

# Character and . . .

## Courageous Compassion

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*The faculty essays presented here emerge from a semester-long process of reading and writing together in an environment of critique and review. Nevertheless, this invited journal of essays represents the authors' views and not necessarily the views of the Wendt Center for Character Education or the University of Dubuque.*

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# Courageous Compassion: Cultivating Virtue in a Complicated World

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*Christine Darr*

## **Abstract**

*When we are confronted with suffering, both locally and globally, we often experience a desire to do something. This article considers how we can channel that desire into a habit of responding to suffering in ways that alleviate the immediate need as well as work to end the root causes of suffering.*

“Our human compassion binds us the one to the other—not in pity or patronizingly, but as human beings who have learnt how to turn our common suffering into hope for the future.”

Nelson Mandela

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One day I was scrolling through my Facebook newsfeed when I saw a picture that stopped me in my tracks. It was a picture of a toddler, a little younger than my own son, wearing a red shirt and blue shorts and lying face down on the sand. He looked so peaceful, but the water lapping around his nose and face made it obvious he was dead. With tears streaming down my face, I started looking up more information about this small boy. I discovered he was a Syrian named Aylan Kurdi, one of the

hundreds of thousands of Syrians fleeing the conflict that had been ripping apart their country for four years. He was on a boat with his family when the boat capsized; he later washed up on a Turkish beach (Sly).

I was not the only one to be deeply moved by the picture and the story of Aylan Kurdi. His photo captivated an international audience and people around the world became aware of the suffering of the Syrian people, whose conflict has already resulted



*The lifeless body of Syrian migrant Aylan Kurdi lies on a Turkish beach.*  
AP Photo/DHA/Nilufer Demir, ©2016 Associated Press

in over 250,000<sup>1</sup> deaths and hundreds of thousands of refugees like Aylan. As people became aware of the situation in Syria, many felt compelled to *do* something. On Facebook, folks were trying to collect baby carriers for Syrian

mothers who must carry their infants on boats and across borders. According to Allison Sherry, refugee resettlement organizations in Minnesota received an outpouring of donations of “coats, blankets, diapers, cash, and countless volunteer requests.” Other aid groups also saw a significant increase in financial and material donations directly after the picture of Aylan was posted online. World Vision, a Christian humanitarian organization, witnessed their donations almost triple in one day (Raab and Parvini).

Along with all these others, I too felt compelled to *do* something, and so I donated some money to a relief organization. However, that left me with the sense that I had just put a very small bandage on a very large wound. In my research on the Syrian crisis it became evident to me that the problems in Syria are *systemic* in nature, by which I mean they are a product of systems

that are put in place by human beings and yet have a momentum of their own, apart from human activity. For example, Syrians are fleeing their country primarily because they are being tortured and killed by the Islamic State, a fundamentalist Islamic group. The Islamic State has gained its power because of many complex factors: religious fundamentalism, United States involvement in the Middle East, U.S. economic foreign policy, Saudi Arabia, oil interests, etc.

Thinking about huge problems such as the Syrian refugee crisis often leaves me feeling incredibly helpless. There are many times when I feel like throwing up my hands and saying “I will live however I want; it doesn’t matter anyway.” And then I see a story like Aylan’s, or any number of other refugee stories, and realize that I do not have the option of giving up. As someone who cares deeply about justice, and who therefore believes that I cannot live an abundant life if my abundance is gained at the expense of others, I cannot choose to disengage—even in the face of seemingly insurmountable difficulty.

So, what should I do? What can we do?

Because of the complexity of these problems, what I can offer here is only a beginning, a recognition that complex problems call for complex solutions but that we all have to start somewhere. I have found the traditions of Christian liberation theology and virtue ethics to be helpful in examining what can often be a paralyzing moral dilemma. In what follows, I draw on these streams of Christian tradition to argue that the first thing I can do is try to become a person of courageous compassion.

As a Christian I am called to love my neighbor, which requires an awareness that my neighbors are human beings whose lives are precious and are inextricably linked to my own. However, I agree with Miguel De La Torre that for a Christian, to love one’s neighbor means “to question, analyze, challenge, and dismantle

the social structures responsible for preventing people from reaching the fullest potential of the abundant life promised by Christ” (9).

When the command to love one’s neighbor is taken seriously, it becomes clear that the compassionate response many of us felt when we saw the picture of Aylan’s body is a necessary but not a sufficient Christian moral response to the Syrian refugee crisis, or to suffering in the world more generally. It is important that I feel moved by those who are suffering and act so as to alleviate that suffering. However, unless I recognize the structures in place that perpetuate so much suffering in the world and work to change those structures, I am not fully loving my neighbor. The sort of compassion to which De La Torre points is a *courageous* compassion, one that understands the structures that lead to suffering and is brave enough to confront them.

By cultivating the virtue of courageous compassion I become a person who is naturally disposed to immediately perceive the story of Aylan in two aspects: the suffering and death of another human being who, like me, was made in the image of God *as well as* the larger context of the social structures in place that led to his body washing up on the beach. In this brief article, first I explore the nature of virtue and the meaning of courageous compassion. Then, I consider how a person who wishes to cultivate courageous compassion might begin to think, feel, and act in response to Aylan’s body and the Syrian refugee crisis.

## **Virtue and Compassion**

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My question in the face of Aylan and other refugees is: what can I do? This is an ethical question, because ethics is essentially the study of what ought to be done. Ethicists, people who study ethics, have attempted to answer the question of “what can I do” in a variety of ways. While there are many valuable approaches a person could take, the approach I will discuss here focuses on the

idea of *virtue*. Virtue ethics has its historical roots in the Greek philosopher Aristotle, but it has played an important role in the ethical reflection of Christian thinkers such as Saint Thomas Aquinas in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and continues to influence many contemporary Christian ethicists as well.

We use virtue language in popular conversation all the time—“patience is a virtue,” “she is so courageous,” “he made a prudent choice”—but we do not often stop to consider what it is we mean.

“Virtue” is a rich ethical concept that is well worth understanding more fully. So, what is “virtue”? At its root, virtue is a *habit* that involves our whole selves: our emotions, our thoughts, and our wills. A virtue is a habit of thinking, feeling, and acting in accordance with what a person takes to be the best life for herself and her community.



*Virtue is a habit that involves our whole selves: our emotions, our thoughts, and our wills.*

A virtuous person is a person who is so in tune with what she values that she always and automatically thinks, feels, and acts appropriately in each situation. While there is a lively debate about whether or not such a person exists, I agree with Aristotle when he says that when you have the shape of your target in mind, you are much more likely to hit your mark (2; 1094a).

Backing up for just a moment, Aristotle begins with the claim that when people act, they act with a goal in mind. Specifically, people act in accordance with “the good,” or what he ultimately calls *eudaimonia* (14; 1097b). *Eudaimonia* is often translated as “happiness,” but means something more robust than “feeling happy.” Within the tradition of virtue ethics, *eudaimonia* extends beyond a mental state to incorporate a person’s mental, emotional, and physical capacities. Scholars equate *Eudaimonia* with the term *flourishing*, and a person is said to be flourishing

when she is exercising her capacities to think, feel, and act to the best of her ability as she pursues her own well-being and the well-being of her community.

Additionally, as rational human beings, we are able to consider two sorts of well-being: the particular and the universal. What is good at this particular time? What is good, generally speaking? What appears good in the instant might indeed be good overall, but it often works the other way as well: what seems good at this moment might not get me any closer to what I take to be good for my well-being, generally.

This is most easily understood by walking through an extended example. Every morning I wake up and feel hungry. I am faced with a choice: what should I eat for breakfast? On my kitchen counter I see two options—a piece of coffee cake and a slice of whole-wheat toast with peanut butter and banana. On the one hand, the cake is warm and covered in delicious streusel and looks so good.

On the other hand, the toast looks crunchy and tasty as well. If I were another sort of animal, I might allow myself to choose simply on the basis of what looks most appetizing at this moment. But since I am capable of rational reflection on universal goods, I can consider my choice in light of my commitment to such universals as physical health. This morning, perhaps, I will choose toast because I know it will nourish my body and give me energy for my day. I might also consider how my choices will impact those around me: am I being a good example for my children? Will my choice enable me to do my work well today?

That is not to say that I will never choose coffee cake. Virtue is not a rule-based ethical framework—I have not established a rule that I must always choose in favor of the universal good of physical health. I might recognize that another aspect of my well-being is the joy of eating; part of becoming virtuous is figuring out how to

decide between competing goods. In any particular situation, which universal good is most important to uphold? We learn how to decide between competing goods partly through education by our parents, our friends, our communities, and partly from our own experiences of choosing and being disappointed or satisfied with our choices. As we choose and are satisfied, we reinforce that choice and begin to develop a habit of choosing in favor of that good.<sup>2</sup>

When we repeatedly choose to act in certain ways those actions become a habit of responding. Over time these habits become an ingrained part of our nature, so that we exercise them “with pleasure and promptness” (Mattison 59). For example, Steven is not a naturally grateful person yet he has decided gratitude is a virtue he would like to cultivate. At first, he must remind himself to look for reasons to be grateful about any given situation. It might be difficult at first to find these reasons. Yet if he persists—say, he keeps a gratitude journal for a few months—he will find that he sees more and more reasons every day to be grateful, many more than he saw in the past. His life situation might not have changed, but his own vision of the world has. The effort he must put forth to be grateful has diminished as well, so that he is able to view the world with gratitude gladly and effortlessly.

The tradition of virtue ethics has identified many different kinds of virtues a person might cultivate, including the four core virtues of courage, prudence, justice, and temperance. A virtue that is less often discussed but no less important, in my view, is the virtue of compassion. As is discussed by other articles in this volume, philosophers have understood the nature of compassion in a variety of ways. By identifying compassion as a virtue, rather than strictly an emotion, I wish to highlight that compassion is a way of thinking, feeling, and acting in response to the suffering of other human beings that can be chosen and intentionally cultivated such that responding with compassion becomes a habit and, furthermore, a lens through which one views the world.

One way to begin unpacking the nature of compassion is through contrasting it with the emotion of pity. Both pity and compassion involve sadness over the suffering of another human being. When I saw the picture of Aylan’s body, I immediately felt pity—I felt grief at the tragic situation of this little boy. Emotion, while an important component of virtue, is not virtuous in itself. Emotion can arise within me without my choice or consent. I must choose how to respond to that emotion, using my ability to reason. A person’s rational capacity allows her to think through how to act on that emotional response in ways that are useful or beneficial to further her own good and the good of her community (Barad 2007).

In her thoughtful and compelling articulation of compassion, Diana Fritz Cates highlights many key components of this virtue. She argues that compassion arises when a person sees the suffering of another human being and simultaneously recognizes that human being as, in some meaningful way, similar to her. Oftentimes compassion arises in response to the suffering of a friend. Drawing on Aquinas, Cates explains that friends are often understood as

another oneself, meaning friends become integral parts of each other’s lives and one friend’s well-being impacts the other. When my friend suffers, I experience that suffering in myself as well because her good is linked with my own. Compassion, in part, occurs when the pain of someone else resonates within my own body so that I feel to some degree the pain experienced by my friend. (177)

However, as we have said, compassion is not simply the emotional response to suffering. Cates argues that a compassionate person is someone who has trained herself “to become aware of and [emotionally] attached to friends in pain, *such that* we are moved to reflect upon and to determine the best possible response to their predicaments” (177, emphasis added).

While compassion might arise most easily and naturally in response to our friends, whose well-being we perceive as very tightly linked to our own, the Christian tradition makes it clear that compassion ought not to be restricted to our friends. For Christians—who are called by God to see all other human beings as brothers and sisters in Christ—the importance of seeing strangers as people like us, people who make plans and dream big dreams and experience disappointment and suffering, ought to be a central concern.

Living virtuously is always a matter of choosing in accordance with what we take to be the good for ourselves and our community. It involves a recognition that my good is inextricably linked to your good, such that I cannot flourish when you are suffering. However, developing a compassionate disposition does not entail that I ought to have compassion for every person I encounter. As Cates explains,

we are not obligated to become engrossed with every starving child that we see or about whom we hear, for . . . this could leave us incapacitated and ineffectual. But we are obligated to become engrossed with at least some of these children some of the time, such that we are *struck hard* by the horror of their situation . . . by the realization that, had our luck been different, that could have been us or our children. . . . (202)

We are obligated to do so because promoting human flourishing and working against suffering is simply what it means to be a compassionate person. Recall that Aristotle claims that what it means to be an excellent human being is being a person who exercises all her capacities to think, feel, and act to further her own good and the good of her community.

Being a compassionate person means being someone who perceives the suffering of others as, in some sense, her own suffering, and deliberating about the best course of action to

alleviate that suffering. Furthermore, cultivating compassion means shaping one's perception of people and world events such that she sees the web of connections that links us all and applies herself to deliberating about how she can respond to the suffering of others out of a commitment to her own flourishing and the flourishing of her community.

## **Compassion for Immigrants and the Need for Courage**

With a more sophisticated understanding of the nature of compassion, let us return to the question posed at the beginning of this essay: what ought I to do in the face of the tragic suffering of Aylan and the millions of people like him? The first moment of compassion involves perceiving another human being in pain and recognizing that his well-being and my own are connected. Listening to Aylan's father tell the story of his boat capsizing and his son slipping out of his fingers into the sea, I feel deeply moved. In one sense, as has been said before, I relate to him as another human being or perhaps as a parent. I can use my moral imagination to place myself in that scenario and try to experience the situation from his perspective.

This response of being moved is a good first step, but in order for the response to be an element of compassion rather than pity, I must be moved to reflect and respond. Perhaps I research organizations that are helping to care for the refugees fleeing Syria and determine which ones are best to contribute money to. Performing a compassionate action such as sharing some of my well-being with another whose well-being is being diminished can be the beginning of a habit of responding to the needs of others freely and joyfully.

Perhaps I do develop a habit of contributing financially when I can to alleviate the suffering of refugees, in the hope that they will be able to make a better life somewhere else. Despite my best efforts the stream of refugees continues. As a person who wishes

to be compassionate, to be someone who has trained herself “to become aware of and [emotionally] attached to friends in pain, *such that we are moved to reflect upon and to determine the best possible response to their predicaments,*” then I might begin to question whether my initial response of financial support is the best possible response to the predicament in question (Cates 177). Certainly those contributions are alleviating suffering to some extent, but when such great suffering continues we must ask ourselves if there is not only a way to help those who are suffering but also to prevent the causes of suffering in the first place.

Within the Christian tradition, liberation theology has been a strong voice calling for Christian compassion to extend not only to

caring for those who suffer but to recognize and dismantle the structures causing the suffering in the first place. That is not to say that all suffering is preventable—of course it is not. However, from this



*Courageous compassion is a stable habit of responding to the suffering of others thoughtfully and intentionally.*

perspective it is the task of Christians to identify preventable suffering and to uproot it. In the face of so much suffering around the world, Christians must develop the virtue of courageous compassion. Courageous compassion is a stable habit of responding to the suffering of others thoughtfully and intentionally in order to alleviate their immediate suffering as well as work to eliminate the causes of that suffering.

In human history we can see time and time again that people committed to the pursuit of justice and love can transform corrupt social systems. In the last century we might think particularly of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States or the Anti-Apartheid Movement in South Africa. The people in these movements saw the suffering of their friends and the people in

their communities. In response to such intense suffering, they dedicated their lives to transforming the racist systems that kept black people in subordinate positions and, through their perseverance, gained significant advances.

Changing social structures is not simple or safe. During the marches, sit-ins, court cases, and freedom rides of the Civil Rights Movement, activists were confronted with hatred and violence at every turn. Many people died either as a direct result of their actions or merely by being associated with the movement. The kind of compassion required to confront the suffering caused by sinful social structures is compassion that has been emboldened by courage—the virtue that sees impossible obstacles to one’s goal and knows when to refuse to stand down. A person of courageous compassion sees the suffering of another and is moved to reflect upon the causes of that suffering—both immediate and systemic—in order to determine the best response.

Reflection into the systemic causes of suffering will often involve research and thoughtful critical analysis due to the complexity of the social structures we face today. Becoming more informed global citizens can be a stepping stone to becoming more compassionate people because we can be more aware of the web of connections that crisscross our globe and link us to each other. Such an education can also enable us to understand and begin to question the structures in place that keep some people in positions of vulnerability and others in positions of privilege. This sort of informed reflection is a necessary component of courageous compassion; if we try to solve problems without understanding the issues involved, our solutions will at best be ineffective and at worst exacerbate the problem.

Turning one last time to the situation described at the beginning, how might a person wishing to develop courageous compassion approach the issue of Syrian refugees? A thorough analysis of the

situation is beyond the scope of this article, but I will try to suggest some places to begin.

According to Russell Goldman, “more than 67,000 migrants have arrived in Europe by sea since the start of the year [2016],” and the total number of refugees to cross into Europe in 2015 was more than one million. Refugees from not just Syria but also from Iraq and Afghanistan are fleeing their homes because of the violence and war that have destabilized their governments, economies, and communities.

In the case of the current refugee crisis, understanding the origins of the violence in that region is the beginning of a reasoned response to the suffering that it causes. For example, many scholars of the region have identified our nation’s dependence on the oil in the region as a significant source of the current conflict and the reason for our own involvement in what oftentimes appear to be regional disputes.

Identifying the causes of suffering is the first necessary step in uprooting them. The next step often involves learning as much as possible about the people in the region who are working to eliminate or change those causes and determining how we can contribute to their success. The best course might, in the end, be a matter of contributing financially. Especially in international affairs, getting personally involved is not always the most effective or beneficial route to success; empowering those who are already on the ground can sometimes be our most significant impact.

Yet in the process of learning more about the situation, my perspective might be changed such that I become aware of my own dependence on oil, for example. Perhaps this awareness leads me to think more about how my own oil dependence reflects a national dependence on oil that perpetuates violent conflict. Over time, the more I cultivate a habit of understanding

my personal connections to global systems, I might develop the courage to pursue greater involvement in organizations working for social change. Compassion draws me to see another's suffering as my own and courage compels me to be brave enough to confront the causes of that suffering when I am able.

## Conclusion

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A virtue is a disposition to think, feel, and act in accordance with one's own understanding of what it means to live well. When we choose to cultivate the virtue of courageous compassion, we commit ourselves to developing a two-fold response to the suffering of others—a response that acknowledges both the personal and structural dimensions of suffering. Upon witnessing the suffering of another human being, someone of courageous compassion immediately perceives that person as a neighbor whom she is called to love. She is therefore moved to alleviate that person's suffering in whatever way she can. As she considers *how* to alleviate that suffering, she is aware that this person's pain might be a direct or indirect consequence of a social structure that is also causing pain to millions of others. She will therefore consider how she might work to change the structures in place that cause suffering.

It is unrealistic to expect that any time I feel compassion for the suffering of another that I ought to devote my entire life to the acts of courageous compassion I have described. The world is full of terrible problems and it is also filled with passionate and committed people working to solve those problems. I cannot bring Aylan back to life, and I do not need to solve the world's problems, but I am called to do something.

The primary calling of a Christian is to love God and love our neighbors; doing nothing about the suffering of others is not an option. Pursue education about the world's problems and needs. Cultivate empathy. Practice compassion toward individuals, but

also wisely critique and dismantle societal structures that cause harm. By choosing to act in accordance with our deeply held commitments we become people who live with integrity, and people acting with integrity in the pursuit of justice will change the world.

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Photo on p. 48 used by permission of the Associated Press.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>The total number of the Syrian death toll is difficult to ascertain, with numbers ranging between 200,000 and 470,000 (Taylor).

<sup>2</sup>There is the danger that we might mistake what is good for us. People who have an addiction to alcohol, for example, choose in favor of what they take to be a good but what does not contribute to their well-being as most people would understand it. This issue of mistaken goods is important to consider, but beyond the scope of this paper.

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