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# Commentary:

## How Can We Have Compassion towards Animals?

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Professor Snow has offered an original and illuminating analysis of compassion which, among its other virtues, provides a plausible account of why we feel compassion for animals and why it is rational to do so. I fully endorse her general approach, so my comments will not be in any way an attempt to undermine or refute her analysis; instead, I wish to raise some questions that follow on the heels of an acceptance of her account.

To summarize very briefly: Professor Snow's account of compassion for animals is part of a larger exploration of the correct way to understand compassion in general.<sup>1</sup> She agrees with other analyses which claim that compassion requires that the individual feeling compassion must "identify with" the being (more accurately, identify with the plight of that being) for which compassion is felt. (In what follows, I will refer to the being which feels compassion as "the source" and the being for which compassion is felt as "the target.") However, she disagrees with Piper and Blum<sup>2</sup> about what is required for such an identification. Piper and Blum think that imagination is a necessary component of any act of identifying with, i.e. that the source of compassion must imaginatively "project" herself into the situation of the target. The problem with this account is that demanding such an act of imagination, if true, would cast doubt on our ability to feel compassion for many nonhuman animals.

Philosophers, at least since B.A. Farrell and Thomas Nagel, have noted that imaginatively

projecting oneself into the plight of a bat, for instance, may indeed be impossible.<sup>3</sup> If so, and if compassion necessarily has an imaginative component, our ability to feel compassion for animals, especially those that have significantly different experiential lives than we do, would be severely restricted. Snow argues that her account of compassion would remove this restriction. She argues, here and elsewhere, that the source's having certain sorts of beliefs about the target is sufficient, even in the absence of any sort of imaginative projection. We can have—and justify—the beliefs necessary to feel compassion even for animals so different from us that we cannot imagine what it would be like to be such a creature.

A full, general commentary on this debate about the nature of compassion should start with a more detailed explanation of what is involved in imagining and imaginative projection and an account of what, if anything, really distinguishes it from having the right sorts of beliefs. While this approach might shed light on some aspects of Snow's general analysis and might even reduce the distance she tries to establish between her theories and imagination-based alternatives, it would lead us away from a specific focus on compassion toward animals. I will, therefore, turn to issues that bear more directly on an attempt to determine whether Snow's analysis does, in fact, give us a better and broader understanding of our ability to feel compassion for animals. I have three general "requests for clarification" and then some general questions about how any account of compassion might affect our judgments about moral obligations.

The first request for clarification concerns the notion of "identifying with." It is clear how we are to identify with the target of compassion on an imagination-based analysis: we imaginatively project ourselves into or take up the target's point of view. Thus, imagination provides both the act of identifying, and the content of the identification. How does identification work on Snow's belief-based analysis? After all, Snow retains the condition that the source must be able to identify with the target, even though it may not be able to imagine what being the target is like.

Snow tells us that the various states we believe the target to be in need not be thought to be identical with any state we have experienced. That is precisely why a belief-based analysis allows for compassion in cases where the imagination-based account falls flat, cases in which the target is vastly different from the source



## DISCUSSION

of compassion. Identification apparently only requires that the source believes that s/he is vulnerable in ways that are similar in some respect to the way the target is vulnerable, and that both are liable to misfortune. But does that tell us enough about what sort of identification is necessary or sufficient for compassion?

On a fairly natural, but narrow or "strict," reading of "similarly vulnerable," it would be plausible to argue that I share only very limited sorts of vulnerability with a bird: perhaps physical pain and acute terror are the only sorts of vulnerabilities that we share. On this interpretation, the idea of similar vulnerability is grounded in shared *experiential* harms. The source's compassion is directed to the specific sort of suffering that the target is believed to be experiencing. This could still be much weaker than the requirements set by imagination-based theories: we don't have to believe that the bird experiences terror or the pain of a broken leg in exactly the same way we do, and we certainly don't have to be able to imagine ourselves in that situation. But we do have to believe that the vulnerabilities are in some way similar, and this narrow reading asks us to focus on harms that are experienced in a similar fashion as negative or harmful. The result is something that is certainly less restrictive than an imagination-based theory of compassion but which nonetheless imposes limitations on what we can feel compassion for.

A different, broader reading of "similar vulnerability" would not put so much weight on similarity of experienced suffering. On this view, trees, paintings, species, and ecosystems, as well as sentient creatures, might be viewed as potential subjects of misfortune. They can sustain damage; something required for their proper functioning can be withheld; and they can die. Even when they do not experience these harms, the damage done to them is similar in other ways to threats to which we are also vulnerable. This broader perspective is consistent with Snow's suggestion that the idea that "existential vulnerabilities" such as death might afford a sufficient basis for identification. However, subsequent remarks suggest that this might be too weak a connection.

Lacking any firm answer in Snow's account to date, we would have to extend the investigation to determine what sorts of shared vulnerabilities are in fact the most appropriate grounding for compassion. My preliminary suggestion is that the etymology of "compassion"—"feeling with"—favors the narrow interpretation with

its focus on feelings and experiences. Whichever interpretation is selected, it is clear that we need to investigate more fully what the identification process requires and allows before we can assess the scope of possible feelings of compassion for animals.

The second question has to do with Snow's claim that we need not rely on direct justification (e.g., objective, scientific demonstrations of the nature of pain in a nonhuman species) in order to establish the legitimacy of compassion. According to her theory, indirect justification which relies on compassion's coherence with a larger network of beliefs, attitudes, actions, and emotions is often sufficient. It is not yet clear to me whether the entire feeling of compassion is indirectly justified, as suggested by her remarks about warranting *the emotion*, or simply the beliefs about the target's states, as she seems to suggest later, when she alludes to "the coherence of its accompanying *beliefs* with other beliefs, emotions, values, and attitudes" [emphasis mine]. If it is the former, Snow would have imported a whole new account of compassion which is to be evaluated holistically, rather than as an emotion whose justification depends on the justification of the beliefs which form a necessary component. If it is the latter, we need some further argument as to why *these* beliefs ought to be allowed a special epistemic status, why they need not be held to the same standards of accountability as any other belief. Or, perhaps indirect justification is an option for all sorts of beliefs, not just those which form the basis for compassion. We simply need to know more before we can decide whether an appeal to indirect justification is a legitimate option.

Questions about justification are related to our first area of questioning about identification with the target and similar vulnerability. There, we were unclear about the content of beliefs that were to provide the basis of the source's identification with the target: what did the source have to believe about the nature of the target's plight in order to feel compassion? Knowing more about the content of beliefs might shed light on this second issue as well, since questions of indirect justification are more easily addressed if we know more about the nature of the beliefs involved. This is not an attack on Snow's theory; it does not identify anything like a contradiction or fatal flaw. We simply need to know more about the beliefs and their content in order to develop the theory fully.

This concern about what can be indirectly justified leads naturally into my third area of puzzlement. In her

paper, Snow identifies different ways of "going wrong." That is, in some cases, someone thinks she is feeling compassion, when in fact she is undergoing some other sort of state.<sup>4</sup> In other cases, the source really does have compassion, but the compassion is irrational. Finally, compassion can be real and rational, but morally inappropriate. Indirect as opposed to direct justification of the beliefs (or of the entire emotion) would make it much more difficult to keep this distinction sharp. The need for precision is likely to be especially acute in cases of compassion for animals, with charges of "anthropomorphism," silly sentimentalism, and outright battiness bandied about with great abandon. Thus, it will be important to sort out these distinctions with care.

Finally, I would like to move past the requests for clarification that have concerned us to date to expand the scope of the discussion beyond the particulars of Snow's analysis. In particular, I want to close with a preliminary examination of the context within which any analysis of compassion would naturally be situated. Let me begin by noting that I take Snow to accept the view that compassion not only *can* move us to action but that it may *properly* function as a component of our moral judgments. I attribute this position to her because if she were to reject it, the discussion of the *moral* inappropriateness of some instances of compassion would make no sense.

A more general consideration of this moral context prompts the question of whether compassion is ever a necessary condition for morally appropriate conduct.<sup>5</sup> Can one be truly moral without compassion? Whether or not it is necessary, is it ever justifiable to charge someone with an irrational or inappropriate *failure* to feel compassion? It seems to me that Snow's theory may provide more of a basis for such a charge than imagination-based theories.

Surely it is possible to argue that failure to believe certain things is irrational; e.g., one might plausibly argue that someone who does not believe that dogs feel pain is being irrational. But if it is irrational to reject the beliefs (a) that dogs are sentient, (b) that this particular dog is suffering, and (c) that one is, oneself, "similarly vulnerable," it is a very short step to the further claim that there is *something* wrong with a failure to feel compassion for that dog. The fact that Snow's account does not demand the ability to imaginatively project oneself into the dog's situation removes an important possible justification/excuse for not feeling compassion in such a case.

None of my questions are intended as an attempt to undermine Professor Snow's analysis of compassion for animals. On the contrary, I believe it offers a valuable addition to arguments about moral obligations to animals. I do hope, however, that they provide a springboard for further discussion.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Nancy Snow, "Compassion," *American Philosophical Quarterly* (1991), pp. 195-205.

<sup>2</sup> Lawrence Blum, "Compassion," in *The Virtues*, R. B. Kruschwitz and R. C. Roberts, eds. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1987), pp. 229-236. Adrian Piper, "Impartiality, Compassion, and Modal Imagination," *Ethics* (1991) pp. 726-757.

<sup>3</sup> B.A. Farrell, "Experience," *Mind* (1950) pp. 170-198. Also, more famously, Thomas Nagel, "What is it Like to Be a Bat?" *Philosophical Review* (1974) pp. 435-450.

<sup>4</sup> This is again relevant to the first concern raised in this paper. If we adopt the narrow interpretation of "similar vulnerability," and if that rules out the possibility of feeling *compassion* for some things, Snow's theory gives us the corrective move of saying that we may have thought we were feeling compassion when instead we were in some distinct but similar state.

<sup>5</sup> To avoid misunderstanding, I should note that I am *not* attributing to Snow the claim that compassion is sufficient for justifying moral judgments or actions; she merely commits to the view that compassion can properly be *part* of the motivation or justification of moral activities.



