

St  
Martin  
in  
the  
Fields

# Radical Compassion

*The Gospel and Social Justice*

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## Terry Eagleton *Compassion and Power*

“What the dispossessed need isn’t sympathy but power - though it’s true that we’ll know that they’ve really come to power only when the very notion of power has been transformed in the process.”

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## Compassion and Power

St Martin-in-the-Fields, 16 November 2011

Any decent, civilised person invited to speak about compassion and power would surely begin by putting in a good word for compassion before proceeding to say a few negative things about power. Being, however, neither decent nor civilised myself, and having been born with a perverse instinct to defeat expectations, I intend to do precisely the opposite, namely to begin by making some positive points about power and then to say some negative things about compassion. The great Samuel Johnson once reviewed a book which contained, he said, a good many things which were new and true. The only problem, he added, was that what was new was not true, and what was true was not new. What I have to say, then, may not be true, but at least it will be new.

Power is of course an excellent thing. In fact personally speaking I can't get enough of it. Those who use the word pejoratively -- who, when they think of power, always think of *oppressive* power - fail to see that it all depends on who has power for what purposes in what circumstances. There are emancipatory powers as well as tyrannical ones. (Speaking of autocracy, we live in an anti-authoritarian age, and one sign of this, believe it or not, is the way some young people insert the word 'like'; into their speech every four seconds. To say 'It's nine o'clock' sounds unpleasantly authoritarian, whereas to say 'It's like nine o'clock' is suitably provisional and open-ended). Gaddafi was an example of power, and so are the protestors outside St Paul's. Only those with enough power already can afford to be so sniffy about the stuff. The only thing worse than having too much power is having too little. Democracy isn't the opposite of power, but a specific form of it. The New Testament speaks scornfully of what it calls the powers of this world, meaning the kind of brutal imperialist set-up that did Jesus to death. But it also speaks of principalities and powers, for

which it has nothing but praise. The Old Testament tells us that we shall know Yahweh for who he is when we see the poor being filled with good things and the rich being sent empty away God isn't a disowning of power but a revolutionary reversal of it. Yahweh is presented in the Bible as a terrorist of love, someone whose ruthless, uncompromising compassion and forgiveness are likely to burn you to a cinder if you aren't careful. Power and compassion here aren't opposites, but ways of describing the same thing.

So we should stop thinking of power in terms of Nicholas Sarkozy and start thinking of it instead in terms of Nelson Mandela. (Incidentally, Nicholas Sarkozy and his ilk is the best argument I know for atheism. If there is a God, then it follows that he must be hopelessly in love with Sarkozy, Berlusconi, Sarah Palin, , Dick Cheney and the like, a prospect so utterly inconceivable, so entirely beyond all human imagining, that it beggars any argument against the Almighty offered by the likes of Richard Dawkins). What the dispossessed need isn't sympathy but power -- though it's true that we'll know that they've *really* come to power only when the very notion of power has been transformed in the process. Emancipation isn't a question of grabbing some of what the rulers have for yourself, but of changing the very meaning and nature of it. This is why Lenin, not exactly a name to conjure with these days( I said Lenin, not Lennon), claimed that the aim of the Bolsheviks wasn't to take over the Tsarist state but to transform it out of existence, which is what the word 'soviet' means. Stalin had rather different ideas.

Let me sketch very briefly an understanding of power that I think is mistaken. -- one which one might call the expression/repression model, which is really Romantic in origin. On this theory, there's a lot of exhilarating creative stuff in here, and the only problem, is that something out there - call it power, the state, patriarchy, imperialism, George Osborne -- is stopping it from bursting exuberantly forth. One of the several problems with this idea is not everything

in here is creative. Another problem is that if oppressive forms of power really were simply out there, we wouldn't be in anything like the mess that we currently find ourselves. The trouble is that power - what St Paul calls the Law - is installed in here as well. Any kind of power which doesn't persuade its subjects to appropriate it, internalise it, make it their own, weave it into the stuff of their identity, isn't likely to survive very long. That's one reason why apartheid came tumbling down, not to mention the neo-Stalinist regimes of Eastern Europe. So the inside/outside model can be deconstructed -- inside and outside are in fact endlessly reversible. The good news, at least according to Freud, is that this process of internalising the Law is never entirely successful. We're all Oedipal rebels who delight in seeing Big Daddy come unstuck and the Law brought low. The bad news, again according to Freud, is that the Law doesn't only persuade us to collude in our own oppression; it actually manages to make us take pleasure in the process. The Law for Freud -- what he calls the superego, the power installed within us - is an insanely vindictive force which delights in getting us to tear ourselves apart, and -- chronically masochistic, guilt-ridden creatures that we are - we reap a kind of obscene enjoyment from this process.

If we bow to this malevolent power, in other words, it's because there's something in it for us. Any oppressive power which can't yield us some kind of gratification, however thin and meagre, is going to be pretty precarious. To avoid this fate, the Law must seduce us into loving it -- into hugging our chains and exulting in our own abasement. This is one of several reasons why St Paul sees the Law as cursed, and sees Christ as liberating us from its despotic sway. The Law can only tell us where we went wrong, not encourage us to go right. The good news is that, once power is no longer able to yield us some meagre gratification, we will revolt against it as surely as night follows day. Why shouldn't we? What would we have to lose?

People who have nothing or very little to lose are dangerous. You might say that they're supremely powerful, in a perverse kind of way. This is one of several reasons why the Bible sees the poor as sacred, the word sacred meaning among other things powerful, dangerous, subversive, not to be messed around with. Those who have hit rock bottom, who are dispossessed of themselves -- the great protagonists of tragedy, for example, Oedipus or Lear or Jesus - are those over whom power can have no hold. This is why the poor for the Bible, those it calls the *anawim*, and of whom Jesus is the prototype, are a critique of power simply by virtue of what they are, not just on account of what they say or do. The poor are the living image of the limits of power. They mark its failure simply by being what they are. The only image of the future is the failure of the present. Those who are stripped of all power, as tragic art is aware, also come in some mysterious way to transcend it. They are images of the fact that the only authentic power is one that springs from self-dispossession. No resurrection, given the dire state of the world, without crucifixion. Only those who lose their lives for the sake of others will find them again.

There's plenty of talk about power in the work of Marx, but it isn't for the most part oppressive or exploitative power. One of Marx's most recurrent phrases, almost in fact a cliché with him, is 'human powers and capacities'. Like his mentor Aristotle, and indeed like the greatest of all theologians, Thomas Aquinas, and like Hegel from whom he pinched an outrageous amount of stuff, Marx believes that true morality consists in men and women being able to realise their vital powers and capacities simply as an end in themselves. Or, to use a more technical theological term, simply for the hell of it. Not so that they can justify their existence before some grim-faced tribunal of History, Duty, Utility, Progress, Production or the like, but purely for the sake of their self-delight. This is why Marx's image of human production isn't packing sardines but art, which exists for its own sake. We need to create the political

conditions in which men and women would be able to live as ends in themselves. Morality is about knowing how to enjoy yourself, knowing how to have a good time, and being in the kind of political conditions where it's possible. Politics and ethics are thus sides of the same coin.

Doing something simply for the hell of it is known among other things to Christianity as the doctrine of Creation. The doctrine of Creation has of course nothing whatsoever to do with how the world got start, whatever poor deluded old-fashioned Victorian rationalists like Richard Dawkins might think. Thomas Aquinas certainly believed in the Creation, but he also thought it quite reasonable to hold that the universe had no beginning at all. Creation is about the fact that God brought the universe about not because he had to but just for the love of it. The world is the original *acte gratuit*, a matter of gift and gratuity, not of necessity. It's true that, surveying the squalid course of human history, the Almighty is now probably bitterly regretting that he ever created the slightest particle of matter, no least Charlie Sheen. But that's another story.

OK, so having said some nice things about power, let me try to say some nasty ones about compassion. The word compassion literally means 'feeling with', And as such is related to words like sympathy and empathy. And the idea here is that the more I can project myself into your inner state, into what you're feeling, the more humanely I'll behave towards you. It would be interesting to know what a sadist would make of this. A sadist knows exactly how his victim is feeling. That's not a reason for him to stop torturing him, it's a reason for him to carry on. The Nazis didn't murder Jews because they couldn't imagine how they were feeling,. They didn't care what they were feeling. Immorality isn't a breakdown of the imagination,. Serial killing requires a lot of imagination. (So I'm told, I don't speak as an expert).

You don't need to know how someone is feeling to treat them humanely. Personally, I've never been chewed by a shark, at least as far as I remember, but I'd still try to help someone who was. Knowing what it feels like to be chewed by a shark is neither here nor there. Morality has very little to do with feeling. It's about what you do,. This is why the prototype of love in the Gospels is the love of strangers, not friends. Anyone can love a friend, just as anyone can love a baby or a badger. This kind of loving is far too comfy and cuddly to count as truly Christian. Anyone who's read St John's gospel will be aware of just how unlovely love is. As my dear, now deceased friend, the Dominican theologian Herbert McCabe, summarised the meaning of the Gospel: If you don't love you're dead, and if you do they'll kill you. There's your pie in the sky for you. There's your opium of the people. There's your cosmic consolation. One of the great modern centres of sentiment is the family, and it's notable that Jesus comes across as deeply hostile to the whole institution. He has, he remarks, come to break it up. Which is really not a very cuddly thing to say.

'Love', the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein once remarked, 'is not a feeling'. Maybe that was just because he read too many books and didn't get out enough,. Or maybe it was because he recognised that the kinds of love that do indeed involve feeling - romantic and erotic love, for example - are not the deepest forms of it = are not exactly what the gospel knows as *agape*. That kind of love -- taking the place of a total stranger in the queue for the gas chambers, let's say, as of course happened in the camps from time to time - doesn't need to involve feeling at all. Feeling is entirely irrelevant. As long as I don't allow you to die in the gutter, it doesn't matter that I find your scabby, unwashed state revolting.

Generally speaking, post-Romantic cultures like our own make too much of a fuss about experience, how we're feeling, as opposed to what we're doing. As Wittgenstein points out, intending is not an experience, Neither is expecting.

You tell me that you're expecting her to arrive on Wednesday, and I say 'oh yes, and what does that feel like? Is it like a kind of twinge, or a slight constriction of the throat muscles? And will it go on right up to the moment when you meet her, or will there be a kind of lingering after-sensation for a bit?' No, you say, it doesn't feel like anything, any more than being a banana feels like anything. I'm not reporting on an experience, I'm describing a situation. Expecting may be *accompanied* by feelings - dread, excitement, blind panic - but it may not be. 'I promise to pay you a fiver'. And what if as the words cross my lips, I haven't the slightest intention of doing so? Have I promised? Of course I have. Promise is a social institution, not a state of mind. If I stand with you before a clergyman in certain material circumstances -- say you're in a long white dress, or perhaps in these enlightened days *I'm* in a long white dress - and say I do, I'm afraid I've gone and married you. What I was feeling is neither here nor there. It really won't do to turn round to my newly acquired father in law and gasp 'God, I don't know what came over me'.

What this all comes down to is that love, properly understood, is profoundly impersonal. Which isn't to say that you have to love everybody in some rush of universal sympathy, a sentimental fantasy if ever there was one, but that you have to love any old body - any old body who makes such a demand on you. As far as that goes, their race, gender and the rest, all the things that postmodern thought holds so dear, are completely beside the point. Love is specific in the sense that it attends to the needs of this uniquely particular individual, but impersonal and universal in the sense that it can be any old uniquely particular individual. And this is an idea that would have struck, say, the ancient Greeks and Romans as very strange indeed. Love is impersonal rather in the way that desire is for Freud. For Freud, desire is nothing personal. It doesn't originate with me, or indeed with any one individual, and it goes all the way through its arbitrarily-selected object, which can be anything from Kate Winslet to a pair of

sponge rubber trousers, to emerge somewhere on the other side. Desire has all the anonymity of language -- the medium in which we come into our own as individuals, but which is profoundly indifferent to all of us, and which none of us ever invented.

This is what the New Testament speaks of love as a commandment. 'A new commandment I give you, that you love one another', Jesus tells his comrades, though as a pious Jew he must have known that it wasn't new at all, that it goes all the way back to the Old Testament. How on earth can you be commanded to love? Surely love is subjective, spontaneous, unplannable, unpredictable? How can one say 'Love that smug-looking banker over there in eight seconds' time?' Well, once again, if one's thinking of love in erotic or affective terms-- as *sentiment* - then of course we're just not built that way. But I've already suggested that this is a mistake. Loving bankers doesn't mean going all weak at the knees when they wink and leer at you, and least of all climbing into bed with them. It means, for example, treating them with justice, not seeking to hang them upside down from lamp posts when we take their banks from them and place them in the hands of the people, and so on. Forgiving someone doesn't mean letting them off. In Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia, seeking in her characteristically devious way to rescue a fellow member of the Christian ruling class from the demands of an odious Jew in pursuit of justice, tells us that 'The quality of mercy is not strained', meaning constrained. But the play itself is wiser than its character. Mercy mustn't be allowed to make a mockery of justice. Shylock, for his part, speaks of his *bond* - something both intense and impersonal, a burning personal commitment but also a contract, an anonymous piece of paper. The victimised need such pieces of paper because they would be foolish to rely on the subjective whims of their superiors when it comes to justice. Portia's outrageous verbal dodge -- that the bond says nothing of Shylock's being allowed to draw blood when carving his pound of flesh -

would be laughed out of court in any real legal context. It would be like claiming that the bond is invalid because it doesn't mention whether Shylock should be standing, kneeling or crouching when he takes the flesh, or whether he should be wearing a pair of frilly knickerbockers.

Marx begins *Capital* by pointing out that the work is a critique of capitalism, not of capitalists. It's an impersonal system he's examining, not the moral lives of individuals. If capitalists are as ruthless as they often are, it's because they have to accumulate profit otherwise they go out of business. It's not exactly that one should forgive them because they know not what they do, but because as long as they're what they are they can't do anything else. Which then raises the question of why they don't do something else for a change. No doubt some of these men and women are as cuddly as Santa Claus. After all, even the most brutal of tyrants drool over their children. Those who put Jesus to death were probably nice enough guys. I don't mean Pontius Pilate: we happen to know enough about the historical Pilate to know that, far from being the liberal, vacillating character with a mildly metaphysical turn of mind that the New Testament presents him as for its own political purposes, he was a bloodstained brute of a killer who ended up being dishonourably discharged from the Roman imperial service. I mean the local Jewish ruling caste, who probably had this populist agitator strung up because they were terrified that in the highly charged political atmosphere of Passover he was going to trigger a revolt that would bring the full force of Roman power down on the heads of their people. They were just, as the saying goes, doing their job. Nothing personal, old chap, as they were heard to murmur. No doubt they too pulled funny faces for their children and would have taken their wives out to posh restaurants had any existed.

But that's not the point. When Christians speak of original sin, they speak of a condition in which the sin, so to speak, is objective, a general condition in

which we're all caught up, not the result of any one person's malevolence. And such an impersonal condition demands an answerable impersonality. The only true compassion one might show to those, say, in the United States with private jets who would cut the food stamps of the poor rather than tolerate a cent on their income tax is to do away with the monstrous system that generates such human beings so that they might have a chance of becoming real people for a change. The only true compassion, in other words, to them as well as to those they oppress, would be to put them out of business. Which is to say that compassion, if we have to talk in those terms, can only be personal by being in the first place political. And that's how it becomes real power.