

CHAPTER 7

*The psychology of compassion: Stoicism
in City of God 9.5*

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Questions about the role of compassion in civic life, and especially in legal contexts, seem particularly germane to us at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Yet as Martha Nussbaum has reminded us, analysis of the issues involved goes back to the ancient world, with Seneca in particular offering a somewhat sophisticated distinction between mercy and compassion, and seeking to foreground mercy in an account of the worthiness of those who receive it.

Augustine famously attacks the Stoic denigration of compassion in *City of God* 9.5, and this comes as part of his larger engagement with the Stoic theory of affectivity in *City of God* 8.17, 9.4–5, and 14.8–9. But it is rather difficult to tell just where he stands in relation to the Stoics, given that he employs Stoic criteria for evaluating emotions, as well as Stoic distinctions and definitions, while chastising the Stoics.

In the particular case of compassion, the fact is that Augustine has a nuanced account which is sensitive to the distinctions and concerns that inform the Stoic position. A close examination of *City of God* 9.5 and of Seneca's *On Clemency*, in conjunction with Augustine's statements about compassion, affectivity and dignity in other works, will allow us to track his appropriation and rejection of various elements in the Stoic account, and to identify his reasons for doing so. That in turn will make it possible for us to address the question of whether his account has anything important to offer that is lacking to the Senecan mercy ethic.¹

¹ The Stoics consistently call compassion (*ho eleos, misericordia*) a morally bad emotion (*DL* 7.123; *Tusc.* 3.9.20). Seneca agrees, in keeping with this tradition, but he adds that there is a virtue called mercy (*clementia*), which is not the same as compassion. See below on Seneca.

I CITY OF GOD 9.5 AT FIRST GLANCE, AND UNDER
CLOSER SCRUTINY

Augustine claims in *City of God* that his endorsement of compassion (*miser cordia*) is the distinctive feature of his ethics as compared to Stoicism, which regarded compassion as a morally bad species of emotion (*civ. Dei* 9.5):

Within our [Christian] discipline, then, we do not so much ask whether a pious soul is angry, as why he is angry; not whether he is sad, but whence comes his sadness; not whether he is afraid, but what he fears. For I do not think that any right-minded person would condemn anger directed at a sinner in order to correct him; or sadness on behalf of one who is afflicted in order to liberate him, or fear for one in peril, lest he perish. The Stoics, indeed, are wont to reproach even compassion; but how much more honorable it would have been for the Stoic in Aulus Gellius' story [*NA* 19.1] to be moved by compassion for a man in order to liberate him, than by [preliminary²] fear of shipwreck.

The beginning of this passage sounds, *prima facie*, like a mischaracterization of the Stoic account. When Augustine says that in the system *he* subscribes to, emotions are classified as good and bad based on what makes them arise (*quare, unde esse*), he seems to cast the Stoic theory as one which fails to distinguish emotions by their objects. That would be wrong, given that the Stoics distinguish emotions in just that way, as we shall see momentarily. The passage also makes the reader wonder whether Augustine is proposing an ethic of altruism rather than a desire–satisfaction model of classical eudaimonism, when he contrasts compassion and fear for another with fear for oneself. And generally this looks like an unreflective and undefended dismissal of Stoic concerns about “compassion.”

However, the fact that this work is apologetic means that there is more here than meets the eye. As Runia has noted in another context, Augustine only selectively acknowledges his indebtedness to earlier authors and schools of thought.³ It is not uncommon in late antiquity that the names of authors or schools are omitted when being drawn upon positively. Apparently the rationale for this is that it allows the raw truth of the ideas to stand out, rather than appearing parochial, as the mere opinions of one particular school or individual philosopher. In contrast, names are named when there is a perceived need to warn the reader about errors. So although

² On Augustine's use and understanding of the Stoic category of preliminary passion (with responses to Sorabji), see Byers 2003.

³ Runia 1993: 322–23; cf. Runia 1995: 120–21, 125.

Augustine is clearly critical of something in the Stoic account, we would be ill-advised to assume that he is rejecting it *tout court*.

Indeed, when we look more closely at this statement of Augustine's in the context of *City of God*, we notice a few things which require us to revise our initial impression. First, it no longer appears that Augustine has misunderstood the Stoic picture. He is not mistakenly accusing the Stoics of failing to distinguish between emotions caused by different objects. He refers to the Stoics' distinction between two kinds of sadness, of desire and of joy – morally good versions of these and morally bad ones (*civ. Dei* 14.8, referring to the *eupatheiai* and *pathē*) – and shows that he not only understands but also adopts the Stoic definition of the latter in *City of God* 8.17, when alluding to the *daemones* of Apuleius: they are, he notes, subject to passions (*passiones, turbationes mentis; deo Soc.* 13). He proceeds to define passion according to Zeno of Citium's definition of *pathos* as it appears in Cicero: a movement of the rational soul or mind that is contrary to right reason.

The Stoic distinction of emotions by their objects is described at some length in the *Tusculan Disputations* (*Tusc.*),⁴ which Augustine uses as his touchstone for talking about affectivity in *City of God*. In the Stoic theory, which has been much discussed because it is formally similar to the cognitive model of emotional therapy found to be clinically effective today, fear is caused by the judgment that something bad will happen; grief, by the judgment that something bad has happened. Desire results from the belief that something good is to be attained in the future; joy is caused by the judgment that something good has happened. (These four emotions are genera, and each has its own species-emotions, which are about specific kinds of circumstances and objects.) What makes emotions good or bad is the truth or falsity of the judgments. Since the Stoics held, in Socratic fashion, that only moral goods are true goods, because only virtue makes humans happy, the paradigmatic wise person feels precaution at the prospect of doing something morally wrong, because this is a true evil, rational desire at the prospect of doing a virtuous act in the future, joy reflecting on the attainment of some virtue or the completion of some virtuous act. These are the only kinds of emotions the sage has (though these, again, are genera encompassing a number of species); there is no grief for the paradigmatic sage – and thus no compassion, a species of grief – because a wise person, being wise, never commits moral evil. In contrast, failure to train one's thoughts in the truth results in morally bad emotions caused by rash and erroneous judgments that loss of a job, the death of relatives, winning the lottery, getting a promotion, and so on are important

⁴ See *Tusc.* 3.II.24–25, 4.6.II–4.7.I4.

for happiness. Emotions caused by these false beliefs are craven fear, exhilaration about frivolous matters, a kind of lust for accidentals, and a grief that hysterically overreacts to things which are really irrelevant to happiness.

The Stoics labeled the two kinds of emotion, and also each particular emotion, in order to avoid confusion. Emotions caused by false judgments are given the technical name “passions” (*pathē*; Cicero: *perturbationes*, Seneca: *affectus*). Those caused by true judgments are the “good emotions” (the *eupatheiai*; Cicero: *constantiae*). To the *pathos* that is fear they gave a different name from the *eupatheia* that is fear (*phobos* vs. *eulabeia*), and so on. In Cicero’s doxography of the Stoic account in the *Tusculan Disputations*, he did the same in Latin.⁵

So Augustine’s references to *pathos* and to *eupatheia* in the *City of God* indicate that he is familiar with this division of emotions according to cause. Moreover, he makes clear that the whole purpose of his bringing it up in *City of God* 14.8 is to show that although scripture uses different terminology, it respects a conceptual distinction between emotions that are morally good because they conform to right reason, and those which do not. The works of secular literature, which also imply a conceptual distinction without following the Ciceronian–Stoic terminology, are brought in as a way of lending prestige to the colloquial usage of the scriptures.

Second, upon closer inspection of the passage about compassion in *City of God* 9.5, it becomes clear that Augustine is not presenting a dichotomy between altruism and self-interest when he commends compassion and fearing for someone else, rather than fearing for one’s own life. He speaks of compassion in order to “liberate” and fear lest someone “perish.” But a parallel passage in *City of God* 14.9 also speaks of “liberation” and “perishing,” and the words have a moral sense: liberating from vice, perishing through sin. The surrounding context is one in which virtue and vice are the intentional objects of emotions⁶ when Augustine says: “But they [the citizens of the city of God] are moved by these emotions not only on their own account but also on account of those whom they desire to be liberated and for whom they fear lest they perish. They grieve if these do perish, and rejoice if they are liberated.” So here in *City of God* 9.5, he is

⁵ The *pathē/perturbationes* are: undue exultation = *hēdonē/laetitia*; irrational desire = *epithumia/libido*; craven fear = *phobos/metus*; grief = *lupē/aegritudo*. The *eupatheiai/constantiae* are: joy = *chara/gaudium*; rational desire = *boulēsis/voluntas*; fear of doing wrong = *eulabeia/cautio*. See *DL* 7.110–14, 7.116; *Tusc.* 3.11.24–25, 4.6.11–4.7.14.

⁶ See before and after the quote, in *civ. Dei* 14.9: joy in good works, fear of being tempted, desire to persevere in virtue, grief over sins committed by oneself and by others, desiring to make others virtuous, fearing that others might be led astray from holiness, grieving at others’ lack of righteousness.

saying that it would have been better, and consistent with the Stoic concern for virtue over everything else, had the Stoic in Gellius' story been concerned with saving others from vice,⁷ rather than having preliminary fear for his own physical life: "But how much more honorable it would have been for the Stoic in Aulus Gellius' story to be moved by compassion for a man in order to liberate him, than by fear of shipwreck." His point is that the former is a true good, the latter an "indifferent" according to the Stoics. He is not advocating that we supplant care for ourselves with care for others, but pointing out that virtue and vice per se, regardless of whose they are, are proper objects for good emotions: we should be moved by these emotions not only on our own account but also (*non solum verum etiam*) on account of others.

But this last point does seem to signal a substantive disagreement with the Stoics. He implies that the Stoics, by their proscription of compassion, show that they are not concerned about virtue per se; they hold instead to an arbitrary distinction between the virtue of others and the virtue that is one's own. Compassion is a species of grief for the Stoics, grief over another's perceived subjection to evil, but the Stoics do not want the sage to grieve even when others are in *true* evils. Given their definitions of *pathos*, *eupatheia*, and grief, they would need to provide some further reason for concluding that the sage should not have compassion for someone else's moral failings; this reason seems to be lacking.

Does the Stoic circumscription of affective involvement to the case of oneself lack philosophical justification? In order to assess the fairness of this charge, we need to explore in greater detail the third *prima facie* plausible interpretation of *City of God* 9.5 that we noted above. Does Augustine unreflectively dismiss the Stoics' concerns about compassion (*miser cordia*)? They think that they have good ethical reasons for saying that compassion is an ethical failure. Does Augustine make an attempt to understand those reasons, and does his advocacy of compassion adequately respond to them?

2 SENECA'S CLEMENCY, AUGUSTINE'S APPROPRIATION

Augustine signals his engagement with the actual reasons that the Stoics (proximately Seneca) offered for their rejection of compassion in two ways

⁷ Note that the designation *afflictus* [*homo*], which Augustine uses in *civ. Dei* 9.5's "compassion with the afflicted in order to liberate him," can mean ethically base, ethically wretched. It is apparently in this sense that he uses it.

in *City of God* 9.5. First, he shows that he is responding to their account when he stipulates that it is good to commiserate (*contristari, conpati*) with one who is afflicted. This is a rather precise reference to a particular aspect of the Stoic theory. (We may take it as non-controversial that Augustine knew his intended audience – principally, the intellectual elites of the late Roman empire – would be familiar enough with Seneca to pick up this precise allusion.⁸) For Seneca does not actually disavow all mercy, but he does ban commiserating with the people whom we succor; by his choice of words, Augustine shows that his disagreement is directed specifically at this ban. Second, he alludes to Seneca's theory when he says that "this impulse [the *miser cordia* that I am advocating] complies with right reason when shown in such a way that justice is preserved" (my translation). He alludes here to the virtue of mercy or "clemency" (*clementia*), which Seneca extols when begging the eighteen-year-old Nero to remain a merciful emperor. It is by definition a tendency to pardon from punishment in such a way as to preserve the principles of justice (see Seneca, *clem.* 1.18.1–2, 2.6.1).

Now this latter allusion that Augustine makes is particularly interesting. For it apparently means that the "compassion" he is advocating conforms to at least one of the criteria for Senecan clemency. (From now on, I will refer to Seneca's particular construal of mercy as "clemency," in order to avoid confusion.) It therefore behooves us to investigate exactly what those criteria are and how they play out in Seneca's picture.

Clemency, for Seneca, is an inclination to dispense with *rules* governing retribution, whenever circumstances indicate that the *principles* of justice have been satisfied – typically, that the guilty party has learned his or her lesson. Moral reform is the end of punishment, rather than simple retribution. This implies two things. First, it is acceptable to remit punishment if the end is attained before the sentence commences, or during its duration. Second, it is a lack of virtue to continue punishing after there is evidence that the guilty party has learned the lesson (see *clem.* 2.7.4, 1.2.2, 1.14.1, 1.17.1). Specifically, it would be acting from the passion of anger, a species of the passion of desire. (Anger is a desire for revenge in which inflicting suffering is erroneously conceived of as a good by the angry person.) So, clemency is a sensitivity which recognizes *reasons* for lightening a sentence: the perpetrator is old and frail, and so learns his lesson with a light punishment because he feels it more, or repentant, or young and

⁸ On the intellectual audience of the *City of God*, see Brown 2000: 298ff.; on knowledge of more than a few works of Seneca as part of a respectable education, see Augustine's disappointment about Faustus in *conf.* 5.6.11.

inexperienced and thus was acting from only partial voluntariness and hence easily regrets the action (*clem.* 2.7.2, 1.1.4, 1.15.7). What the Stoics decry is mercy which acts from feelings of pity without regard for justice: sentimental people want to throw open the doors of prisons and let out the most harmful criminals if once they see them cry (*clem.* 2.4.1). This Seneca calls “compassion” (*misericordia*).

Now that the terms are defined this way, clemency looks more attractive than compassion, at least for anyone who, like Augustine, is committed to a “virtue ethics” in which deviations from justice are conceived of as harmful both to the person who is treated unjustly, and also to the (moral character of the) one who acts unjustly.

In fact, Augustine does uphold the criterion of justice in mercy, not only in *City of God* 9.5 but also in letters dealing with the punishment of criminals. When an amateur admirer of Stoicism writes to him expressing the opinion that criminals should not be subjected to beatings simply because the scars are always a fresh source of shame, he is presumably paraphrasing Seneca in one of his softer moments (*clem.* 1.17.3). (Book 1 of *On Clemency* contains Seneca’s own opinions and pragmatic arguments in addition to the more doxographic Stoic material; this softness about the shameful scars is apparently one example.) Yet Augustine retorts along more orthodox Stoic lines that even though physical torture “is abhorrent to our way of thinking,”⁹ this being why he did not want to press criminal charges against the suspected instigators of a church burning and looting in his diocese (who would have been subject to torture under interrogation), it is essential nonetheless that some punishment be meted out (*ep.* 104.17; cf. *ep.* 91.9). For known culprits, he advocates a heavy fine as punishment, instead of beating, because of “compassion.” However, he presumably thinks that if this less severe punishment cannot be secured from the magistrate, the full force of the law is preferable to a simple pardon (see *ep.* 104.1, 104.5–7; cf. *ep.* 10*.4). Recall that this is how Augustine understood his own childhood beatings, which he compared to torture (*conf.* 1.9.14–16). Our ultimate criterion of compassion should not be what the perpetrator of crime finds desirable (*cupire*), he tells us, but his true, that is, moral, interests (*ep.* 104.8). The compassion (*misericordia*) that he advocates is therefore highly moralizing and subject to the demands of justice, as is Seneca’s clemency.

⁹ The translations and paragraph numbering used for these and other letters cited herein are from Atkins and Dodaro 2001. Seneca similarly associates the use of torture with the vice of cruelty: see *clem.* 1.13.2, 1.25.2, 2.4.2.

3 THE HEART OF AUGUSTINE'S CRITIQUE

Given Augustine's agreement with Seneca that mercy should be answerable to justice and aim at the moral correction of others, why does he insist on calling it "compassion" (*miser cordia*), a term by which Seneca denoted an emotion that shows a lack of consideration for justice?

His disagreement with Seneca is primarily directed at his restricting of clemency to a *virtue*, a disposition toward external actions. The problem is that Senecan clemency is an officious set of deeds (Seneca: *facta, opera*), without affective involvement. It has the look of an efficient bureaucrat dispensing aid to anonymous recipients.

Augustine wants clemency to be defined as a feeling, a good emotion accompanying a tendency to do good works. He thinks that in this life the sage will be subject to "feelings of this kind even while performing morally appropriate actions" (*bona officia; civ. Dei* 9.5; my translation; cf. *s.* 259.3, 259.5). (Note that *officia* is Ciceronian Latin for Stoic *kathēkonta*, appropriate actions.) When he homes in on the idea of commiseration (*contristari, dolere, conpati*) and defines compassion (*compassio*) as "a kind of fellow-feeling in our hearts for the misery of another which compels us to help him if we can" (still 9.5; trans. Dyson), Seneca's notion of clemency is being supplemented, not rejected altogether.

Augustine uses the term *miser cordia* to allude to a clement emotion because it is the only term that the Stoics have for an *affect* that is concerned with the ills of others. But his compassion is clement. Similarly to the case of the *pathē-eupatheiai* discussion in *City of God*, Book 14, Augustine is adhering to some elements of a conceptual distinction between two senses of mercy, while denying that one need stick to the technical Stoic names for particular affects.

When he says that it would have been "much more humane" (*longe humanius*) for the Stoics to have praised a feeling of compassion (*miser cordia*), he is directly responding to Seneca. His point is that Seneca did not go far enough when he said that clemency is a particularly humane *virtue* (*ex omnibus virtutibus nulla humanior; clem.* 1.3.2).

4 STOIC INCONSISTENCY AND ISOLATIONISM

But why is it so important to Augustine that we sympathize with the people whom we help? First of all, he thinks, the Stoics offer no convincing reason for omitting an emotion of clemency from the set of *eupatheiai*, and so their position is not actually derived from the principles of Stoic virtue

ethics – principles that Augustine himself generally likes.¹⁰ Seneca's claim that feeling compassion is bad because it clouds the judgment (*clem.* 2.5.5, 2.6.1) looks to be a smokescreen; for if the Stoics really thought that feelings *necessarily* involve clouded judgment, they would not have the class of *eupatheiai* at all. This is Augustine's point when he says that sharing in the sadness of someone else can "comply with reason" (*civ. Dei* 9.5). The other Stoic argument, namely that affective clemency is impossible because this would be a kind of grief and the sage by definition can have no grief, since he never does anything morally wrong (*clem.* 2.5.4), is irrelevant to the question of grief over *others'* moral failures.

Similarly, Augustine implies, the Stoic prohibition on suffering with the sufferer conflicts with the ancient claim that virtue is to be valued for its own sake. As noted earlier, when he points out in *City of God* 9.5 that a concern for virtue as such will entail that the sage has emotional reactions to others' virtue or lack thereof, he implies that the sage *ought* to have concern for virtue as such – but that the Stoic sage does *not* actually have this. If the Stoic sage cared about virtue for its own sake, the matter of whether a virtue or vice were one's own or another's would not be a deal-breaker. If what distinguishes a good emotion (*eupatheia*) from a bad one (*pathos*) is that its object is a true (moral) good or evil rather than an indifferent, it is not clear what is grounding the stipulation that the good or evil must be a good or evil "of one's own." In the play *Medea*, for instance, when the chorus feels sorry for Medea that she is becoming morally worse by killing her own children, why could this not be a *eupatheia*?

Hence, the prohibition on grieving over another person's moral vice looks arbitrary. It is not derived from the distinction between moral value and everything else, which is supposed to be the basis for classifying emotions as good or bad. What, then, is motivating the Stoic proscription?

Augustine concludes that it must be the simple fact that grief is an interior pain, a suffering with the sufferer. He thinks that the Stoics reason as follows. Most people are morally bad, and their lives are messy because of their own wrongdoing and the vicious behaviors of others around them, which entice them to become worse. Consequently, a sage who opened herself up to being emotionally impacted by others' moral failures would potentially be continually upset. Continually being lacerated by such pains is not an enjoyable, healthy way to live (cf. the characterization of the Stoics in *s.* 348.3). So the sage's emotions should only be about her own moral states. This will reduce

¹⁰ He does not like their claim, however, that we can (now, after the Fall) become virtuous without the aid of grace.

the amount of affective pain that the sage experiences to a negligible amount. The sage can fear the approach of moral evil, but it must be her own moral evil, and the real reason for this (unacknowledged by the Stoics yet nonetheless motivating them) is that since she is careful about her associates and the places she frequents, she will not often have to fear doing anything wrong. Similarly, it is *because*, being wise, she has no actual misdeeds and so never does grieve that the Stoics can allow that she could in principle be upset by a true evil (her own non-existent vice).

Now the Stoics, by their own eudaimonism, are not supposed to think that the avoidance of pain and attainment of pleasure are proper goals of ethical action; that would be Epicureanism. By refusing to make clemency a *eupatheia* the Stoics are (in fact though not officially) advocating a version of Epicurean freedom from the painful emotions of fear and grief (*ataraxia, aponia*).¹¹ They have thereby contradicted their own principles.

So Augustine thinks the Stoics are trying to avoid pain caused by involvement with others, and that their refusal to allow for clement grief is just one tell-tale example. Hence in *City of God* 9.5 he mentions grief at another's moral baseness alongside of frustration and fear provoked by others' actual or possible bad moral states – neither of which is pleasant. If Christian affective life is distinctive for unambiguously allowing that virtuous emotions can be elicited by others' lack of moral progress, then the reason this differentiates it from Stoicism is because the Stoics, in their desire to be rid of painful emotions, have adopted an all-out self-sufficiency. They have a fear of intimacy, because of the vulnerability to pain that it brings.

Augustine's reading of the Stoic allowance of suicide is another clue that we are right to think that this is the charge he wants to level against the Stoics in regard to compassion. Suicide is fleeing from pain, he thinks, as in the case of Cato, motivated by a desire to escape a painful feeling of embarrassment. It is because he thinks that this is a kind of weakness, a hedonistic motivation, that he makes Job a foil to Cato: "our opponents do not wish us to give preference over Cato to that holy man Job, who chose to endure. . . rather than to be rid of all his sufferings by putting himself to death" (*civ. Dei* 1.24).

By thus pinpointing Augustine's critique as a charge of pain-avoidance, we can make an important clarification of his excoriations of Stoic

¹¹ See Epicurus, *Key Doctrines* 10, Long and Sedley 1987: 21D; *Letter to Menoecus* 127–32, Long and Sedley: 21B; and *DL* 10.136. Augustine knows the Epicurean position via Cicero; see, e.g., *Tusc.* 3.15.32–33, 3.6.12, 3.17.38.

“hardness” (*duritia*). He sometimes uses this term to designate their refusal to make clemency an emotion.¹² Commentators have often seen this, and his references to *apatheia* in *City of God* 14.9, as an accusation by Augustine that the Stoics advocate total insensibility.¹³ The hardness Augustine has in mind, however, is more narrowly a reference to painful other-regarding emotions. When he mentions two senses of *apatheia* in *City of God* 14.9, namely, the Stoic sense of absence of morally bad emotions and the Cynic and Skeptic sense of total insensibility, he does not mistakenly identify the Stoic position with *apatheia* as insensibility. Moreover, as we have already seen above, he shows awareness of the Stoic *eupatheiai*, including painful fear, and he does not accuse the Stoics of withholding pleasant other-regarding emotions from the sage.

Notice that Augustine’s charge of pain-avoidance also seems to gain some support from the Stoic list of species-*eupatheiai*, or morally appropriate emotions, a list which Augustine himself presumably did not know. These affects are simply named, but not elaborated upon, by Diogenes Laertius in his *Life of Zeno* (*DL* 7.116). Interestingly, some of these seem to be responses to others’ good moral characters – “respect,” “affection,” “goodwill” (these must be references to the moral characters of others, since all *eupatheiai* are about true goods and evils, moral states). So the Stoics seem to allow fond feelings provoked by others’ moral goodness, but deny the sage a painful feeling of grief over others’ moral badness. Since even the morally good person is “external” to the sage’s own moral character, the allowance of the former and the exclusion of the latter from the sage’s affective life looks arbitrary, unless it is motivated by a desire to avoid pain, as Augustine implies.

The inconsistency whereby the Stoics fall into Epicureanism matters to Augustine not simply for reasons of logic. He cares about it because it also frustrates his effort to convert pagan intellectuals to Christianity – one of the main purposes of *City of God*. He regards the Stoics’ aspiration for self-sufficiency (*sibi sufficere*) as their tragic flaw (*civ. Dei* 10.18), since it prevents them from accepting the idea that they need grace in order to be happy. But now we see that he thinks that their program of insulating the self from others is rooted in an aversion to affective pain. And an unwillingness to acknowledge that affective pain is a regular part of life, even for the sage, will

¹² *ep.* 104.17; *mor.* 1.27.54. In the latter text, his general point seems to be that just because compassion is a feeling, this does not indicate that it is necessarily evidence of moral *miseria*.

¹³ O’Daly 1999b: 156 presents Augustine as only seeing one meaning of *apatheia*, viz. mental inhumanity and bodily insensitivity, and rejecting this supposedly Stoic view; cf. King 2009: 3.

prevent the Stoics from acknowledging that the world is fallen, which will again prevent them from accepting the need for a savior.¹⁴

It should be noted that there is an additional Stoic argument which is relevant here, though it is not mentioned in Seneca's treatise on clemency or addressed by Augustine. It is attested in Epictetus and mentioned in Seneca's *On Providence*, but without an explicit connection to the case of compassion (see, e.g., *ench.* 17, 30–31; *prov.* 5.7ff.). This argument would hold that compassion is wrong because to be upset about things over which we have no control – specifically the moral choices and voluntary states of others – is a kind of rebellion against providence. Had Augustine taken this up, he would have responded by saying that God merely allows other people to err morally (*ench.* 11); such things are merely known and tolerated by God, who does not actually make them happen.¹⁵ So, grief or fear could be an appropriate emotion caused by the judgment that something ought not to have been done by someone else, or would not have happened in the ideal (pre-Fall) world. It need not be taken as tantamount to rebellion.

5 LESSER GOODS OR PREFERRED INDIFFERENTS?

But there is, of course, a second reason why Augustine disagrees with the Stoics about compassion, hinted at in *City of God* 9.4. While the charge of inconsistency applies to their handling of others' moral states as objects of emotion, Augustine goes farther than the Stoics would have gone had they been consistent. He wants to allow the physical and social hardships of others, and not merely their moral states, to be proper objects of compassionate clemency. This is anticipated in *City of God* 9.4, where he follows Cicero in arguing that the Stoics' "preferred indifferents" (*commoda*) are not merely indifferent to our happiness but are actually good ontologically and consequently can be good for us, that is, real contributors to human happiness.

Thinking back to the case of the looters and their possible torture cited in Section 2 above, we can add, then, that Augustine diverges from the Stoics in his underlying assumption that torture is truly bad for the one being

¹⁴ As I argue elsewhere (Byers, forthcoming), this desire to emphasize the sage's experience of affective pain also seems to be the reason why in *City of God* 9 he uses technical words for Stoic passions (*perturbationes*, *passiones*) to refer to preliminary passions, distinguishing them from consensual emotions by placing them in the *animus* rather than the *mens*: he wishes to emphasize that in a preliminary passion, the sage is (without his own consent) subject to pain of the same quality as in a passion proper.

¹⁵ Compare Wetzels's discussion (2001: 53) of "predestined" versus "merely foreknown" events.

tortured because of the harm done to the body and the accompanying physical pain – and not merely bad because it shows a moral defect in the torturer. It is thus something to be feared and sorrowful about, even if this is preferable to no punishment at all. (Again, this is similar to Augustine's understanding of his own childhood beatings.)

A parallel case of compassion-advocacy serves to confirm this reading of Augustine on torture. In the year 428, merchants were abducting free people from the African coast and selling them as slaves in other provinces. Augustine says he feels the urgency of working to free these people; if he and the other bishops do not have compassion on them, he worries, then no one else with enough clout to be effective will do so. And yet, compassion should extend to the slave traders themselves. He desires that the culprits should not face the possibility of punishment according to the applicable law, since it prescribes beating by whips tipped with lead. Instead he again advocates a fine (*ep.* 10*.3–4). He wants to use the law to *frighten* the traders into stopping the practice, but he wants as well to prevent the punishment of beating from being applied; the “abominable” culprits of illegal human trafficking, as well as perpetrators of sacrilege and theft, should also be shown compassion (*misericordia*; see *ep.* 10*.3–7, 104.6, 104.16–17).

The difference between Augustine and the Stoics very clearly lies in Augustine's statement that the trafficking of free people is a real “evil that has befallen Africa,” one meriting grief: on hearing about the misfortunes of these people, “hardly one of us could restrain his tears.” It also lies in his belief that the use of lead-tipped whips on criminals is an evil to be avoided because it can lead to death, the destruction of the body (*ep.* 10*.4). It is the Stoic refusal to call such things “bad” for the one who suffers them which prompts Augustine to say that Stoic ethics falls short in its failure to include *misericordia* (*ep.* 104.16–17).

6 HUMAN DIGNITY AND COMPASSION

If Augustine's claim that torture, beating, and kidnapping are to be feared and grieved over is not flowing from Stoic principles, what is its source? The answer surely lies in Augustine's account of human dignity. But here again, the question of precisely what differentiates Augustine's account from that of the Stoics will be complex.

Nussbaum has said that part of what motivated the Stoic repudiation of compassion was a respect for persons as dignified agents. Their view was strongly egalitarian and cosmopolitan, being rooted in a conviction that

humanity has dignity by virtue of its power of choice (*prohairesis*).¹⁶ According to this way of looking at things, compassion fails to give adequate attention to the natural dignity of the person, since it focuses on accidental features of the suffering person's life: on what has happened to someone, rather than on his or her rational capacity for moral choice.

It is true that in his account of clemency, Seneca implies that compassion devalues a human being. More precisely, the Stoic execration of compassion seems to be rooted in a refusal to identify a person with his or her bad fortune. Seneca speaks of self-congratulating pitiers who are averse to the people they pity. They shrink from contact with the handicapped, the elderly, and the destitute; they insultingly fling their alms while averting their glance. Apparently such people are repulsed because they make this false identification of "bad/repulsive circumstances" with "bad/repulsive human being." Perversely, they also *like* there to be needy people because it provides an opportunity for them to look compassionate and to feel proud of themselves for acting compassionately; they do not regard the recipients of their alms as equals, but inferiors (see *clem.* 2.6.2–3).

This Stoic point is insightful and again rather attractive, as was their earlier stipulation that compassion ought not violate justice. We might want to refuse to reduce a person to his or her bad fortune, just as we might want to resist the contemporary Anglo-American practice of identifying people with their accomplishments or lack thereof.

However, the viability of the Stoic attempt to articulate what *does* constitute human dignity is questionable. Here we must disagree somewhat with Nussbaum's interpretation. The whole emphasis of Stoicism implies that the dignity of a person resides in her acquired *moral character*. In Epictetus, the Stoic author who makes extensive use of the notion *prohairesis*, the term does name a rational power for making moral choices (that is, the power of assent used in the context of action, e.g., *disc.* 1.17.21). But it also not uncommonly names the dispositions acquired through the repeated use of this power; thus *prohairesis* has qualities – it is either morally beautiful or morally ugly (e.g., *disc.* 2.10.27–29, 3.1.40). More importantly, the power is valuable *as instrumental* for attaining the right kind of disposition, for becoming beautiful. What makes human beings preeminent in the scale of nature is not Kantian autonomy, but rather their ability to conform their choices to the order of things established by God (*disc.* 2.10.1–3). *Prohairesis* is valuable as a necessary condition for becoming "free" in the normative sense of freedom from vice and error, for forming a disposition by which we

¹⁶ Nussbaum 2001: 357, 359, 364.

always choose in accord with right reason (e.g., *disc.* 1.4.18, 1.8.16, 1.12.10; *ench.* 30).¹⁷ What inspires respect for the minds of others is their virtue. When the Stoics execrate compassion, then, they are not making a choice between identifying someone with her bad fortune and her rationality *per se*, but a choice between identifying someone with her bad fortune and the way she uses her rationality, that is, her moral character.

Now, if we are going to identify people with one or the other of these, the latter is obviously preferable as a basis for talking about human dignity. But of course the down side is that those with bad character will now be in a social position analogous to that of female or otherwise “defective” infants in Graeco-Roman societies, who could be taken out of the community and left to die by exposure. If you act contrary to virtue, the fact that your action was preceded by assent means that you acted from a failure to reason well, and also that you acted voluntarily; if you persist in making bad choices, you will certainly lack the (moral) identity which merits admiration. It is by no means clear from what the Stoic sources say that I still owe you “respect.” It would, moreover, be irrational for me to have solicitude for your moral excellence, given that your state is voluntary. We are lacking a robust account of inalienable dignity that can unfailingly command respect for people simply as human and solicitude for their moral good, even when they have voluntarily made themselves bad. And so we are lacking an account of dignity that can adequately ground an *egalitarian* Stoic mercy, such as Nussbaum wants.

Seneca, it is true, does sometimes *seem* to verge on a theory of natural rights: human beings ought to love the whole human race as they love themselves, and even slaves should receive clemency (*humani generis comprehendens ut sui amor*; *clem.* 1.18.1–2, 1.11.2). Notice, though, that he does not justify this “ought” by referencing the human power of assent. Instead, he implies or says two things. First, he implies that since society is universally morally corrupt and mired in error (e.g., *otio* 8, *ira* 2.10.3–4) everyone who does wrong is acting from partial ignorance and therefore deserves a lessening of their punishment, that is, clemency. Second, he appeals to our social nature, to the fact that the safety and well-being of the individual is tied up with that of the community (*clem.* 2.6.2, 1.3.2).

However, the normative force of this latter appeal to the common good, which looks *prima facie* as though it might foreground human rights, is attenuated because its foundation is unclear. In the same breath that Seneca says that slaves are due clemency, he indicates that people of higher social

¹⁷ Cf. Gill 2006: 98.

rank (freed and free-born) and “honorable” people (*honesti*) are more worthy of clemency (*clem.* 1.18.1). (Similarly Cicero, working off Stoic material and seeming to lead up to the claim that all humans are equal in worth, in the same breath makes the relevant kind of equality the equality of friends equal in virtue; *leg.* 1.12.34.) Again, when Seneca explains how the good of the individual is supposed to be complemented by the good of the community, it turns out to be a mixture of pragmatism and Epicureanism. You ought to be clement because when you are clement toward inferiors, you are clement toward yourself: you ensure that they will not rise up against you. Thus can your life be pleasant, untroubled by disturbances (*clem.* 1.3.2, referencing Epicureanism; cf. *clem.* 1.5.1ff.). And running throughout Seneca’s reasoning is the self-referential argument that if we do not act from clemency, we are likely to act from a desire for revenge, which is bad for our own moral character (see, e.g., *clem.* 2.6.2–3). That argument requires, and makes, no appeal to the dignity of the recipient of clemency.

In Augustine we find the same insight that we do in the Stoics, namely that there is a kind of feeling sorry for unfortunate people that is in fact demeaning and perversely desires the bad fortune of those whom it pities: “We should not wish people to be wretched so that we may be able to practice works of mercy . . . If you render service to a wretched person, perhaps you desire to extol yourself before him and wish him to be subject to you, because you have benefitted him. He was in need, you bestowed; you seem to yourself greater, because you bestowed, than he on whom it was bestowed. Wish him [instead] to be your equal . . .” (*ep. Jo.* 8.5).¹⁸ The compassionate clemency that Augustine advocates therefore seeks to avoid this. But unlike the Stoics he grounds compassion in a robust account of human dignity.

It is at first tempting to think that this dignity is established by the importation of Christianity; after all, Augustine singles out compassion as a hallmark of the Christian approach to thinking about affectivity in ethics. But this is not quite accurate, if by “Christianity” we understand only biblical praise for clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, teaching the ignorant, visiting prisoners and so on (e.g., Matt 25:31–40). Augustine does not arrive at his concept of compassion simply by tacking divine commands onto Stoic ethics. Certainly such biblical injunctions are relevant to his way of thinking about the matter. But he actually thinks that such precepts are implications of the basic principles of natural law.¹⁹ He also thinks that

¹⁸ Trans. adapted from Browne and Myers 1888.

¹⁹ See the discussion and texts in Byers, forthcoming.

God, who gives these divine commands, essentially is the immutable and intelligible standard of morality, along the lines of Plato's Forms. It follows from both of these facts that Christian ethics does not constitute a neat, separate category of ethical norms that Augustine need not defend, beyond saying that they are particular to his own religious preferences. According to the demands of his own theory, he must give a philosophical account of how biblical recommendations are compatible with classical virtues (such as justice), which are applications of stable standards or Forms that exist inside the mind of God (including Justice).

Augustine does this, of course, with an ontological account of the person that is deeply indebted to Plotinus. This account can explain why it is appropriate to fear or grieve when the goodness of the soul or body is threatened or damaged. The soul is a superior kind of substance (immaterial), and its intellect is an image of the mind of God, making it immortal. This ontological excellence justifies lamentation at the fact that people "defile" their souls with moral evil. Augustine says, for instance, that we should grieve over the dead souls of those who killed the African martyr Perpetua (s. 280.2). But that event was about two hundred years earlier; so the idea is apparently that even though it is useless to grieve, since the perpetrators cannot be saved from vice now, the self-inflicted damage to their souls is still worth lamenting. In Augustine's Plotinian account, the body also has "borrowed" dignity, given that the intellectual soul forms the body. So it is not irrational to grieve if someone is tortured, or their corpse is left to be eaten by birds – nor to fear that these things may happen, or get angry at people who want to do them. Relevant claims specific to Augustine's Christianity are amplifications of these ontological points. By the manner in which the incarnation was accomplished, God showed the goodness of both male and female bodies (see s. 51.3, on the incarnation of a male body through a female body); redemption itself was motivated by the beauty of the soul (*ep. Jo.* 8.10.2–3, 9.3.2, 9.9.2).

This goodness of the soul and therefore of the body, which is prior to and distinct from acquired moral character, allows Augustine to say that human beings deserve a certain protection and respect, regardless of what they have done – although he does not apply the principle as widely as we might like.²⁰ His wider concept of dignity thus overlaps somewhat with more recent discussions of respect in personalist schools born from

²⁰ See Rist 1994: 235–39 on Augustine's failure to say that we should work toward the abolition of institutionalized slavery and torture.

phenomenology (rooted in Kant),²¹ although he justifies it differently. Compassion is compatible with and even demanded by the virtue of justice, because the ontological excellence of the person merits care and concern.

“Compassion in Christ,” which Augustine thinks should supplant officious Senecan clemency (*ep.* 104.17), is therefore an empathetic attitude as well as an orientation toward clement action that preserves the principles of justice. Augustine’s Christ is not Taylor’s “non-Stoic” Christ; but neither does he operate from the “disengaged stance” which Taylor sees in the neo-Stoicism of early modernity,²² and which Augustine saw in Senecan clemency. Christ looks like a Stoic sage, insofar as his feelings were according to right reason (*recta ratio*) and up to him: “His weakness derived from his power,”²³ since he had emotions only when he judged (*iudicare*) that they should be experienced. Yet Christ was sensitive, because he had perfect perception of how things ought to be, and of how they really are in the fallen world. He unambiguously had other-regarding emotions provoked by others’ moral states – anger, fear, grief, and desire in reaction to others’ potential and actual virtues and vices – and it pained him when others suffered from the physical effects of the Fall: death and other temporal afflictions (*civ. Dei* 14.9).

7 CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Part of the appeal of Stoicism’s cognitive psychology of the emotions is that it gives a relatively sophisticated ancient account of the relation between the emotional life of an individual and the good of others in society. If emotions are caused by voluntary assent to propositions, it is easier to hold someone responsible for the destructive societal effects of his rage, for instance, than it is if emotions are caused by non-rational psychological or bodily processes. Yet the Stoic proscription of painful other-regarding emotions such as compassion can be read as a reaction against the vulnerability that this link between the personal and the social entails. Rather than allowing ourselves to be saddened by the sadness of others, or made fearful by their fears, we should remember that other people are in the class of mere externals.

²¹ Compare Spaemann’s definition of forgiveness (2007: 232) as acknowledging that the person who has harmed us is more than this action of having harmed us; persons are not reducible to their moral actions or attributes.

²² See Taylor 2007: 115–39.

²³ Here “weakness” refers to vulnerability to emotional impact from others.

In Augustine's schema, by contrast, the affectively healthy person ends up looking tougher than the Stoic sage, because more willing and able to bear affective pain. Clemency is not merely a disposition to do helpful things for others, but also to be sensibly affected by their suffering. Paradoxically, then, the toughness accompanies a general softness toward the condition of others. What prevents this softness from being mere sentimentality, as the Stoics feared, is the same thing that provides a more adequate justification for the "clement" actions of the sage than Seneca himself had provided. Augustine's ontological account of the human being as good, in which the body is an image of the soul and the soul is an image of God, gives him a way to speak of compassionate clemency as a proportionate, and thus just, response to bodily and moral afflictions.

The principle benefits of the Stoics' cognitive psychology can therefore be retained, despite the different ontological context in which judgments are carried out. In Augustine's system, the emotion of compassion is caused by an accurate judgment about the loss of real goods, although he will want to retain a distinction in magnitude between temporal goods and eternal goods (virtues). Hence accountability for emotions will still be possible, and the use of cognitive therapies will still be relevant.