COMPASSION AND ATTACHMENT: A COMPARISON OF MAX SCHELER AND THERAVĀDA BUDDHISM

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ABSTRACT

This paper will explore how the concept of compassion is understood by the Western phenomenological tradition of Max Scheler, in contrast to how it is understood by Theravāda Buddhism. In the Western tradition the distinctions and connections between 'empathy,' 'sympathy' and 'compassion' involve considerations about morality and ethical theory. Max Scheler combines his phenomenology with psychological approaches to consider how one individual can relate to the mental states of another other individuals. Scheler, distinguishes between empathy and sympathy to avoid the need to experience another's suffering directly. This distinction is made in Theravāda Buddhism, where emotional contagion is understood as a form of attachment. But Scheler unlike Buddhism, still emphasizes the autonomous subject of phenomenology which is central to ethical action. Central to Theravāda Buddhism is the recognition of suffering and dealing with the feelings that arise. The individual sheds their attachments and this leads to a wholesome *kamma*, as stated in the first of the Four Noble Truths. So the Theravada Buddhist tradition focuses on the alleviation of suffering not only in the mind of the individual but of humanity in general. Since Theravāda Buddhism stresses non-self, this moves it beyond Scheler's approach. This approach to

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compassion is not one of 'feeling with' or 'suffering with' another specific individual, but one that actively addresses human suffering in general.

Keywords: Empathy; Sympathy; Compassion; Attachment; phenomenology

Introduction

In the Western tradition, the feelings of empathy and sympathy are factors that, together with the 'feeling with' the suffering of the other, give rise to the feeling of compassion. Various theories explain their connection differently. The phenomenological approach of Scheler develops these connections based upon 'intention'. This phenomenological approach emphasizes the ability of an autonomous subject to 'feel with another' and act appropriately or ethically.

The idea of compassion is also important in the Theravāda Buddhist tradition. Yet in this approach, compassion is separate from the experiences of empathy and sympathy which would be for Buddhism a kind of 'attachment.' It is an acknowledgment of the suffering of others based less on intention and more on practical action, which is also linked to Buddhist practices such as meditation and dealing with fellow human beings.

This article will show that knowing and understanding of the differences between empathy, sympathy, and compassion is important to clarifying the differences between Western Christian-influenced tradition and the tradition of Theravāda Buddhism. It illustrates a difference between a compassion which is a 'feeling with another' and a compassion which is free from attachment to another individual's suffering, and which is instead directed toward the active alleviation of human suffering in general. This contrast between the Western tradition which emphasizes an ethics of compassion based upon a feeling with another and the Buddhist tradition which emphasizes a compassion which does not involve attachment is very important for understanding the differences between these two traditions and how they understand the ethical.

Max Scheler on Compassion

Kant saw compassion as a duty which was based upon reason. But in the phenomenological tradition, Scheler was trying to revive the importance of the 'value' of the passions in such a way that they can be understood to contribute to ethical actions. Max Scheler describes the feeling of compassion as a case of sympathy as an ethically relevant action, but in order to feel sympathy or compassion for somebody's suffering, you need to know that the other is indeed suffering. So more basic than sympathy is a way of experiencing others, what Scheler calls "Nachfühlen" which is equivalent to empathy.[1] Yet this idea of empathy is often not very clear in Scheler's texts. There is often the use of more than one term to describe the same phenomena. For example, 'understanding experiences' is described both as Nachfühlen and Fremdwahrnehmung. Likewise, the descriptions of sympathy, empathy and compassion in Max Scheler's phenomenology does not provide a sufficient explanation as to whether compassion and the underlying feelings of empathy or sympathy are states that are positive, neutral or negative? Compassion, which is based on sympathy, it can be assumed that it involves a perception of pain, suffering or other negative emotions, and arises from a reflection. Empathy is different because it includes the feeling of "foreign consciousness." The foreign is perceived by an inner experience which relates to the "I" in the same way as the I experiences itself. The distinction between inside and outside is dissolved. Or as Edith Stein would say: "in the beginning there is a neutral stream of experience", and out of this what is one's own and what is from outside of it are "gradually crystallized out of it"[2]

Max Scheler does not think that the general understanding the emotions of the other person should be based on a strict reproduction of that emotion. For Scheler, inner perception is distinguished from outer perception and is directed toward acts. He makes a distinction between the givens of consciousness on one hand, and external objects with different modes of being (Wesensgesetzlich).[3] It is important to distinguish within one's inner perception between actions based on one's own experience and the foreign experiences coming from the outside.

In the distinction between joy and pity, the principle is established that presupposes a certain knowledge of the quality of the experience in other people. It is not through pity that I learn about someone who is in pain, apprehending, understanding, and, in general, reproducing (emotionally) the experiences of others, including their states of feeling. These presuppose some sort of knowledge of the fact, nature and quality of experience in other people, just as the possibility of such knowledge presupposes, as its condition, the existence of other conscious beings.

One may know about another's peril without necessarily responding to a distressing situation with a feeling of pity (or any other kind of responsive psychological state). In the case of empathy, an "empathic" response comes from empathic knowledge about another's experience, which provides the stimulus for it. Max Scheler writes, "knowing and responding are associated in a cause-effect manner," so although they are different and distinguishable phenomena, they are collectively referred to as empathy.[4] He speaks here of 'affective empathy' which is very similar to the concept of sympathy. Affective empathy, involves the ability to understand another person's emotions and respond appropriately.[5] The experience of compassion, is also grounded in empathy, which involves the observation of another's experience.[6]

Max Scheler refers to self-consciousness as an inner perception through which the experiences of the other are made, thereby the inner perception is not focused on sensation, but is involves intention. As Matthias Schlossberger observes "the experiential ego does not always ascribe its psychic content to itself." This becomes followed by reflection. For Scheler, reflection is act, where the inner perception the "I" becomes objectified and the outer perception becomes understood reflexively.

Compassion and sympathy are moral categories that unite people through the recognition that the other is someone equal. Compassion is not just a connection in terms of judgment or justification of another's pain.[7] The question arises whether the feeling of pain of the sufferer is really recognized as pain through an act of understanding (through the recognition of both mutuality and otherness), and only then directed as

compassion towards the sufferer. In principle, the suffering of the other and the suffering of the one who perceives suffering, are two separate things from a phenomenological point of view and understanding. While this might be considered as a kind of egoism, Scheler argues that egoism it does not comprehensively explain the isolation of the perceiver. He focuses instead on the concept of eudemonism, as "the ethical behavior in which feelings of pleasure represent goals and purposes of striving and will, whether one's own or another's." So the fact that one can feel with another person (empathy) does not necessarily say anything about one's attitudes.[8]

Max Scheler's concept of compassion is based on an idea that emphasizes compassion as an important, yet one that accepts that compassion is essentially distinct from the person suffering and related ultimately to self-interest.[9] Compassion is understood as an act of a compassionate person that does not require the feeling of empathy – which would means that one identifies so strongly with the other's pain that they live the experience of the other. The psyche of the other person is not decisive. The only decisive factor is that the compassionate person is able to convey his feeling and is convinced of his action in a moral sense. This will accord with Theravāda Buddhism, but differ based upon Scheler's emphasis on the self. According to Scheler's theory, compassion is an action according to moral virtue, and at the same time it stands in a relation to rationality.

Compassion from the perspective of Theravāda Buddhism

The care for one's own well-being as well as the well-being of others is an important aspect of the teachings of Theravāda Buddhism. One's own well-being depends on the relationship with others, one's own suffering and essentially the suffering of others. But in our relationship with others, feelings play a big role which can have a positive or negative effect. According to the Buddhist concept, suffering arises out of attachment to things, people, and ideas.[10] So the goal of Buddhism is to develop a compassionate personality through practice, but not to let

the suffering of another person or the suffering cause become one's own attachment. An attachment is understood as a hindrance to one's process of leaving the Buddhist path of practice.[11] This practice is an active state, where the very idea of the passions is to be passive and to be moved by that which is outside of oneself. So this peculiar attitude of compassion without attachment is something that should be investigated in more detail.

In the Theravāda tradition of Buddhism, according to texts of the Pāḷi Canon, compassion uses the word *karuṇā* which includes the wish that others be free from suffering.[12] Compassion (*karuṇā*) is understood in the Theravāda tradition results from one's enlightenment; from knowing that one is part of a greater whole and is dependent on and connected to that whole. Compassion is part of the four *Brahmavihārās* (abodes of Brahma, sublime attitudes, limitless states, divine states, and the immeasurable (*appamanna*), which is part of a series of Buddhist virtue and meditation practices. Compassion, however, should not be confused with *maitrī* (loving-kindness), which has as its goal the desire for the happiness of all beings. Compassion refers to the empathetic care for all sentient beings and the relief or liberation of their suffering. Notice that this is an active approach to compassion and not a passive one.

So in general, compassion in Buddhism has the goal of alleviating the suffering of others, or to aim for the extinguishing of all suffering. From various discussions in the Buddhist texts, compassion can also be interpreted as "the striving to find a way" to address suffering. It is based on the belief that all beings wish to be liberated from suffering. And so it extends to all living beings. The Visuddhimagga Buddhagosa in *The Path of Purification* advises that if a person is so evil that he or she has no apparent good points, compassion should still be felt for him or her because of the great suffering he or she will suffer as a karmic result of such evil (Vism. 340).[13] While compassion arises only by knowing about one's own situation and weaknesses, it is not based on self-interest. Compassion cannot be understood as an emotional attachment and this follows the three marks of existence (impermanence, suffering, and non-self). Attachment involves an attempt to control that which is outside of

the self, and this attempt results in suffering for both parties involved. Theravāda Buddhism distinguishes among four types of attachment a) sense objects, b) opinions and views, c) rites and rituals d) self-hood. In order to free oneself from an attachment, different methods are applied, these are, besides the meditative practice, compassion, interdependence, accepting, and expansiveness. The desire for security and personal freedom often reifies or solidifies one's self within the constant process of changing phenomenal experience. Meditation is used as a tool to counteract this effect. Non-attachment stands for an emancipation from mental anchors which is in contrast to the false perception of security.

In order to be able to meet suffering with compassion, it is necessary to know more precisely what is meant by suffering (*dukkha*) for Buddhism, since it ranges from such states as perceived pain, sorrow, misery, and dissatisfaction. Suffering arises from desire (*taṇhā*), but also from attachment (*upādāna*) to emotions as well as to matter. Desire essentially refers to the function of not being able to let go, which consequently is the origin of suffering. Thus, it can be stated that the extinction of desire leads to liberation. So compassion in the Buddhist understanding does not mean compassion for another being or person, but rather it refers to one's own confrontation with the suffering that affects others, the associated mindset can be countered with meditation. The Noble Eightfold Path, as the practical instructions to reach the end of suffering, is the fourth part (*magga*) of the Four Noble Truths. While compassion is not explicitly mentioned, a general idea of universal love and compassion for all living beings can be derived from the ethical principles of conduct. In this context, the development of wisdom (*paññā*) and compassion are two inseparable qualities, and wisdom refers purely to qualities of mind.[14] Part of the meditative practice of compassion is the personal attitude toward the suffering of others but it also contains elements of sympathy (*anukampā*). This is different from the understanding in Western tradition and is also described as "the Buddha's moral concern is found in his sympathy for all beings; and therefore refers to a non-cognitive meditation practice[15] of tranquility meditation (*samathā-bhāvanā*).[16,17] In this meditation

technique, the focus is on "peaceful abiding" free from defilements such as greed, hatred, and delusion, as these have a negative effect on the mind, which is often weak and tends to be restless and wandering. *Samathā* or tranquility serves to purify non-peaceful states of mind, and leads the meditator towards the cultivation of peaceful states (Vism., 9.1).[18] The term sympathy, if used in Buddhism, translates as 'trembling along with.'[19] which means identification with the suffering of the other in the true sense and is used because of its proximity to compassion. The Pali term *anukamapā* or *dayā* is used to describe the suffering and distress of the other as an inner attitude of the mind.[20,21] From the Buddhist point of view, through the practice of meditation, metta is cultivated as one of its objects of mediation, creating the basis of a kindness extending to all beings, including oneself, while compassion acts as an activator to save others who suffer. The compassion-meditation as part of the four Brahmaviharas is directed towards self-acceptance and the overcoming of self-doubt and prejudice. Compassion is not directed towards the being or the person but only towards the suffering of the other which must not be understood as compassion in the Western sense. It is closer to the attitude of care. From the Buddhist understanding, the feeling of empathy is a description of "feeling for the other and not feeling with him." The sensation of empathy essentially consists of self-esteem, the relationship of people to each other, and self-efficacy, which is also considered the unit of measurement for perceived empathy. Daniel Goleman and Paul Ekman have identified three components of empathy, including cognitive, emotional, and compassion. The highest goal in Buddhism is to achieve enlightenment, which requires the development of two qualities: wisdom and compassion. Wisdom in the Buddhist context is understood as consciousness or discrimination and combines the principle of non-self. Empathy is one's own awareness of the perceived emotion of the other with which one tries to understand the other and his suffering. Since the practice of meditation is not about defining or understanding how someone feels or how much they are suffering, empathy as a kind of understanding, as it is understood in Western philosophy, is not as important in Buddhism.

Conclusion

The comparison between the Western phenomenological approach to the Theravāda Buddhist approach to compassion brings to attention certain interesting insights. In the Western tradition the connections between 'empathy,' 'sympathy' and 'compassion' involve considerations about morality and ethical theory. Max Scheler's approach combines his phenomenology with psychological approaches to consider how one individual relates to the mental states of the other individuals. In general, in the definitions of empathy vs. sympathy a distinction is made concerning with feeling what the other is feeling (as is the case with empathy) or a 'feeling with' another individual, where one's 'feeling' is not necessarily identical. In other words, it is a matter of whether one experiences another's experience directly or indirectly. So following compassion in this indirect way, Scheler's approach remains at the level of self-interest of the autonomous ethical subject.

In Theravāda Buddhism, all emotional contagion is understood as a form of attachment and is considered to be counterproductive to the feeling of compassion. Central to Theravāda Buddhism is the recognition of suffering and dealing with the feelings that arise. Suffering results from attachment. So compassion in the Buddhist sense is not a feeling the emotions of the other, where it would be an attachment to the other individual, but is something directed to the suffering itself. This would be related to one meaning of *karuna*, as the 'breaking' of the suffering of the other. It is com-passion which is not passive (*passio*). It is an activity developed through habit and meditation. So the Theravada Buddhist tradition focuses on the alleviation of suffering not only in the mind of the individual but of humanity in general. This approach to compassion is not one of 'feeling with' or 'suffering with' another individual, but is an approach that actively addresses human suffering in general.

ENDNOTES

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