

Comments on Arenson:
Some Doubts about the Moral Value of Pity

1. The subject of Professor Arenson's paper—pity and its appropriateness for an Epicurean hedonist—is timely. There has recently been much interest in emotions in both philosophy and psychology and there is a vibrant literature on the emotion pity itself. Professor Arenson's question concerns whether feeling pity detracts from the pleasantness of one's life. One example that occupies the Epicureans and which Arenson discusses, is the question of whether it is appropriate for Epicurus to feel pity for a slave. Arenson asks, "Why would someone whose goal in life is her own pleasure, feel pity for her subordinates, given that pity can be a source of psychological pain?" (Arenson, p. 1.) Whether or not we are modern-day hedonists, Arenson's paper addresses one worry that we might have about the value of feeling pity: that it is unpleasant. Arenson shows that, initial appearances to the contrary, the unpleasantness of pity is not sufficient to cast doubt on its appropriateness: there are good reasons to include pity in our emotional repertoire.

In what follows, I want to raise a different concern about pity: pity seems to require a problematic hierarchy between pitied and pitier. This hierarchy is evident in the relationship between a free person and an enslaved person. But, I suggest, this hierarchy infuses other relationships of pitier to pitied. In all cases, I believe, where one person pities another, pity includes a value judgment that the pitied is beneath or below the pitier; in short, I believe that the pitier endorses the lower status of the

pitied. The hierarchy between these two individuals may point toward an unjust relationship between the two, or it may point to injustice within institutional structures, as it does in a society that condones slavery. In short, where pity is warranted or appropriately felt, there may be endemic injustices in the relationship between pitier and pitied. Although I agree with Arenson that the unpleasantness of pity does not preclude the happiness of the pitier, the hierarchy between pitied and pitier and endorsed by the pitier is sufficient to cast serious doubt on the moral value of feeling pity. Moreover, I argue that the goods potentially achieved by pity can be achieved instead by compassion. Finally, though I have space only to gesture at this claim, I believe that the systemic injustices that exist where pity is felt will diminish the happiness of all members of society, pitied and pitier alike.

2. The Epicureans acknowledge that the lives of slaves involve many hardships: lack of freedom, lack of security, little intimacy with loved ones, severe bodily harms, etc. Clearly, the life conditions of slaves are antithetical to flourishing. This is not a new idea; moreover, the Epicurean can and should acknowledge this. But should this acknowledgment be contained in a belief about slaves and their poor life circumstances, or should it be contained in a potentially unpleasant emotion, pity?

Arenson argues that the Epicurean has two argumentative routes to support feeling pity at the poor life conditions of another: first, "pains should be endured if doing so will yield greater pleasure, and ...second, [pains should be endured according to] the Epicurean habit of reflecting on the relative hedonic superiority of one's own situation" (17-18). On the first argument, pity may foster solidarity

among humans. Feeling pity keeps us from becoming “heartless savages,” or “...inhuman;” as Plutarch says, “it is better to be affected somewhat and to be distressed and for the eyes to glisten and melt with tears...” (Plutarch, quoted on p. 18). Feeling pity is humanizing and connects us with others in our society. And for these reasons, it would seem that feeling pity is valuable.

According to the second argument, Epicureans can feel pleasure at their own relative superiority or good fortune in their situation. Arenson is quick to point out that this is not a sadistic pleasure at the misfortune of others, but rather it is pleasure at one’s own freedom from that unpleasant situation. In contemporary terms, we understand this as gratitude at our good situation. I will return to this point below, but for the moment it suffices to say that this too seems valuable: feeling pity appears to include the accurate assessment of the absolute and relative well-being of members of a society, and that awareness contained in the emotion pity appears to be valuable.

In her exposition of the first argument, Arenson argues that Epicureans hold that it is appropriate to feel pity for those who experience insecurity in their everyday lives. In particular, Arenson says, “Lucretius points out that everyone was compelled to feel pity for those who were unable to ensure their own security” (p. 7). She then quotes Lucretius who says, “...everyone ought to have *compassion* on the weak...” (Ibid, emphasis added). Lucretius, like many others, does not distinguish pity from compassion. Many contemporary philosophers collapse this distinction as well. For instance, Martha Nussbaum writes, “When I use the words ‘pity’ and ‘compassion,’ I am really speaking about a single emotion...on the whole

the philosophical tradition is in such vigorous conversation that the terms are frequently heard as translations of one another..."¹ If Nussbaum is correct, it seems that many thinkers avoid drawing a distinction between pity and compassion. I shall argue, however, that this is a mistake.²

3. To understand why, let us begin with Aristotle's definition of pity.

Aristotle holds that pity is "a feeling of pain caused by the sight of some evil...which befalls one who does not deserve it, and which we might expect to befall ourselves...soon."³ Aristotle is commonly interpreted to identify three conditions for feeling pity, each of which is necessary and together are sufficient for feeling pity. We feel pity: 1) for those who have suffered a significant harm or evil; 2) for those to whom harm has undeservedly befallen; and 3) for those with whom we identify.⁴ Regarding the first condition, we feel pity for those who have suffered an evil or a great harm; we do not feel it for those who have experienced a minor setback or upset. It would not be justified to feel pity for someone who got a paper cut, whereas it might be appropriate to feel pity for a guitar player who loses an arm

¹ Martha Nussbaum, "Compassion: The Basic Social Emotion," Social Philosophy and

² Brian Carr also criticizes Nussbaum for failing to draw this distinction. See Carr, "Pity and Compassion as Social Virtues," Philosophy, vol. 74, no. 289, July 1999, pp. 411-429.

³ Rhetoric II.8

⁴ Nussbaum interprets Aristotle as advancing these three conditions: Nussbaum, *ibid*, and M. Nussbaum, "Pity and Mercy: Nietzsche's Stoicism," Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality, Richard Schacht (ed), University of California Press, 1994. Brian Carr, though he criticizes Nussbaum's endorsement of these three conditions, does take them as a reasonable starting point for an account of pity: Carr, "Pity and Compassion as Social Virtues," Philosophy, 1999. For additional discussions of pity see Eamonn Callan, "The Moral Status of Pity," Canadian Journal of Philosophy, vol. 18, 1988, 1-12; Aaron Ben-Zeev, "Why did Psammenitus Not Pity His Son?" Analysis 50, 1990, pp. 118-126; and A.T. Nuyen, "Pity," The Southern Journal of Philosophy, vol. 38, 1999, pp. 77-87. On compassion, see also, Nancy Snow, "Compassion," American Philosophical Quarterly, vol. 28, no. 3, 1991, pp. 195-205.

in war. According to Aristotle, the harm must be substantial for pity to be appropriate. Second, Aristotle holds that the harm must be undeserved. Though this view has been questioned of late,⁵ Aristotle reasonably holds that it is appropriate to pity those who are harmed not as a result of their negligence. The guitar player who loses an arm in war is not (absent contravening information) negligent for losing her arm in war. But a drunk driver who loses a limb in a car accident is. So on Aristotle's view, it would not be appropriate to pity the drunk driver. Finally, Aristotle holds that we feel pity for those with whom we identify: we feel pity, in part, because we recognize that but for luck or circumstance, we might have been in the situation of the pitied. Pity seems to include the recognition that the pitier might have found themselves in the same situation as the pitied. And again, this makes sense: one of the social functions of pity is to link the well-being of two differently situated people: linking one who is suffering with one who is not but might have been or might be in the future. This is the important social function that pity plays, according, as we saw earlier, to Plutarch. Pity contains the caring of one who is relatively well-off for one who is relatively not. Adam Smith, for instance, seems to hold this view. He holds that one of the advantages of both pity and sympathy are that they link the good of one person to the good of another.⁶ When someone feels sympathy or pity for another, the sympathizer or pitier takes on an unpleasant emotion that justifiably dissipates only when the circumstances of the object

⁵ M. Weber, "Compassion and Pity: An evaluation of Nussbaum's analysis and defense," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 7: 487-511, 2004.

⁶ Adam Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments* 1.1

improve. In this way, their fates are linked, and furthermore, the one feeling pity or sympathy has a motive for helping improve the position of the other.

Unlike Aristotle and Smith, who hold that it is valuable to feel pity, many philosophers doubt the value of feeling pity. According to Nussbaum, both Nietzsche and the Roman Stoics (Seneca in particular) regard pity as an acknowledgement of weakness and insufficiency in both pitied and pitier.⁷ For the pitier, to feel pity is to admit softness toward others and allow oneself to be negatively affected by the fate of the other. Nietzsche defends a Stoic rejection of the softness of pity, in favor of a cultivation of hardness, power, and creativity. Nietzsche also argues that pity is inappropriate for the pitied, because pity falsely attributes value to worldly goods. That is, it is inappropriate, on Nietzsche's view, to pity one in poor circumstances because despite appearances to the contrary, the poor circumstances do not in reality affect that person's well-being. To assume that the poor circumstances matter for well-being is to hold a false view of what really matters. Again, we see that Nietzsche's view represents his adoption of a Stoic endorsement of the self-sufficiency of happiness.

4. Though I am skeptical of this Stoic-Nietzschean view of pity, with its emphasis on hardness and self-sufficiency, I agree with Nietzsche and the Stoics that pity is problematic. I want, therefore, to suggest another reason to worry about pity. The Stoic-Nietzschean view appears to begin with the common intuition that many of us prefer not to be the object of pity. As the 17th century philosopher, Spinoza puts it: "A [person] who lives by the dictates of reason strives...not to be touched by

⁷ Nussbaum, 1994, pp. 150-152.

pity.”⁸ This starting point seems to me correct. Indeed, there may be two reasons why we desire not to be pitied. First, we naturally desire not to find ourselves in pitiable circumstances. If we never find ourselves in terrible circumstances, we would never be pitied. But even if we are in poor circumstances, still many of us do not wish to be pitied. This may be because the object of pity is seen to be lower than the pitier; the one pitied is often the object of condescension, or even perhaps contempt, regarded as having less dignity. The pitied may themselves even feel undignified. The pitier takes themselves to be above or better than the pitied. And even if the pitier recognizes that this is merely a matter of luck, or admits the possibility that their own life circumstances may change, or that they may be affected by evils, still the pitier takes themselves to be better than the pitied. The pitier may feel that were they in these terrible circumstances, they, unlike the pitied, would respond better; alternatively, the pitier may believe that they are inherently more dignified than the pitied. In sum, at the extreme, the pitied is seen to be a sniveling, pathetic individual, driven to this lowest point by their bad circumstances, but not necessarily so driven — the person in poor circumstances, the pitier may believe, might not have responded quite so badly to these terrible circumstances. Pity, on this view, necessarily or conceptually, involves hierarchy: the pitier takes themselves to be above or better than the pitied.

We can see that when Epicurus pities a slave, this conceptually includes the belief that Epicurus is better than the slave. This is unproblematically true in the sense that Epicurus, having freedom, security, etc., is in a better situation than the

⁸ Michael LeBuffe, “Spinoza’s Psychological Theory,” *SEP*, 2015, retrieved on January 25, 2018.

slave. But pity seems to involve more than simply this belief in the relative well-being of the pitier. Because otherwise, Epicurus' emotion could be characterized as gratitude: feeling joy at one's relative good fortune. Pity, by contrast, involves the pitier's endorsement of the lower status of the pitied.

Now this claim, that pity involves an endorsement of the lower status of the pitied, will strike some people as puzzling, or even as false. Indeed, pity involves a concern for the pitied on the part of the pitier; so it might seem strange to say that this concern also includes an endorsement of their lower status. So let me explain this claim. I believe that pity includes an acceptance of the situation that gives rise to the evil. So in the case of someone whose long-time companion has died, pity for the surviving spouse involves the recognition of the importance to the spouse of the one who has died, and it involves an acceptance that death is final, irrevocable. If we pity the surviving spouse it is, in part, because we recognize and accept the finality of the situation. In the same way, I take it that when Epicurus pities a slave, the pity contains an acceptance of the social relationships constituted by slavery and an acceptance that these social relationships are, for now at least, here to stay. Contrast this with a different Epicurean, Epicurus*, who, instead of feeling pity for the slave, feels outrage for the conditions occupied by enslaved people and the institutions that have led to these terrible life prospects for this enslaved person. Epicurus* may feel compassion or concern for the slave but also feels outrage for them and that outrage contains Epicurus*' rejection of the institution of slavery and its injustices. Pity, because it includes an acceptance of the institution of slavery and its injustices,

includes an endorsement of that social relationship and its attendant injustices, or at least some complacency with regard to those social relationships and injustices.

A skeptic of my view might be willing to acknowledge that this account makes sense in the context of a relationship of slave-owner and enslaved-person, but does it make sense of the feeling of pity toward one whose long-time spouse has died? Even here, I do think that pity involves an endorsement of some form of hierarchy between the pitied and the pitier. In this case, the pitier looks upon the pitied as someone who has suffered a terrible loss in the recognition that the pitier has not suffered that loss (though they could suffer it). Feeling pity involves acknowledging the terrible circumstances of the other in the recognition of the diminished status that results from being in these circumstances: "Poor you," says the pitier. "You are rendered a diminished version of yourself, at least for now." Pity may also include an assessment of the response of the pitied to these bad circumstances: the pitier may see the pitied as responding in a way that is undignified. And in so judging, the pitier takes themselves to be better than the pitied.

One might further wonder how my account, with its emphasis on the endorsement of hierarchy between pitied and pitier, would address self-pity, given that with self-pity, the pitied and the pitier are the same individual. In particular, how would two selves or two aspects of an individual differ in status, one maintaining a higher status than the other and that one endorsing the lower status of the other? This is a big topic, and so I can indicate just a bit of how my view would handle this issue. I do think we sometimes hold bifurcated views of ourselves in

which one part or aspect of the self takes a particular stance toward another part of aspect. For instance, someone might look back at some action they took and find that it was petty or unkind. Such an individual might say to themselves, “that was really unkind of you to do that.” It is only this sort of distance, which we often take toward ourselves in self-reflection, that is needed to achieve the two aspects of pity: the individual in a moment of self-reflection says, “I am pitiable both due to my poor circumstances and due to the way I am responding to them.” Contrast this with another individual, also in poor circumstances, but who instead says, “I am in poor circumstances, but I am responding to them in the best way possible, in a dignified and honorable way.” The latter does not feel self-pity, but the former does. And all that is needed to understand self-pity are these two perspectives, which are common to everyday examples of self-reflection.

5. It would seem that my view can make sense of both pity and self-pity. On both views, I have argued that an endorsement of hierarchy is a conceptual part of pity. But does this hierarchy mean that pity is sufficiently morally problematic that we should avoid cultivating it and work to extirpate it, as the Stoics urge of all emotions? As Arenson shows, feeling pity has some advantages. It connects us emotionally to the good of another: as the pitied is faring badly, so the pitier takes on a negative emotion. Nussbaum also argues that pity is important because it contains an acknowledgment of the fragility of our happiness and the extent to which our flourishing is subject to luck: according to Nussbaum, the one who eschews pity, as Nietzsche and the Stoics do, “doesn’t see what the life of a beggar is,

what it is really like to lose your only child, what it is really like to love someone with all your heart and be betrayed.”⁹

I agree that pity is not without its advantages. Moreover, I believe that it is important to preserve the system of value that acknowledges the fragility of these goods. But we do not need to cultivate pity to do this. Rather, I believe we must draw a distinction between pity and compassion, and we should cultivate compassion rather than pity. Pity, we should understand as feeling sadness at the fate of another, where that includes the cognition that the pitied lacks dignity, or is lower than the pitier. Compassion, by contrast, involves sadness at the fate of the other, without this cognition about status. Indeed, one might even suppose that feeling compassion involves a kind of humility, a recognition that were circumstances different, the compassionate one would be in need of compassion. To put it differently, whereas pity emphasizes the way circumstances or evils diminish the pitied, compassion instead emphasizes the evils or the bad circumstances themselves. These evils are not seen as diminishing the agency or the dignity of compassion’s object. Instead, compassion emphasizes the connection between the one who feels it and the one toward whom they feel it. We should cultivate compassion, as I have understood it, rather than pity.

Returning to the third of Aristotle’s three requirements for pity (that the pitier must identify with the pitied) I want to suggest two ways in which this might be so, and thus further distinguish pity from compassion. I believe that in both pity and compassion the subject of the emotion must identify with the object. But in the

⁹ Nussbaum, 1994, p. 161.

case of pity, the emotional identification by the pitier also involves a fear of falling into similar bad circumstances or fear of losing one's dignity. As a result of this fear, the pitier's emotion includes some contempt for or condescension toward the pitied. The endorsement of their difference in status (contained in the contempt or condescension) serves to distance the pitied from the pitier and may enable the pitier to psychically protect themselves from their fears. In feeling compassion, by contrast, the subject recognizes the ill fate of the other and feels sympathy without fear. Feeling compassion, rather than erecting a barrier between the two, connects the two in humble recognition of the precariousness of happiness.

Before I close, I would like to make one further point about pity. One might think that it would be appropriate to cultivate pity, precisely because pity is tuned in to hierarchy. Feeling pity tracks the existence of a hierarchy between pitied and pitier. This can alert the pitier to injustice and motivate them to work to eradicate it. Still, I doubt that this reason is sufficient to justify cultivating pity: pity not only tracks the existence of an unjust hierarchy, I have argued that the pitier, through feeling pity, also endorses this hierarchy. And because pity endorses hierarchical relations among moral equals, pity is itself morally tainted by the unjust hierarchy. The awareness of injustice and the motivation to end it can instead be contained in compassion without the attendant endorsement of the hierarchy or of the diminished dignity of the pitied.

6. Professor Arenson ends her thought-provoking and tightly argued paper by pointing out that there are important differences between the Stoic and Epicurean views of emotions: the Stoics regard nearly all emotions as important to

eliminate for flourishing to be possible. Aronson has shown that this is not the Epicurean view: on the Epicurean view, feeling pity for a slave is appropriate and can be a motivation for altruistic action. Indeed in feeling pity, Epicurus may be motivated to help the slave, including perhaps working to end the institution of slavery. While this is valuable, I have argued that these ends are better achieved by compassion.

Despite these clear differences, there also appears to be common ground between the Stoics and Epicureans, and even Aristotle: all of these ancient philosophers urge us to ask whether experiencing emotions is conducive to happiness. Aronson has shown that one aspect of feeling pity (its unpleasantness) does not preclude happiness. But I have argued that because of its conceptual link with hierarchy, pity is morally problematic. Pity conceptually involves an endorsement of hierarchy, whereas compassion does not. In response, we should distinguish these two emotions and work to cultivate compassion, rather than pity. Finally, I have barely hinted at the idea that a hierarchical relationship or society in which some are appropriately pitied involves a deep and fundamental injustice. And though I do not have the space to argue for this here, I believe that due to this injustice, no one in this society can flourish: obviously not the pitied, but also not the pitier.