

FREETHOUGHT AND COMPASSION

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Introduction

According to the Houston Church of Freethought's website, a freethinker is "a person who forms opinions about religion independently of tradition, authority, or established belief." I might quibble a bit that this is somewhat narrow, because I would suspect that we try to form *all* of our opinions in this manner—not just those pertaining to religion. The site goes on to say that "freethinkers attach more importance to the why of belief than to the what."¹

There is a great deal of focus among freethinkers on epistemology, or how we decide what is true. There is relatively less emphasis on what we do with that knowledge, and how to live in light of it. Given the faith-based culture we find ourselves in, it's understandable that freethought would have that focus. But if we are to 'make a life' of freethinking, then we should begin to broaden our focus to build a more robust and well-rounded understanding of what it means to live as such.

Surely the epistemological principles of freethought carry with them an implied number of ethical ideals. Among them would be honesty, consistency, integrity, and fairness—all of which are inherently necessary for the handling of evidence and claims in a rational manner.

Many other principles don't quite fall under the umbrella of an epistemology, yet are crucial to a happy life. Still, the HCOF website provides at least one more sentence relevant to this. It says:

Freethinkers, therefore, look for and find meaning in their daily lives: in their efforts to learn, to grow, to understand, to help others, and to try, at least, to leave the world perhaps a little better place than they found it.¹

This speaks to me of compassion. Unfortunately, compassion is under assault in our world. Our media and popular culture are rife with things that encourage cruelty, denigration, and even a complete absence of civility. The Germans have a word for which there isn't a simple English version: *schadenfreude*, which means taking pleasure in the misfortune of others.²

Schadenfreude is a major source of entertainment with the advent of daytime talk shows, and it has only grown with the popularity of reality television.

At the same time, the internet has provided a faceless arena in which the usual social constraints of face-to-face interaction have been stripped away. People feel completely free to exchange insults of the most crass, heartless, and bitterly mean-spirited nature imaginable. Even between friends, the faceless screen can lure us into phrasing things more harshly than we would in person. In addition, vocal inflection and facial expression are masked, making what might be meant lightly to be taken more sensitively than it would have.

While wide access to information is one of the greatest advances in history, one can only wonder what the effects of growing up in such a cruel social environment will have on humanity in the future. It seems inevitable that the vitriol of chat rooms and forums will begin to spill out into the real world. Like so many advances before, with such access to mass media and communication, we have once again empowered ourselves—empowered to help *or harm* ourselves, that is.

The answer to this challenge is the same as it has always been and involves, to a large degree, a commitment to compassion. But I think it's necessary to define exactly what is meant by *compassion*.

What is Compassion?

Compassion has held a significant place in the teachings of major religions, philosophies, and traditions throughout history, even if the practitioners of these traditions haven't always lived up to their teachings' lofty ideals.

Still, it seems likely that these elements of compassion have been an inspiration for people, and part of the widespread appeal of the major traditions. In fact, if we can say anything positive about many of them, it's their plea for compassion.

The Dalai Lama has said that “the whole purpose of religion is to facilitate love and compassion, patience, tolerance, humility, forgiveness.” Christian monk Thomas Merton said, “compassion is the keen awareness of the interdependence of all things.” Developmental psychologist Arthur Jersild said, “compassion is the ultimate and most meaningful embodiment of emotional maturity. It is through compassion that a person achieves the highest peak and deepest reach in his or her search for self-fulfillment.”³

Unfortunately, in the case of many religions, this noble call has often been obfuscated by extraneous or counterproductive notions, mainly due to a lack of emphasis on intellectual honesty and rational means of assessing truth—something which, incidentally, freethought excels at.

Merriam-Webster defines compassion as a “sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it.”⁴ The core of compassion is empathy, but with the added impetus to help others. As

such, compassion is both a feeling and an intellectual objective. I will address shortly the question of whether this objective is a logical one.

People conceive of compassion in a variety of ways. Many see compassion as a form of altruism or charity. Or they might even view compassion, especially towards those who don't give it, as a type of appeasement. They might look on it as something we do because of social pressure to conform to the needs of the whole. By this reckoning, a plea to be more compassionate so that we might have a nicer world, would be akin to asking someone to donate their time picking up garbage so that we can all enjoy a cleaner city.

I believe these notions are *wrong*. They are misunderstandings of compassion that are responsible, in large part, for instances of its absence. Just as with the virtue of reason in freethought, compassion isn't a charity or appeasement but rather something which benefits the user; something we cultivate in ourselves which serves us directly.

Why Compassion Makes Sense

We are Social Animals:

Human beings, like dolphins or wolves, are social animals, and social animals tend to harbor instincts and proclivities that encourage them to form relationships with others. When these are strained, damaged, or absent, it creates feelings of guilt, anger, jealousy, loneliness, and so on.⁵

Empathy, as the core of compassion, is one of those inclinations we harbor. It can be suppressed through an unhealthy upbringing or nurtured through a loving supportive upbringing. Even adults, through determined effort, can nurture and improve their sense of empathy. But the vast majority of us *do* have it. This is the reason why we can all go to the movies and experience emotional sways along with the emotional experiences of the characters on screen. The facts that these are strangers and fictional events make no difference to our simple, automatic empathic responses.

Our Physiology:

Over ten years ago, neuroscientists discovered a system of neurons in the brain that allow us to empathize with others by "walking in their shoes," so to speak. These are called *mirror neurons*.

When we make a certain movement, some of our mirror neurons activate, but also activate in the *same* pattern when we merely see *others* make the same movement. Mirror neurons are said to be involved in our ability to "really feel what [we perceive] the other person is feeling".⁶

But is all of this just a silly biological quirk we have picked up through chance? While we do have our appendix and other vestigial traits, complexity theorists have been running computer simulations in an effort to understand more about the development of our cooperative behaviors.

Logistics of Survival:

In these simulations, various sub units interact and are allowed to evolve different algorithms for dealing with one another. Over time, the more successful behavioral inclinations rise to the top. Similar analyses have been conducted by game theorists many decades before that. Those behaviors that rise to the top tend to include many we might recognize as forgiveness, nicety, and other aspects of compassion.⁷ In our case, “survival of the fittest” meant “survival of the compassionate.”

Importance to Reason:

There are also aspects of compassion that interact directly with reason. In that regard, *objectivity* may be the nexus between reason and compassion. As I am sure many will agree, objectivity is essential to good reasoning and the unbiased handling of information. But objectivity involves the ability to see things from *outside* our own point of view, and this is where empathy may help provide that wider view. For example, neuroscience has recently suspected that autism may be linked to a problem with mirror neurons.⁶

Compassion for Enemies:

It’s easy to have compassion for those we care about or feel sorry for. It’s easy to fall into the trap of thinking that we can be compassionate to one individual and not to another. This is because we mistakenly think of compassion as an *action*—one that can be dealt out when specific circumstances and people call for it, rather than as an internal and habitual *character trait*.

Those mirror neurons don’t care whether or not the person on the movie screen is fictional. These instinctive traits aren’t that fine tuned. A person who is cruel to animals can be cruel to people. By the same token, a person who is cruel to enemies can be cruel to friends. Empathy is a habit and every choice we make further shapes our habitual nature—and either nurtures or diminishes a compassionate character.

It is like a muscle. Being compassionate to friends and loved ones is like using your muscles everyday as you live around the house. Being compassionate to those who don’t seem to deserve it is like lifting heavy weights. Those who are happiest tend to be the “body builders” of compassion.

It isn’t just about our instinctive emotions and impulses. Compassion is more than just empathy, but also includes a conscious rational commitment based on the logic of compassion. Imagine, if you will, a world in which compassion is dispensed only when it is received and considered deserved. In addition, take note of the fact that human beings are imperfect: imperfect in their knowledge, imperfect in their self control, and imperfect in their fortitude.

It stands to reason that, a decent percentage of the time, human beings won't do what they are supposed to do. They may forget to say "thank you," they may take out their frustrations on the wrong person, or they might even harbor ill will out of a lack of information, wisdom, or misunderstanding. Of course, there are also hateful people with conscious mal intent, but the bulk of us are simply imperfect normal people.

Each time someone acted inappropriately they would be undeserving. When treated as such, it would cause a similar judgment by the other party. The total number of incidents in which compassion was transferred between individuals would begin to decrease.

In such a case, we would have a leakage in our boat. Like Hawking radiation quietly leaking out of a black hole, the total mass of our collective compassion would enter into a downward spiral. So mere *quid pro quo* is not a workable formula for our mutual wellbeing. In fact, the computer simulations I mentioned above show that forgiveness, mercy, and trust are essential algorithms for a sustainable system of cooperation. In other words, we must face up to the fact that there are times when compassion should be given when it is *not* deserved.

When we combine that fact with the realization that our own empathic character can't be switched on and off but must be nurtured, this should constitute a well grounded rational argument for the policy of "love thine enemy".

I'm not suggesting an extreme pacifism as cruel power-hungry people abuse and seek to dominate us. Nor am I one who thinks that every bad person out there is simply confused and "doing the best they can." Some are as conscious as any of us of the facts and yet harbor ill will and lust for control. In these cases we must resist them however we may.

But in the process of maintaining our defense, we shouldn't become sadistic or cruel in our actions. If we must use aggressive actions, we should do it without taking glee or relishing in it, which might damage our humanity. Rather, these incidents should be taken solemnly and with regret for those who left us no option. We should always be looking for opportunities to be compassionate where least expected. This will not only nurture our compassionate natures, but will give us opportunities to reverse downward spirals of cruelty.

As I have described so far, compassion is in our physical build. That build isn't incidental, as we are benefited by our own compassion in the logistical sense of survival. Thirdly, it seems that the empathic foundation of compassion may be a necessary element in our ability to think rationally. And these facts work together to justify compassion even when we wouldn't normally consider it deserved.

All of these are notions in favor of compassion are consistent with the reason-based aspects of freethought, but in addition to those, there are

also individualistic psychological and philosophical benefits. These benefits have to do with living a well rounded life—something that any church might want to explore with its members.

Compassion and the ‘Good Life’

Nearly anyone who works with the sick or the needy will tell us that when we help other people, it puts our own problems in perspective. We get a better, more existential conception of our problems—and the good feelings don’t hurt much either. Obviously, when we are compassionate, we engender the same behavior in others. When we are extraordinarily compassionate, or when we are compassionate when no one would expect us to be, the effects on others toward us can be profound.

Sometimes even small acts of unexpected compassion can be an inspiration to others. To those who haven’t been so compassionate, these acts often serve as abrupt wakeup calls, leading them to wonder about their own actions. In either case, we tend to personally benefit from the improved relations.

Consider this:

- 1) The most profound effects on others often come when acts of compassion are unexpected.
- 2) Friends and loved ones often exchange compassion so this is expected. The least expected acts of compassion are those towards strangers and enemies.
- 3) Strangers, even if improved, will usually be gone from our presence and never seen again. Meanwhile, enemies are usually considered such because we encounter them frequently.

It therefore follows that the greatest personal gains we stand to make individually are most likely to come from our acts of compassion toward enemies.

This sort of endeavor requires courage and some degree of confidence. Some might call it a “leap of faith” in humanity. I would say, however, that logic, reason, the facts, and even history are on the side of compassion. The odds-makers might be inclined to calculate compassion as the “favored horse”—and it takes no faith to bet on the favored horse.

This isn’t to say that we should make ourselves a sacrifice to others. This would be a misunderstanding of compassion. In fact, it would be an *under-utilization* of compassion. That same universality of compassion that suggests it be applied to enemies and friends alike also means that we ourselves are included. Compassion includes *compassion for ourselves*.

But wherever we are compassionate, the personal benefits to ourselves can be great. Our personal lives are improved by our better

relations, as well as the good feelings we experience as fulfilled social beings. In general, a compassionate person lives a happier, more content life than a person consumed with animosity, bitterness, and hatred—regardless of whether others deserve it.

Compassion, then, would seem to be an important component of the “good life”—what Socrates would call *eudaimonia* or “flourishing.”⁸ Secular humanist Paul Kurtz would call it achieving “excellence.”⁹ I’m sure there are many other terms.

This may seem a selfish way to look at compassion. But indeed, all ethics eventually come down to self-interest on some level. If not, then there would be no reason for individuals to concern themselves with it. But there’s selfishness, and then there is selfishness. Many philosophers refer to it as “enlightened self-interest”—not to be confused with the shallow vice of selfishness.

Instead, this sort of notion comes out of a profound realization. The realization that personal ethics are *good for us*. Like health and brushing one’s teeth, compassion would fall into this category as well. Compassion is beneficial to its user’s emotions, its user’s psyche, its user’s rationality, its user’s network of allies, and its user’s world. It isn’t an obligation or a commandment, so much as it is wise practice. Compassion is “good medicine.”

A Well-Rounded, Freethinking Life

As I mentioned, freethought is heavily centered on reason. Compassion is not opposed to reason. In fact, compassion isn’t even a tandem element sitting alongside reason in partnership. Compassion is *within and of* reason. Compassion is important *because* of reason.

What is also interesting is that *reason* is important because of compassion. One of our primary arguments regarding reason and its use to establish facts about the world is because of what we know it can do for humanity, and that motivation for valuing reason is a compassionate one.

If we are to promote freethought as a way of life, it must be more than simply about how facts are determined. It must have something to say about our humanity and about living a happy and meaningful life. Therefore, I would make a plea to my fellow freethinkers that we become vanguards of compassion in a world that needs more of it. As it is with individuals, compassion will be *good medicine* to the freethought movement.

Improving Compassion

Unlike many principles I believe in as a humanist, compassion isn’t a “social policy” or a large-scale principle. Compassion is a personal thing. It begins with the *person in the mirror* and grows by example. Therefore, I would like to offer what I’ve found helpful for those seeking to exercise their

compassionate muscles. I offer these as suggestions for one particular goal—not ‘commandments’...

1) Don’t fill your time and your mind with vitriol

Vitriol and hateful thinking is insidious, as tempting as candy, and as addictive as a narcotic. It’s so easy to slip into without realizing it. But no logical or sensible position or action ever requires it. Even if violence or aggression were the only logical alternative, it can be done without hatefulness. That hatefulness may seem to be our ally when it comes time to perform certain actions or present certain positions, but it lingers around long after it has worn out its welcome. It shapes our habits and our character, and that hatefulness will breed. Not even counting its effects on our external world, it will make us bitter and negatively affect our contentment internally. When you notice yourself thinking hatefully, try to imagine how tragic it is that our enemies weren’t more enlightened, how unfortunate it is for them that they didn’t turn out to be loving happy people themselves.

2) Discard media that “poisons the soul”

Of course, “soul” is a poetic word here. Films with generally bad people in them aren’t a problem. All good stories need bad guys. But some forms of media, especially the likes of talk shows and some reality television, relish in meanness toward others and the suffering of others. Even many radio talk programs can do this. I used to listen to many of them out of curiosity for the topics, but some contained such vitriol that I found myself affected by it and it seemed to be shaping my attitudes. Since leaving vitriolic programming behind, I have found myself much happier

3) Smile more

This was a suggestion I heard at the Buddhist temple recently. I also read it recently in #3 of Ron Titus’ “Ron’s Rambings” in the Houston Freethought Alliance April newsletter. It may sound fake and make you feel hypocritical, smiling when you don’t really feel that way. But soon you’ll discover that that it isn’t just a smile that follows an emotional state but an emotional state can follow smiling too. In addition, you will get some nice responses from time to time.

4) Learn how to moderate your words without sacrificing the integrity of your position or content

This is an important one for those who think of compassion as some form of appeasement. As mentioned, no position or action ever requires extraneous meanness, insults, or phrasing. Anything substantive that can be said can be communicated just as well by taking care to word things in a compassionate way. In fact, this will often help those words to be more effective because they won’t cause the reader to bring up “defensive shields” and stop listening. Some people will be offended by the content, regardless of its expression; but why miss out on the opportunity to get through to those who might not by throwing in extraneous vitriol? Remember too, that these

words affect *your* habits and your character, which will affect your own long term happiness.

5) Be mindful of your own internal emotional responses and states

There are all sorts of stoic philosophies and meditative practices for interjecting your conscious awareness between outside stimulus and passionate response, but even just the attempt to watch ourselves can be helpful. It may seem odd to advise controlling your emotions in order to be more compassionate. This is because, usually, a lack of compassion is due to emotionalism rather than the opposite. This is another indicator that compassion is not merely a feeling but has a rational component.

6) Remember the source of the benefits of compassion

Remember that most of the benefits of compassion don't change based on the behavior of the other person. Compassion is about who *we* are—not about who *they* are. It's a matter of asking ourselves, "what kind of person do I want to be?" and enjoying the fruits thereof.

7) Become the advocate for your enemy

First, learn to tell the difference between a person with genuine malicious intent and a person with whom you simply have a misunderstanding, even if they may have done wrong things. For the former, do what you must to protect the innocent (including yourself) and don't let hatred consume you in the process. But for the latter, consider what motivates them and try to help them in a careful way, to become a better person. Disarm their fears and challenge their preconceptions with kindness.

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