

Compassion and education: Cultivating compassionate children, schools and communities by Andrew Peterson (2017). Palgrave Macmillan, London. ISBN 978-1-137-54837-5

In his book *Compassion and education*, Andrew Peterson explores the concept of 'compassion' in three main areas: (i) compassion as a virtue, (ii) compassion in relation to self and others, and (iii) compassion in relation to teaching and education. Peterson states that his 'focus in this present book lies in particular on the cultivation of compassion within the education of young children in schools' (p. 10). His work therefore contributes to the discussion of character education within the field of philosophy of education and makes an interesting read for educational philosophers as well as practising teachers alike. To explore compassion as a virtue and linking it to teaching practice, Peterson uses a combination of traditional analytical philosophy as well as down-to-earth practical real-world examples in his line of argument, which makes this well-written book meaningful for educators across the board.

Following the introduction to the topic in Chapter 1 and a short overview of the key points made in the book, Peterson commences his argument in Chapter 2 that compassion should indeed be considered a moral virtue according to Aristotle's conception of virtues as an intermediate and balanced action and moderated passion through practical wisdom. Peterson argues that compassion is more than a feeling, including a moral component that entails a *compassionate action* (p. 63) towards others out of concern for the other rather than for oneself. As such, compassion is distinct from notions such as *sympathy* and *empathy*, which, as he argues, do not necessitate action on behalf of the other. Compassion, on the other hand, 'involves a moral perception to enact compassion in the right way, at the right time and for the right reason' (p. 20). It therefore extends beyond an emotional response, including a moral component dependent on the situation, and utilising practical wisdom to discern whether or not a compassionate response is appropriate and, if so, what it should look like. Cutting short Peterson's detailed and well-developed argument, he identifies a 'mutually informing and sustaining triadic relationship which comprises compassion,' concluding that 'compassion involves being exposed to the distress of another (cognitive), being moved by this exposure (affective), and taking action to address or remove the suffering of the other (volitional) (Davies 2010) in ways which involve common humanity and *eudaimonistic* judgements' (p. 35, emphasis in original).

Building on this foundation, Peterson continues to explore the concept of compassion in more detail in Chapter 3, discussing the emotional underpinnings of compassion and contrasting it to other emotions such as pity, empathy and sympathy. He explains that these three emotional factors are prerequisites of

compassion; however, they are not synonymous with compassion. Compassion includes a cognitive and a volitional component, which are not necessarily part of a purely affective response, supporting Peterson's argument of compassion constituting a moral virtue.

In Chapter 4, compassionate acts are discussed in more detail and Peterson starts with a number of critical questions about the nature of compassionate acts, asking, for example, if 'such action is focused on spontaneous, short-term or planned, long-term behaviour,' and 'whether the compassionate action is shaped by the object or the subject, or indeed through some sort of exchange between the two' (pp. 65-66, emphases in original). In response to the first question, Peterson explains that most often compassionate acts respond to an immediate situation of observed suffering resulting in short-term actions. However, such actions can grow into something more prolonged. As an example, he presents the case of Katie Cutler, who started an online appeal for support for a person who had suffered a physical assault. This triggered a significant response far beyond the needs of this one person, resulting in the eventual establishment of 'a foundation to help others' (p. 66). In response to the second question, Peterson seems to argue that an appropriate compassionate act, although originating from the subject taking the action, needs to take into account the views of the suffering object (person/community) in need as 'they are important moral considerations which need to be accounted for' (p. 67). In this context, caring compassion vs. compassion as justice is discussed, as well as compassion in relation to cosmopolitan citizenship and moral action. Peterson also alerts the reader to barriers to compassionate actions, such as the bystander effect, situational barriers, and experiences of helplessness and compassion fatigue, which can inhibit compassionate action even though individuals experiencing these barriers generally subscribe to moral and compassionate values and action.

In Chapter 5, the argument turns from considering compassion towards others to compassion towards oneself. Peterson explores notions such as self-compassion and self-love, arguing for an enlightened approach toward oneself, stating that any compassion toward others is rooted in a compassionate self-love relationship to oneself. Comparing current psychological concepts with Aristotle's notion of self-care, he concludes that self-compassion is neither self-pity nor self-esteem, but a caring for one's self with kindness and mindfulness in a holistic manner. Peterson explains that although research around self-compassion and its impacts is limited, there are indications that increased levels of self-compassion and self-love resonate with increased levels of altruism, concern for others, forgiveness and ultimately compassion for others. Hence, furthering self-compassion in young people might lead to a more compassionate society as a whole, which leads to the consideration of compassion in education in the final two chapters.

Turning fully to the relationship between compassion and education, Peterson explores teaching *for* and *about* compassion in Chapter 6 before discussing schools as compassionate institutions in Chapter 7. The argument made here is not that compassion needs to be introduced to education; Peterson rather explicitly acknowledges that compassion already is present in schools and educational practice. What he argues for is to strengthen and intensify opportunities for developing compassion in young people in a deliberate way, building on what is already taking place today in schools in the United Kingdom and elsewhere. He starts out with three educational questions, of which the first has been answered in the earlier chapters, the second forming the key focus of the remaining chapters, and the third providing a starting point for more deliberate action building on what is already happening. These questions are: (i) how do 'we conceive compassion and its various elements in the first place', (ii) what are 'those practical arrangements and processes through which compassion can be educated in young people', and (iii) if and how do 'students come into relation with the suffering of others in their schools, classrooms and daily lives' (p. 116). In response to these questions, Peterson explores existing schemes such as empathy education programmes, to name one example, which are a good start, but not always sufficient to support the development of compassion in young people. A discussion of essential aspects that would constitute meaningful compassionate education follows, and two teaching approaches are presented that can be used towards this aim: '(1) the use of narratives and (2) intersubjective communication' (p. 121).

Finally, Chapter 7 explores the role of schools as institutions—and specifically as compassionate institutions. The potential for teachers to act as role models for compassion, while also teaching about compassion through content and shared experiences is considered. Peterson also considers the school–family/community connection and acknowledges that families and communities are generally more important and significant for the development of a young person's character than schools. However, if schools and families are working together to provide a coherent experience for young people that reflects the 'principles of loving care', namely 'good physical care, unconditional love and clear boundaries for behaviour' (p. 150), the development of compassion in young people can be supported. Peterson acknowledges that most, if not all, schools would endorse these principles. However, in the current neoliberal climate and the focus on measurement and accountability, schools can find it challenging to put these principles into practice. To support schools to further strengthen their compassionate engagement, Peterson refers to a practical guide developed by the University of Illinois. As concluding thoughts, he alerts readers to the importance of the teacher as moral educator and the requirements for this role, which is challenged again by current developments such

as 'the reductionism of teacher preparation programmes and the resulting contraction of engagement with philosophical, theological, psychological, historical and sociological ideas on morality and education' (p. 155).

In summary, Peterson presents a well-argued, compelling, and carefully worded discussion of the importance of compassion as a moral virtue for societies and humanity, and the role that education, in the form of schools, teachers, and families and communities, can play to support the development of compassion in young people. Although I would have liked to see a stronger critique of challenges to compassionate education within current neoliberal environments around the globe, this raises awareness about the importance of compassion and invites a critical dialogue about the place of compassion in education. The engaging writing style and real-world examples not only make this book a pleasurable read, but also, I would suggest, exemplify how narratives can be used to teach about compassion, if not strengthen compassion itself.

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