are referred to as the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Countering the diminished view of humanity that had held sway during the Middle Ages, the
Renaissance gave (re)birth to a confident assertion of the strength, intelligence, dignity and autonomy of humankind (Tarnas, 1991). Although this emergent perspective was the combined product of many influential thinkers, Rene Descartes’ (1641/2008) deliberations on the nature of selfhood proved particularly influential. Seeking to establish a secure basis for knowledge, Descartes famously asserted that the one thing that was not subject to doubt was the fact that he was doubting, leading to the immortal statement cogito ergo sum (I think therefore I am). Taylor (1995, p.59) argues that Descartes’ statement was pivotal in establishing the idea of ‘monological consciousness’ that came to dominate Western thinking over subsequent centuries – i.e., the “reification of the disengaged first-person-singular self” – to the extent that this individualised sense of selfhood is frequently referred to as the ‘Cartesian I.’

Although people in the West have generally become so accustomed to viewing the self in this way that individualism has become ‘naturalised’ (Taylor, 1995), this is not the only way of appraising the self. We can appreciate this point – that individualism is a contemporary cultural construction that is somewhat specific to the West – by considering the way other cultures have approached the notion of selfhood. In this respect, anthropologists have uncovered variation in views of selfhood among various world cultures, both historical and current (Lomas, 2015). In doing so, the primacy and universality of the individualist perspective has been challenged. For example, focusing specifically on Vietnam, Marr (2000) suggests that the person has historically been viewed in Vietnamese culture primarily in terms of his or her location within, and contribution to, the social order. Indeed, Marr contends that the concept and label of the ‘individual’ only entered the Vietnamese lexicon in the 20th century; even then, it was only wielded pejoratively, where a person acting selfishly could be accused of the anti-social misdeed of ‘individualism.’ This notion of a more group-oriented view of selfhood in Vietnam accords with arguably the most widely researched cross-cultural generalisation within psychology: the idea that Western societies are ‘individualist’ whereas Eastern cultures are ‘collectivist’ (Hofstede, 1980). Developed initially as a societal identifier by Hofstede, and then applied by Markus and Kitayama (1991, p.224) to self-construals, this theory holds that contrary to Western individualism, Asian societies have “distinct conceptions of individuality that insist on the fundamental relatedness of individuals,” where the “emphasis is on attending to others, fitting in, and harmonious interdependence with them” (p.224).

The individualist-collectivist distinction has been widely embraced, being analysed and to an extent corroborated across hundreds of empirical studies (Taras, Kirkman, & Steel, 2010). However, although it does bring a level of cross-cultural nuance to the debate, it still serves to reinforce the notion of individualism, but simply limits it to ‘Western’ cultures. The picture may be far more nuanced though. For a start, as critical theorists such as Edward Said (1995) have argued, the very notions of ‘West’ versus ‘East’ are themselves cultural constructions that homogenise and obscure myriad differences at a regional and local level. For instance, the idea that ‘the East’ lacks its own traditions and philosophies of individualism, and likewise that ‘the West’ does not also possess its own collectivist voices and schools of thought, is a generalising
fallacy that does disservice to the rich heterogeneity and complexity of both arenas (Spiro, 1993). Moreover, a binary ‘East-West’ distinction constructs these two hemispheres as if discretely bounded and hermetically sealed, overlooking the dynamic inter-transmission of people and ideas across geographical boundaries. This criticism is particularly apposite in this recent age of globalisation, which is characterised by an incredible cross-fertilisation of cultures; we have seen apparently Western ideologies such as consumer capitalism finding fertile ground in many Asian countries, while ostensibly ‘Eastern’ practices like meditation have attracted hugely receptive audiences in the West (King, 1999).

Thus, the notion that individualistic views and experiences of selfhood are ubiquitous or inevitable in the West has been challenged; instead, there is a growing recognition that ‘intersubjective’ experiences of self are perhaps more prevalent in the West than the individualist-collectivist dichotomy appears to suggest (Larsen, 1990). Various contemporary theories of identity have emerged capturing this sense of intersubjectivity. However, before discussing these, it is worth clarifying why the term ‘intersubjective’ is preferred here as an overarching term for these theories and perspectives than the more common ‘collectivist’ label. The term collectivist has become tainted by association with the horrors of totalitarian communist regimes (Conquest, 1987). This usage is connected to the notion that collectivist models of selfhood – as promoted in such regimes – tend to deny the rights of people to exist as autonomous individuals per se, rather viewing them as fungible parts of a larger collective social entity (which takes absolute precedence to their needs). In contrast, intersubjectivity – as developed and propounded by philosophers such as Husserl (1931/1999) – does not dismiss people’s claims to individuality and agency; it simply recognises that their being is also formed through their interconnections with other people.

So, as noted above, there are numerous theories dealing with an intersubjective sense of selfhood. In their various ways, all these theories argue that people can come to transcend a narrow, view of selfhood – the autonomous, bounded, individual ‘Cartesian I’ depicted above – and learn to ‘identify’ with other people. (Identity is being used here in a strong sense to mean that the person experiences their own life as somehow being bound together with the life of the other person; for instance, the other’s suffering is in some way the person’s own suffering. Without jumping ahead of the argument, readers will be able to see that this is exactly the kind of shared emotional experience that constitutes compassion.) This intersubjective sense of selfhood has been operationalised in various conceptually overlapping models, including the intersubjective self (De Quincey, 2000), the transpersonal self (Vaughan, 1985), the dialogical self (Hermans, Kempen, & Van Loon, 1992), the permeable self (Larsen, 1990), interbeing (Nhat Hanh, 2000), ‘I-thou’ relationships (Buber, 1958), and identity fusion (Swann, Jetten, Gómez, Whitehouse, & Bastian, 2012). For example, De Quincey (2000, 2005) proposes three levels of intersubjectivity. The most basic, intersubjectivity-1, occurs through communication, involving the sharing of linguistic signals. This level does not presume any shared identity, but simply acknowledges the recognition of the other by
virtue of the communicative act. Intersubjectivity-2 then begins to broach the notion of identity shifts; this is the ‘communal feeling’ that one might experience when engaged in a meaningful relationship, and particularly during significant moments of interaction (e.g., making love with one’s partner). Finally, intersubjectivity-3 involves a more transformative sense of ‘shared presence’: as Gunnlaugson (2009, pp.34-35) describes it, this does involve a radical identity shift towards a “more profound transpersonal form of interacting,” in which one’s “interrelatedness with another is experienced as primary to one’s ontological constitution.”

The other intersubjective constructs cited above essentially describe variants of De Quincey’s (2000) notion of intersubjectivity-3. For instance, the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (1958) differentiated between ‘I-it’ and ‘I-thou’ relationships. With ‘I-It’ connections – which tend to constitute the majority of people’s relationships – the other is regarded instrumentally as an object, valued only to the extent that he/she fulfils one’s own needs. Conversely, in I-thou relationships – in which the other is held in unconditional regard, as equally worthy of love, care and respect as oneself – one enters into a state of union (as per intersubjectivity-3). As Buber (1965, p.170) put it, “In an essential relation the barriers of individual being are breached and the other becomes present, not merely in the imagination or feeling, but in the depths of one’s substance, so that one experiences the mystery of the other being in the mystery of one’s own.”

Somewhat similarly, although focusing more on alignment with a particular in-group, the construct of identity fusion describes a “visceral feeling of oneness with the group” that is “associated with unusually porous, highly permeable borders between the personal and social self” (Swann, Gómez, Seyle, Morales, & Huici, 2009, p.995). Hermans’ (2001) notion of the ‘dialogical’ self concentrates more on the internalisation of other people as constituent parts of one’s own identity – with parallels to Gergen’s (1991) notion of the ‘saturated’ self – in which others come to “occupy positions in a multivoiced self” (Hermans, 2001, p.250). Thus, Hermans (2003, p.90) conceptualises the self as a “dynamic multiplicity of voiced positions in the landscape of the mind, intertwined as this mind is with the minds of other people.” Finally, Thich Nhat Hanh’s (2000) notion of interbeing articulates the central Buddhist philosophy of ‘dependent co-arising’ (Nakagawa, 2000); this teaching holds that all things (including people) lack independent existence, but instead are fundamentally interrelated to and dependent upon all other things for their existence and identity (this teaching will be returned to below).

Without wishing to minimise the nuanced differences between these different constructs, they all depict an intersubjective sense of selfhood, in which one experiences a transformed sense of identity that incorporates other people in some way. In speaking of such a transformed sense of selfhood, one must be careful, since psychopathologies such as schizophrenia are also often explained in terms of the disruption and even “dissolution” of self-other distinctions (Parnas, 2000, p.117). However, without denying the possibility that there can be dysfunctional intersubjective experiences of the self, what theorists such as Buber (1958) and De Quincey (2000) are describing in speaking of intersubjective selfhood is the transcension of one’s narrow self-identity,
rather than an obliteration of it. Again, in referring to transcendence, one must also be precise about the meaning of this term. In this context, one can usefully draw upon the definition formulated by Hegel (1807/1973, pp.163-164), who suggested that to transcend means “at once to negate and preserve.” As Wilber (1995) explains, what is negated is an exclusive identification with a particular view of self. However, the old sense of self is not totally lost: it is preserved, but is now set in a larger experiential framework that means it is ‘seen through.’

To give an example of such transcendence, imagine a mother (or a father) with her new baby. Before the birth, this hypothetical mother may have had a somewhat individualistic sense of selfhood; she may well have loved and cared for others, but her selfhood was entirely bounded to herself – she was, in Watts (1961, p.18) neat phrase, a ‘skin-encapsulated ego.’ However, after giving birth, the mother may literally experience the baby as a part or extension of herself. Of course, they no longer share the same ‘skin-encapsulated’ physical body. However, cognitively, emotionally and motivationally, the mother and baby remain essentially one: the baby’s pain is her pain; its smile is her joy. Now, this is not a ‘dissolution’ of the self: rationally, the mother can still recognise and identify herself as a separate being. This is in contrast to the baby, who has yet to develop any self-other distinction, and who does experience this dyadic relationship in an ‘undifferentiated’ way (Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 2000). Thus, the mother has transcended her old sense of selfhood: it has been preserved (she can still recognise herself as a separate being), and yet negated (her identity has been enlarged to also encompass her progeny). Arguably, entering into an intersubjective state of selfhood involves just such an act of self-transcendence (or a variant of it). Now, in the third and final section, I will explore the role of compassion in this act, and more importantly, examine why self-transcendence actually matters.

**Psychospiritual Development**

In the section above, it was suggested that individualism is not universal – nor indeed endemic to Western cultures – and that it is possible for people to transcend their narrow sense of selfhood and enter into an intersubjective mode of being. In this third section, I shall explore why this kind of intersubjectivity is desirable; as will become apparent, this is because it can not only help alleviate one’s own suffering, but more radically, can be a route to transformative psychospiritual development. Firstly though, let me tie the discussion on self-transcendence and intersubjectivity back to the central focus of the article, namely compassion. The contention here is that compassion is valuable because it is arguably the most direct route to self-transcendence and an intersubjective mode of selfhood. In fact, more than that, it could be said that, by definition, compassion *is* intersubjective: compassion is inherently intersubjective, and intersubjectivity is inherently compassionate. The very nature of compassion – i.e., sympathetic distress arising in response to another’s suffering (Ozawa-de Silva et al., 2012) – is an intersubjective experience. In any given moment or act of compassion,
however brief, one breaks out of a narrow sense of selfhood: one’s sphere of concern has expanded to encompass the other person, which is the very definition of self-transcendence, and has entered into an intersubjective state of selfhood.

To take our hypothetical example of a new mother (or father), one could regard her identification with and concern for her new-born as the very epitome of compassion. Of course, this is an idealised example: not all mothers will feel such identification, and even those that do are unlikely to do so constantly (they will experience moments of selfishness amidst their care). However, this latter consideration actually gives us reason for optimism and hope: it indicates that intersubjectivity is not a trait-like all-or-nothing affair (one either possesses compassion, and exists intersubjectively, or one lacks compassion, and exists individualistically), but rather is a mode of being that one can, at one’s best, enter into. Imagine a continuum, here, between total selfishness (the kind of absolute solipsistic disregard for others found in psychopathy) and total selflessness (the kind of absolute compassion manifested by a Buddha). Consider that everyone is located, by temperament and development, somewhere along this line. One can add further nuance to this idea by recognising that one’s location may shift depending on certain factors, such as mood, or who the other person is: for example, if one is feeling happy, or is with a person for whom one cares deeply (as per the mother with her baby), there is likely to be movement in the direction of greater selflessness. Crucially though, through engaging in practices like compassion or loving-kindness meditation (Galante et al., 2014), one can actively shift oneself along the continuum towards greater selflessness, towards a more intersubjective mode of existence.

However, still not addressed is the central concern of the article: why compassion – and the resulting self-transcendence and intersubjectivity – actually matters, why it should be so valorised by traditions such as Buddhism and Christianity. Of course, as mentioned above, one can readily acknowledge that compassion is beneficial to the recipient (Scott, 2013), and moreover serves to uphold a moral vision articulated by these religions (Lecso, 1988). But, I raised the possibility above that compassionate acts – and the self-transcendence that such acts facilitate – may also potentially have a profound impact on the actors themselves. As H. H. the Dalai Lama (1999, p.75) puts it, if we “reach beyond the confines of narrow self-interest… peace and joy become our constant companion.” As Barad (2007, p.20) points out, the Dalai Lama is directly saying that “compassion causes peace and joy.” Considered in these final paragraphs, is why that might be the case, why compassion might be so beneficial to the actors themselves.

This is a consideration that has been largely overlooked and under-theorised in contemporary psychology. One explanation for this omission is that academic psychology is largely rooted in the dominant Western individualistic view of selfhood (Becker & Marecek, 2008), with notable exceptions such as transpersonal psychology. Thus, as Harrington (2002) argues, since compassion is fundamentally an intersubjective phenomenon that happens ‘in-between’ individual selves, it has generally remained a lacuna within Western science.
This conventional psychological perspective – centred as it is on discrete, bounded, atomistic individuals – struggles to accommodate the type of ontological shift implied by the concept of self-transcendence, and as such fails to appreciate the significance of compassion (which helps engender this shift).

So, to appreciate why self-transcendence may be valuable for wellbeing, I will finish here by considering a tradition that has given much attention to these issues, namely Buddhism (while also drawing parallels with Christianity where appropriate). Summarising a tradition as rich and comprehensive as Buddhism is beyond the scope of this article. However, it would not be inaccurate to say that Buddhism places such an emphasis on compassion – and on the self-transcendence that it engenders – because Buddhism attributes most of the suffering in this world to one specific cause: the self (Lomas & Jnanavaca, 2015). As we would expect with a tradition as rich and comprehensive as Buddhism, comprising as it does numerous schools of thought, it does not feature just one single perspective on the self. However, without getting lost in esoteric philosophising around subtle doctrinal differences, Buddhism generally upholds a teaching of anatta (a Pali term meaning no-self/soul). That is, Buddhism regards the self, as conventionally understood, to be an unhelpful construct, or phrased more powerfully, a destructive illusion (Epstein, 1988). The individualistic model of selfhood (the idea that we exist as separate, fixed, bounded entities) is not only regarded as an incorrect fiction, but a fiction that underlies much of the problems in the world. Somewhat similarly – though the parallel is not perfect – Christianity regards conventional notions of self (i.e., a self-subsisting individual ego) as a pale shadow of the ‘true’ self (i.e., a soul that can partake in the nature of God). Moreover, Christian doctrine tends to regard exclusive identification with the conventional self, and denial or ignorance of the ‘true’ self, as the root cause of unhappiness and ‘sinfulness’ (Capps, 1993).

To put this view of selfhood into context, Buddhism proposes that existence is characterised by three key qualities: anatta (no-self, or insubstantiality), anicca (impermanence) and dukkha (frustration or suffering) (Sangharakshita & Subhuti, 2013). All phenomena, including humans, are ultimately seen as insubstantial (they are not self-existing entities; their existence depends on a network of supporting conditions) and impermanent (they change as their supporting conditions change). A useful metaphor is that of a whirlpool in a river: the configuration of the natural environment is such that a repeating pattern of water is created; however, the whirlpool does not exist as a separate object apart from these conditions. In Buddhism, the self is regarded in much the same way; out of the on-going flux of subjective experience (the thoughts, feelings and sensations flowing through our stream of consciousness), processes such as memory and language provide the illusion of the self as a fixed entity, when really there is nothing actually ‘there.’ (In this aspect, Buddhism differs from Christianity, with the latter upholding the existence of an enduring ‘soul.’) However, Buddhism further argues that people tend to deny these two fundamental aspects of reality (anatta and anicca), and instead regard phenomena, including their own self, as stable and permanent. Crucially, this misperception is seen as the cause of the third aspect of existence, dukkha.
This is partly because people become attached to phenomena that are inherently subject to change; people then suffer when this change does in fact occur. It is also because, in the case of the self, attaching to the idea that one exists as a separate individual generates a constellation of destructive behaviours, whether pertaining to the drive to aggrandise the self (e.g., egotism, pride and jealousy), or the urge to defend and protect it (e.g., hatred and aggression towards anything which threatens it).

Given that it is our clinging to the notion of a separate self that is viewed as the root cause of suffering, Buddhism consequently teaches that the way to overcome suffering is by transcending the self (Ho, 1995). To return to our definition of self-transcendence, this does not mean the kind of dissolution of self-other boundaries that may occur in psychopathology (Parnas, 2000), but rather appreciating that one’s narrow view of selfhood is an unhelpful construct, and ‘seeing through’ it (Epstein, 1988). After all, Buddhist masters are certainly still capable of clothing and feeding their ‘fictional’ self; yet in a deeper sense they have come to understand it as being ultimately illusory. This is the point of many Buddhist meditative practices: to understand, at a deep experiential level, that the self is ‘not real’; to thus transcend this narrow sense of selfhood and to create a more expansive identity, one encompassing other people. Thus, such practices endeavour to move people towards an I-thou regard for the other, along the continuum towards selflessness. This is the point of practices like compassion and loving-kindness meditation, in which one is encouraged to generate feelings of love and care for others (Fredrickson et al., 2008). In an analogous way, in Christianity, people are urged to transcend their individual, conventional self, and to enter into experiences of communion – with one’s ‘neighbour,’ with one’s congregation, with the broader institution of Christianity, and ultimately with Jesus and God (Westphal, 2004).

This process of self-transcendence as an on-going journey of psychospiritual development, involving a continual expansion of one’s intersubjective concern (Wilber, 1995). That is, transcending one’s individualistic view of selfhood and developing a deep sense of care for another person – such as a parent’s devotion to his or her child, as featured above, or any other dyad suffused with love – is a good start, but simply the start of a much longer and far-reaching spiritual journey, in which people may continually expand their sense of selfhood in an on-going process of transcendence (Wilber, 1995). This means not limiting our compassionate intersubjective concern to one other beloved person, but continuing to extend this outwards, encompassing all those we come into contact with, and even beyond, up to and including all sentient beings (Barad, 2007). Indeed, this expansion of care is cultivated in Buddhist practices like loving-kindness meditation – which expand ‘outwards’ in just such a way – and is central to Buddhist moral philosophy, which argues that we have a duty to safeguard the wellbeing and development of all beings in the universe (Lecso, 1988). Similar themes of on-going spiritual development and self-transcendence can be found in Christianity, and indeed in most religions (Westphal, 2004).

Furthermore, in considering this process of psychospiritual development, theorists have sought to give definition and form to its omega point. That is,
if self-transcendence is an on-going process – of expanding one’s circle of compassionate care, and thus of entering into an ever-wider intersubjective experience of selfhood – where does this lead? Synthesising diverse perspectives on this question, Wilber (1995) holds that many religious traditions describe the ultimate end-point of this development as an experiential union with some kind of numinous power. Monotheistic religions, such as Christianity, might describe this as sharing in the divinity of God; as the 13th-century Christian mystic Meister Eckhart (1980, p.217) phrased it, “I discover that I and God are one.” Likewise, Buber (1958) felt that the particular power of I-thou relationships was that they constituted a spiritual relationship, in which both partners entered into the ‘eternal thou,’ a supra-personal union suffused with the grace of God. Alternatively, non-theistic religions such as Buddhism might conceptualise this as union with the bhavanga, with the ground of being (Wallace, 2001). As to the nature of such a union, most reports characterise this ultimate intersubjective state of selfhood as being suffused with an overwhelming sense of love. As Wallace (2001, pp.4-5) puts it, “Buddhist contemplatives have… concluded that the nature of this ground of becoming is loving-kindness.” Although such ideas may currently sound rather radical from the perspective of conventional psychology, these kinds of reports do suggest that the cultivation of compassion may have great, even profound consequences.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have advanced a theory of compassion that focuses specifically on its value to the protagonist. It is of course recognised that compassion can be of great benefit to its recipient(s), and indeed to civic functioning more generally (e.g., as the basis for a communal moral framework). However, less attention has been paid to its impact on the protagonists themselves, partly because it is frequently constructed as an ostensibly dysphoric emotion (involving sharing in the distress of another person). And yet, compassion is invariably valorised by religious and spiritual traditions, and indeed is frequently lauded as among the highest of all human qualities. Drawing on ideas in Buddhism and Christianity, I have argued that this valorisation is due to the way that compassion can lead to transformative shifts in a person’s self-identity that are highly beneficial to the person. In particular, it has been suggested here that compassion inherently involves a process of self-transcendence, enabling people to enter into an intersubjective state of selfhood. This intersubjective state may not only relieve the protagonists’ own suffering, but can accelerate their psychospiritual development. Given the introduction of this theory here, future work will be needed to (a) empirically substantiate the basic premise (e.g., through psychometric assessments of changes in self-identity as a result of compassion-based interventions); (b) explore how to explicitly encourage and facilitate this type of self-transcendence in the context of compassion training; and (c) examine the long-term impact of practising compassion on psychospiritual development. We have an interesting journey ahead as we begin to truly understand and appreciate the profound potential of compassion.
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