



Received: 24 February 2023

Accepted: 3 November 2023

Published: 21 December 2023

# A Strange State of Mournful Contentment

## The Role of Compassion in Moral Betterment

---

**Laura Candiotta** - University of Pardubice

### Abstract

In this paper, I will consider a unique case in which changing one's character is part of a process of moral betterment when facing oppression. By engaging with the Dutch-Jewish intellectual and Holocaust victim Etty Hillesum, I will highlight the situated dimension of moral betterment as a practice that is driven by the pressure of concurrent events. I will claim that moral betterment does not need to come out of an internal will to change for the better. Instead, I will argue that "bearing real suffering" (Hillesum 1996: 220) is what makes compassion a potential source of moral betterment. This is possible because, in compassion, one experiences emotional friction between weakness and strength in facing the suffering caused by oppression.

**Keywords:** moral betterment; compassion; Etty Hillesum; emotional friction; suffering; oppression.

### 1. Introduction

Why should I change my character for the better? What can support me in this process? And is merely changing my character what I am aiming for?

In this paper, I will consider a specific case in which changing one's character is part of a process of moral betterment in facing oppression. I take moral betterment as an "itinerary" into compassion to (1) transform moral egoism into altruism, and (2) avoid the trap of hating one's oppressors. By engaging in a dialogue with the Dutch-Jewish intellectual and Holocaust victim Etty Hillesum (1996), I will highlight the situated dimension of moral betterment as a practice that is driven by the pressure of concurrent events. I claim that moral betterment does not just come out of an internal will to change for the better; I argue instead that "bearing real suffering" (Hillesum 1996: 220) makes compassion a potential source of moral growth. This is possible because, in compassion, one experiences emotional friction. The emotional friction inherent to compassion can take many different shapes, for example as a tension between one's vulnerability and concern for others, the desire to relieve suffering and the doubt about one's ability to do so, or the wish to help one's

friends and the guilt of disfavoured others. In its basic terms, I take the emotional friction inherent to compassion to be a tension between weakness and strength while facing suffering. As Etty<sup>1</sup> states, this is not just “an idea of suffering” (Hillesum 1996: 220) but a personal, intimate meeting with a fellow human being who is suffering. Importantly, this suffering is both personal and political. It comes out of an unbearable situation, the misery of being confined in Westerbork, the constant fear of being sent to Auschwitz, and, in Etty’s case, the compassion towards what was happening to the others.<sup>2</sup>

To unpack how moral betterment can emerge out of emotional friction, I present two processes of transformation *of* and *through* compassion from the experience of Etty Hillesum. The aim here is neither descriptive nor simply historical. I take Etty Hillesum as a moral exemplar, in line with a core motif of ancient Greek ethics and contemporary virtue exemplarism (Zagzebski 2017). Her writing expresses such a rich and dense examination of the complexity of inner life and its transformations that I cannot reduce it to a mere “case” to analyse. Instead, I dare to philosophically encounter Etty’s personal experience through her autobiographical reasoning,<sup>3</sup> learn from her, and bring part of what has emerged from this meeting to readers. This is because a moral exemplar does something to those who are inspired by it, be it through moral exhortation, reliance in moral development, or a desire to emulate. But, I will pursue this aim with the awareness that reading and writing are not enough to fully engage with Etty’s life experience. As Etty insightfully expressed, “I shall never be able to put down in writing what life itself has spelled out for me in living letters. I have read it all, with my own eyes, and felt it with many senses” (Hillesum 1996: 210).

In the second section, I will introduce the two core concepts that will be employed in this paper, namely compassion and moral betterment. I will also introduce the metaphor of an “itinerary” and explain why it is best suited to helping us grasp the ethical significance of Etty’s experience in Westerbork. In section 3, I will explain why we need to understand moral betterment as a situated phenomenon, in this case both in Etty’s personal experience and in the historical situation, by diving into the affective dynamics of compassion. I will then explore Etty’s diaries and letters to depict two instances of situated moral betterment in and through compassion. In *Moral Betterment 1*, there is a change intrinsic to compassion, namely from self-gratification and a parochial interest in relieving the suffering of a limited number of family members to an extended love of humanity. In *Moral Betterment 2*, compassion is seen as embedded in a set of practices that enabled Etty not to hate her oppressors. In both cases, love emerges as a power that orients compassion to everyone in a very embodied manner, as an intimate meeting with the “concrete other.”

## 2. Compassion and Moral Betterment

Though philosophers have been interested in compassion for centuries, whether compassion is an emotion or a virtue is still under debate, and there is ongoing disagreement about its specific differences to related

---

1 In this paper, I mostly refer to Etty Hillesum as “Etty.” However, I need to stress that this is not a way to diminish her value as a philosopher (who are usually referred to by their surnames), nor is it meant as a diminutive way of addressing her because she is a young woman. On the contrary, calling her by her first name is part of the methodology I will employ in this paper, which is to philosophically engage with her personal experience in an intimate way and to treat her as a moral exemplar. It also makes sense to address her in this way because she signed her diary and letters with a simple “Etty.”

2 Etty volunteered to work as a social worker in the transit camp of Westerbork, the Netherlands, where Jewish people were held before being sent to the extermination camp in Auschwitz, Poland.

3 On the importance of narrative in developing what has been called a “science of personal wisdom,” see Ferrari, Weststrate, and Petro 2013.

notions such as empathy and love, and its role in morality (Carr 1999; Nilsson 2011; Maibom 2014; Bloom 2016; Betzler 2019). I am not going to tackle this issue here. Instead, I will focus on how the affective dimension of compassion, which, as I claim, is inherently ambivalent and tensional, can contribute to moral betterment. I do not argue that this affective dimension of compassion is the sole source of moral betterment. There are many other factors, some that are not necessarily affective, which can ground moral betterment, such as religious beliefs or personal values. It is very often the case that they are all in play, and the quality and composition of the mix depends on the moral agent's personal history, as well as the culture and society in which she is living. But I will claim that when the affective dimension of compassion is involved, moral betterment assumes a situated shape: it takes the shape of an ethical itinerary that guides one through suffering with other beings and the desire to relieve them from it. I will first provide a conceptual clarification of the key terms I will be using, and then spell out my thesis using the "itinerary" metaphor.

In suffering together with another being, which is the experience implied by the etymology of the word "compassion,"<sup>4</sup> the agent feels both the other's suffering and the wish to relieve it. This action-oriented dimension of compassion as wanting to do something to relieve the other's suffering is also affectively experienced. Compassion does not only involve suffering: there is a desire to relieve suffering, accompanied by a sense of resilience and self-efficacy when someone believes that she is capable of accomplishing this task. One can feel good when helping others and find satisfaction through this act when the wish to relieve suffering is fulfilled, even if a successful result cannot be guaranteed. The felt dimension of compassion is not just an afflicted suffering; it implies a feeling of agency, a fundamental "I can." But there is also a sense of vulnerability that arises out of the acknowledgment of suffering and the wish to relieve it. One might also be afraid of hurting others while trying to help them. Or, one might feel incapable of helping others, for different reasons, personal and contextual. For instance, one might feel the urgency to help but not know what or how to do it. Or, one might know what to do but be in a situation in which one cannot. In this case, one's feeling of agency is tarnished and mixed with vulnerability. This means that compassion's affective dimension is far from simple. In compassion, there is a tensional ambivalence<sup>5</sup> between strength and weakness. I argue that this tension, instead of putting agency on hold, contributes to one's inherent motivation to strive for betterment. I will explain how moral betterment can unfold from this tensional ambivalence through the term "emotional friction" in the following section.

By moral betterment, I mean a type of moral change that is oriented toward the good. In moral betterment, one becomes more virtuous, similar to how one becomes more evil in moral deterioration. I am not referring to the moral motivation to change, as most of the literature on moral enhancement does (Douglas 2008; Jotterand and Levin 2019).<sup>6</sup> Instead, I am targeting character transformation through the application of certain practices, which would result in having virtue as a well-entrenched character trait. Pierre Hadot has identified and listed many spiritual exercises that were part of philosophical life in antiquity, such as the Stoic view from

---

4 The English word "compassion" comes from the Latin "compassion," from the verb *compati* (*com-pati*), which in turn derives from the Greek "*sym-pathein*," both meaning "to suffer together with." The German "Mitleid" has the same etymology (*mit-leiden*), which is where the Dutch "medelidjen" (the word employed by Etty in her diaries and letters) comes from.

5 Valence is the technical term for the feeling dimension of an emotion. It is usually understood in polar terms: pleasure/pain (Russell 1980, Frijda 1986) or good/bad (Kahneman 1999). Notably, Colombetti (2005) has challenged the standard, dichotomous conceptualisation of valence, showing that emotional experience is much more complex than the classical contrasting of polarised hedonic feelings implies. I take the affective dimension of compassion as a prime example of this more complex hedonic feeling by understanding the complexity in a dialectical manner, as will become clearer when I discuss "emotional friction" in the next section.

6 Here, I am taking a classical virtue ethics approach to moral betterment because it is the one that best expresses the moral framework of Etty Hillesum.

above and *praemeditatio malorum*, or the Epicurean *tetrapharmakos* (Hadot 1995: 81–125).<sup>7</sup> He claimed that these ancient spiritual exercises aimed at the transformation not only of one’s character, but also of one’s lifestyle. The reason for this is that spiritual exercises possessed “a concrete attitude, a way of life and seeing the world” (Hadot 1995: 108).<sup>8</sup> This reference to moral betterment in ancient Greek and Roman ethics is crucial, because it shows how moral betterment can come out of continuous practice. In the case we are considering, we will focus on compassion, and how it entails both a transformation of character and of lifestyle.

By moral change, I mean the transformation of moral character over time. This type of character transformation implies the renegotiation of moral frameworks, mindsets, character traits, and habits (Hämäläinen 2017). In moral betterment, one can attend to an improvement of moral character. As argued by Nora Hämäläinen (2017), different metaphors can be used for understanding moral change beyond the culturally laden metaphor of “progress.” For example, moral change can be understood as a “tipping point,” namely a change of balance within a framework of understanding. Another metaphor is that of a “bargaining table,” which is particularly useful because it treats moral change as something that one does, as a practical negotiation between different moral frameworks.

The metaphor that I will use in this paper to shed light on the role of compassion in moral betterment is that of an “itinerary.” Moral betterment, in this sense, is a path to virtue. This is an ancient metaphor of a noble philosophical breed.<sup>9</sup> The path is, to quote Rickard Kraut, “a route of goodness” (Kraut 2007: 15). According to Kraut, following this route is a legitimate method for attaining virtue for most ancient philosophers. Ancient ethics has an intrinsic teleological aim, with the good as its final end, and recognises that becoming virtuous is what enables the moral agent to achieve the good. This final end, namely attaining happiness as the good life (*eudaimonia*), motivates one to engage in spiritual exercises. Notably, for Aristotle, the good life consists of human flourishing: completely actualising one’s potential, fully being what one is (Baracchi 2008: 79–101). Through this process of development and flourishing of potentialities, the subjective experience of happiness opens up a good life, which transcends the individual self (Hadot 1995).

The metaphor of an “itinerary” shares with this perfectionist tradition a fundamental developmentalist and teleological view on *eudaimonia* and virtue. However, it brings out something more specific about the role of the subject who will take the journey of moral betterment. The itinerary metaphor brings out the active role of the person who is walking the path, and who will commit herself to certain practices. It orients the development of the character around steps and practices that one does to move forward on the path. This is because the

---

7 Hadot (1995: 126–44) has also stressed the continuity between Ancient Greek philosophy and Christian philosophy (and notably, Ignatius of Loyola’s *Exercitia Spiritualia*) regarding spiritual exercises. In this context, it is also important to note how much the metaphor of an “itinerary” is present in the spiritual and mystical traditions, and how it also took the shape of the practice of pilgrimage to holy places since the Middle Ages. See Bowie 1995 for a reading of Etty Hillesum’s inner life through the lens of female mysticism.

8 But there is no contrast between the two. The transformation of the style of life comes from the transformation of how the subject perceives reality. For Hadot, this proto-cognitive account of transformation derives not only from Plotinus, heir of Plato’s account on the conversion of the soul (Hadot 1993), but also from French phenomenology and existentialism (Hadot 2001). For me, it is important to stress that the transformation of the style of life is not simply a transformation of perception. What changes is the daily practices of a person, what she does, as well as how and why she does what she does. That is why, as Michel Foucault insightfully claimed, it is not just a matter of “care of the soul” but also of “ergon.” See Candiotta 2021.

9 Parmenides understood the method of inquiry as an *odos*. He pointed to two paths, the paths of Night and Day (DK B1, in Graham 2010: 211). The former is one of not-being and cannot be followed because not-being is not; the latter is of the being, and that should be followed because it is the path of truth (DK B6, in Graham 2010: 215). Plato built his dialectical method as an ascending path. Just think about the way out of the cave in the *Republic* (*Resp.* 7, 514a–517a, in Cooper 1997: 1132–34) or the ladder of love in the *Symposium* (*Symp.* 210a–e, in Cooper 1997: 492–3).

itinerary metaphor stresses the personal commitment of walking that path by undertaking certain steps. The transformations do not simply happen of their own accord. Some effort, planning, and moral strength are required to reach the final destination.<sup>10</sup> Lastly, this itinerary is “ethical”<sup>11</sup> because it guides the transformation of character for the better, and is the path by which this transformation unfolds.

### 3. Situated Moral Betterment

In Etty’s experience, this ethical itinerary is situated in her life, which is constantly burdened by the violence of her time. Situating her ethical itinerary within her personal life, which is so existentially bound to Jewish history, is important to avoid treating moral betterment in an abstract and unworldly manner. Here, “situated” means that Etty’s moral betterment unfolds out of, and is rooted in, (1) her personal experience, and (2) the historical situation. Arguably, these two scales, the personal and the historical, are always related. But in Etty’s moral betterment, they are so deeply entangled that her personal life can exemplify what a “counter scenario” of extermination can be (Gaarlandt 1996: xiii), in particular with regards to the reciprocal beliefs of victims and perpetrators.<sup>12</sup> Etty chose to join the Jewish fate by volunteering at Westerbork, and in so doing, she opened her heart to the suffering of humanity (1) and, at the same time, to the risk of falling into the trap of hating her oppressors (2).

In this section, I will first contextualise Etty’s personal experience within the historical situation of the occupied Netherlands. Then, I will explain how moral betterment can come out of an engagement with real suffering as the result of “emotional friction.”

In May 1940, the German army invaded the Netherlands, which, until then, was a neutral country with respect to the war. In the spring of 1942, the Nazis began their first major roundups of Jews in the Netherlands. Until the Nazis’ pressure on Jews intensified in 1942, Etty’s personal life did not change much.<sup>13</sup> She was studying at the university, taking part in some intellectual circles in Amsterdam, and enjoying herself with friends and lovers, most remarkably the psychochirologist Julius Spier. But then she realised that she could not continue the life she was living.<sup>14</sup> After becoming a member of the Jewish Council on the 15<sup>th</sup> of July, 1942, she volunteered as a social worker at Westerbork, a Nazi transit camp in the occupied Netherlands. From the end of July 1942, Etty lived and worked in Westerbork. Throughout the fall of 1942, she intermittently spent time in Amsterdam

---

<sup>10</sup> Scholnick (1994) has analysed the “path metaphor” in comparison with the “arrow metaphor” from an embodied perspective (Johnson 1987), by stressing that, in the path metaphor, there is not just linearity and directedness but also the experience of passing through different steps. She argued that understanding a path with the help of the arrow metaphor makes the path too deterministic. This does not allow any change from the walker. I agree with the criticism of teleology as an arrow, especially from an embodied perspective. However, in the path metaphor there is more than this. The path metaphor understands change as progress and growing. So, I take the “itinerary metaphor” as a subspecies of the path metaphor, with the key characteristic of planning the steps for making the growing happen. This is relevant to Etty’s strength of character and act of will in undertaking a process of moral betterment as an itinerary in and through compassion. So, there is a teleological tension in an itinerary – it is not just wandering. But this tension is not the linearity of the arrow, but rather the wilful intention to better oneself through the journey.

<sup>11</sup> The adjective “ethical” derives from the Greek word *ethos*, which means character.

<sup>12</sup> Heidi Maibom (2022: 86-105) has recently analysed the asymmetry of perspectives between victims and perpetrators. The former tends to moralise transgressions and to see the wrong as incomprehensible, while the latter tends to justify their actions. Etty offered an extraordinary alternative to this binarism by committing herself to compassion and avoiding the temptation of hatred.

<sup>13</sup> “Last night I wondered again if I was so unworldly simply because the German measures affect me so little personally” (1996: 129; Diary, 29 April 1942).

<sup>14</sup> “Only a few months ago I still believed that politics did not touch me and wondered if that was ‘unworldliness,’ a lack of real understanding” (1996: 126; Diary, 29 April 1942).

due to her poor health. But this was also an opportunity for her to collect medicine to bring to Westerbork and to collaborate with the leftist student resistance front. From June 1943, Etty lived permanently in Westerbork, although some friends offered her the opportunity to escape. Her parents and her brother Misha were also sent to the transit camp during the summer. In September 1943, the entire family was deported to Auschwitz. Etty wrote her last postcard from the train: “We left the camp singing” (Hillesum 1996: 360). In November 1943, Etty was sent to the gas chamber.

In her diaries and letters, Etty expresses a deep, nuanced, and complex emotional life. With constant introspection that was mediated by the practice of writing in a diary,<sup>15</sup> she vividly depicts the transformations in her inner life that were prompted by the external changes to her lifestyle that took place upon her move to Westerbork. This existential change significantly marks her moral betterment because it allowed her to meet “reality” and “bear real suffering”:

Reality is something one shoulders together with all the suffering that goes with it, and with all the difficulties. And as one shoulders them, so one’s resilience grows stronger. But the idea of suffering (which is not the reality, for real suffering is always fruitful and can turn life into a precious thing) must be destroyed. And if you destroy the ideas behind which life lies imprisoned as behind bars, then you liberate your true life, its real mainsprings, and then you will also have the strength to bear real suffering, your own and the world’s. (1996: 220; *Diary*, 30 September 1942).

In this diary entry, we find Etty’s self-exhortation to destroy the mere idea of suffering because the strength to bear real suffering can only be found in liberating life from the bars of ideas.<sup>16</sup> Etty was sceptical about relying on ideas because she noticed in her first-person experience that, in doing so, there was a high risk of experiencing compassion in a narcissistic manner, namely as “self-gratification” (1996: 10; *Diary*, 9 March 1941). This practical imperative to meet reality is what facilitates a transformation of compassion, as we will see in the next section. Here it is important to highlight that the situatedness of Etty’s moral betterment is chosen by Etty as a practice to liberate her true life. So, stressing the two scales of situatedness is not to make a general claim about the personal and historical location of an experience. On the contrary, my emphasis on the entanglement between Etty’s personal experience and the historical situation in which it was situated points to the moral significance of situatedness. It is by making her commitment to freeing herself from ideas a practice of meeting real suffering that Etty’s moral growth can unfold. This is because, for her, a mere idea of compassion is an abstraction – she needs to immerse herself in the situation to make it real. She does not want to live in fantasies or in writing about compassion from her safe desk in Amsterdam. She felt the urgency to dig deep into real suffering in order to avoid the narcissism implied by the idea of compassion. But what does it take to meet real suffering? How is the itinerary of compassion a source of moral betterment?

My answer lies in what José Medina (2019) calls “emotional friction.” Medina distinguishes between negative and positive emotional friction (Medina 2019: 26). The former refers to the emotional obstacles one must face to overcome one’s complicity in oppression; the latter refers to the emotional attitudes that help one to resist oppression. Medina takes emotional friction as something that should be cultivated and sustained in social and political activism. Here, I intend to apply this conceptualisation to moral development. In doing so, I interpret emotional friction in a very embodied and embedded manner, since I assume that the “friction”

---

<sup>15</sup> This can also be understood as a practice of resistance. On this, see Brenner 1997.

<sup>16</sup> This criticism towards a mere idea of suffering that obscures the access to reality resonates with Murdoch (1992: ch. 18) and Weil (2003, in particular the section titled “Imagination which Fills the Void”).

Medina is talking about results from experiencing oppression in a very intimate manner, namely by actively engaging with the suffering of a person who is a victim of oppression and all the ambivalence that comes with it. This engagement with the other's suffering creates friction not only because oppression is against one's personal values, but also because the suffering is conjoined with the desire to relieve it. As I have already said in the previous section, there is more than suffering to compassion. There is also the desire to relieve suffering, and reliance on one's strength to do so.

Let us dig a bit deeper into the dynamics of emotional friction in compassion. Compare the vulnerability felt when acknowledging another person's suffering, and the toughness felt when desiring and committing to do something to relieve it. The relationship seems clear-cut: vulnerability is unpleasant, and toughness is pleasurable. Vulnerability discloses weakness, and toughness discloses strength. Vulnerability and toughness are polar opposites and seem irreconcilable. But, in fact, this is not always the case: the rich and nuanced affective dimension of compassion is a good counterexample.

Some relevant affective dispositions come with compassion. For example, accepting that one will undergo suffering means to accept feeling vulnerable,<sup>17</sup> and this is not refuted by the desire to free others from suffering by employing one's resilience.<sup>18</sup> The desire to relieve suffering activates and keeps alive the dialectic between weakness and strength, but it does not remove their opposing natures. This is because there is dynamism and tension in this ambivalence, and it is precisely this tensional ambivalence that characterises my understanding of emotional friction within an embodied and embedded framework. Emotional friction disrupts and challenges the character, like a spark lit by rubbing two wooden sticks together. Emotional friction is morally significant in that it can disrupt character and serve as a source of moral betterment in an embodied and embedded manner – as we will see by engaging with Etty's experience.

Now consider the world-directedness of affective valence. In the case of compassion, an affective engagement with suffering produces a tension between vulnerability and resilience. This tension is not simply "internal." The real suffering is acknowledged in the others' suffering and by engaging with it daily. Compassion could be expressed, in Etty's words, as "a strange state of mournful contentment":

Yes, children, that's how it is, I am in a strange state of mournful contentment. If I once wrote you a desperate letter, don't take it too much to heart; it expressed only a brief moment. It's true you can suffer, but that need not make you desperate. And now I'm going to jump in at the deep end again; I'm off to the hospital with a little tin box for my beloved father under one arm and my official folder under the other. I shall find many empty beds there after this transport. (1996: 288; *Letters*, dated 29 June 1943)

There is mourning in compassion, especially if it is experienced in a transit camp where, every week, hundreds of inmates are sent to Auschwitz. But there is also a sort of contentment that comes from being at the service of others. Etty had a little box for her father under one arm and an official folder under the other. This scene significantly expresses Etty's daily search for balance in the ambivalence between the care for her parents and for all the inmates. As we will see in the next section, this tension will mark the transformation of parochial compassion into something bigger. But here compassion is lived as a "strange feeling," namely complex, ambivalent, and tensional. It is ambivalent because one can feel good (contentment) while feeling bad (sorrow for someone's suffering and eventual death). There is a temporality at work here: it is not that this affective

<sup>17</sup> On vulnerability, especially in facing illness, see Brady 2018: 103–11.

<sup>18</sup> On resilience as a virtue of the character that comes out of suffering, see Brady 2018: 88–102.

ambivalence should necessarily make one feel good and bad at the same time. Affective ambivalence is not necessarily a contradictory feeling, if by “contradiction” we mean, in Aristotelian terms, being one thing and its negation at the same time and in the same respect. The ambivalence might be extended through time, in a dialectical process of ups and downs, alternations of balance and tension, desperation and peace.

Yes, really, it’s true, there are compassionate laws in nature, if only we can keep a feeling for their rhythm. I notice that afresh each time in myself: when I am at the limits of despair, unable, I am sure, to go on, suddenly the balance shifts over to the other side, and I can laugh and take life as it comes. After feeling really low for ages, you can suddenly rise so high above earthly misery that you feel lighter and more liberated than ever before in your life. I am now very well again, but for a few days I was quite desperate. Equilibrium is restored time and again. Ah, children, we live in a strange world. (1996: 305; *Letters*, dated 8 July 1943)

It is not that just our emotional life is “strange”; the world is. And Etty experienced this fact through immersing herself in the fate of her people. But her choice to engage with real suffering should not be taken as martyrdom. Meeting the suffering of her time was still an “unelected transformative experience” (Carel and Kidd 2020: 167). She was simply ridding herself of the privileged unworldliness she described in the first pages of her diary. In Etty’s experience, fighting against the abstraction of compassion and immersing herself in real suffering was the key to making compassion a source of moral betterment.<sup>19</sup> It is also important not to apply a reductionist frame onto the nature of this strange feeling. In my understanding, it certainly expresses the affective dynamics of compassion, but there is something more there:

This morning, while I stood at the tub with a colleague, I said with great emotion something like this: “The realms of the soul and the spirit are so spacious and unending that this little bit of physical discomfort and suffering really doesn’t matter all that much. I do not feel I have been robbed of my freedom; essentially no one can do me any harm at all.” (1996: 227–8; *Letters*, dated 29 June 1943)

These lines come immediately before the preceding quotation. They talk about a profound sense of freedom that can be experienced, even in Westerbork. The itinerary metaphor can help illuminate how this is possible. As in an itinerary, there are many steps and pauses that make up the route, so the transformation of and through compassion does not happen by its own accord and all of a sudden. There are also other feelings that arise along the way. And feelings are not the only things that matter: freedom, acceptance, love, and also compassion, are all more than feelings. Existential meanings, commitments, and values are also part of an ethical itinerary.

The dialectical dimension of compassion’s ambivalence also emerges when we consider the freedom that Etty was referring to in the above quotation. There is not just acceptance in freedom; there is also resistance. Etty’s desire to relieve suffering marks both her existential resistance and her acceptance. It is a form of resistance because her ethical itinerary contrasts with the itinerary of the trains which arrived every Monday evening in Westerbork and left the following day with hundreds of people destined for Auschwitz. Etty was not delusional. She was acutely aware that she was in an extermination camp. She also knew that her survival

---

<sup>19</sup> It might be argued that only distal compassion is a virtue, and not proximal compassion, since it requires the exercise of rational capacities. For this argument, and debate about it, see Bagnoli 2018. Although I cannot argue for it here, I would like to stress that Etty’s compassion is not merely “proximal,” although being situated in the real personal encounters, since it is framed within an itinerary of personal development orientated by love.



meant someone else's death. Therefore, it is clear she accepted the fact that "what they are after is our total destruction" (1996: 154; *Diary*, 3 July 1942). But she was also strong in reclaiming an inner freedom that cannot be stolen. She didn't fall into desperation, although she was honest enough to acknowledge her vulnerability. For example, she frankly admitted: "I am still too afraid of hurting others, when it actually hurts them much more if I am with them in fact but not at all in spirit" (1996: 116; *Diary*, 22 April 1942). But in Westerbork, she worked to "find life meaningful" (1996: 154; *Diary*, 3 July 1942) by working with her soul, "or whatever else you care to call what shines through from within" (1996: 29; *Diary*, 8 June 1941). It is important to stress that this is not an intimist refuge when one gives up on political hope.

If we were to save only our bodies and nothing more from the camps all over the world, that would not be enough. What matters is not whether we preserve our lives at any cost, but how we preserve them. I sometimes think that every new situation, good or bad, can enrich us with new insights. But if we abandon the hard facts that we are forced to face, if we give them no shelter in our heads and hearts, do not allow them to settle and change into impulses through which we can grow and from which we can draw meaning –then we are not a viable generation. It is not easy – and no doubt less easy for us Jews than for anyone else –yet if we have nothing to offer a desolate postwar world but our bodies saved at any cost, if we fail to draw new meaning from the deep wells of our distress and despair, then it will not be enough. New thoughts will have to radiate outward from the camps themselves, new insights, spreading lucidity, will have to cross the barbed wire enclosing us and join with the insights that people outside will have to earn just as bloodily, in circumstances that are slowly becoming almost as difficult. And perhaps, on the common basis of an honest search for some way to understand these dark events, wrecked lives may yet take a tentative step forward. (1996; 250; Letters, dated 18 December 1942)

This quotation comes from one of the two letters that were illegally published by the Dutch Resistance in 1943. This is important to stress because it shows how much ETTY's ethical itinerary was not simply personal therapy. It was an act of acceptance of and resistance to oppression; it was a message for the future.

## 4. Moral Betterment 1

In the previous sections, I argued that emotional friction is experienced in the tensional ambivalence of compassion. According to Medina (2019), emotional friction is what activates change. Change takes place both in promoting positive emotional friction – in ETTY's case to work in and through compassion to extend it to humanity (*Moral Betterment 1*) – and combating negative emotional friction – in ETTY's case to counter the tendency to hate oppressors (*Moral Betterment 2*). In this section, I will examine some pages from the *Diaries* and the *Letters from Westerbork* together in order to focus on the ethical itinerary undertaken by ETTY, where she strives to apply her aspiration for compassion to the reality of suffering. In this process, love will emerge as the power that orients compassion towards everyone. But let me once again repeat that this reconstruction of the dynamics of moral betterment should not be narrowly conceived in an abstract, mechanical, or reductionist manner. As has been stressed by Eva Hoffman:

The process of change is always mysterious, but in the middle stages of ETTY's diary, it becomes almost palpable. . . . Increasingly, her writing points toward that border where attentiveness to subjectivity meets contemplation, where emotional intuition converges with moral thought. In all of this, ETTY had

the courage to follow the thread of her own experience – and that thread took her further still, in more unexpected and radical directions. (Hoffman 1996: xii)

The two processes of moral betterment I am describing here are *personal*. They are *Etty's* moral betterment; they are *her* ethical itinerary. But this does not mean that we cannot relate to or learn from them. We can develop our own sensitivity, be inspired by her experience, and learn what we should not do if we take the practice of reading her writing as one important step within our own ethical itineraries. But we should avoid making a universal theory out of it because, in doing so, we would betray her warning against imprisoning life behind the bars of ideas (Hillesum 1996: 220).

Wednesday night. . . . My protracted headaches: so much masochism; my abundant compassion: so much self-gratification. Compassion can be creative, but it can also be greedy. . . . For example, clinging to one's parents: one has to see them as people with a destiny of their own. (1996: 10–11; *Diary*, 9<sup>th</sup> March 1941)

When I suffer for the vulnerable, is it not for my own vulnerability that I really suffer? (1996: 230–1; *Diary*, 13th October 1942)

Here, Etty is warning herself against an overly narrow form of compassion that aims at self-gratification, namely to be the person who can help the miserable by virtue of being in a safer and privileged position, or to care only for one's closest neighbours, in Etty's case her parents, even if in a selfless manner.<sup>20</sup> This is a form of compassion that is actually a form of self-interest, because it is centred around one's own suffering. Etty was looking at an alternative to moral egoism, or the duty to act in one's own interest. But she was very careful to avoid construing compassion as altruistic *per se*. She understood that even compassion can be egoistic:

What does wise mean to you: egoistic? All this egoism is getting so boring. Since people have been telling each other for centuries that man is basically an egoist, one begins to believe it and actually becomes egoistic. There are so many sides to a human being that it would be nice to try something else, just for a change from boring and unproductive egoism. (1996: 262; *Letters*, dated 8 April 1943)

We used to feel so certain that we would help each other bear the sorrows of our age. . . . Vanity of vanities – but what was not vain was my discovery that I was able to commit myself unreservedly to another, to bind myself to him, and to share his sorrow. (1996: 222; *Diaries*, 30 September 1942)

By immersing herself in the dynamics of compassion, she found the possibility to commit herself *unreservedly* to another. This absence of restrictions is a crucial shift in her moral betterment as it marks the passage from moral egoism to altruism through love.

Last night I had to struggle again not to be overwhelmed by pity for my parents, since it would paralyze me if I gave in to it. I know that we must not lose ourselves so completely in grief and concern for our families that we have little thought or love left for our neighbors. More and more I tend toward the idea that love for everyone who may cross your path, love for everyone made in God's image, must rise above love for blood relatives. (1996: 334; *Letters*, dated 18 August 1943)

---

<sup>20</sup> This coincides with her biggest fear, which is not directed at herself but rather to her loved ones: “The hardest labor camp is better than this suspense every week. It didn't bother me so much before, because I had accepted the fact that I would be going to Poland. But living in fear for your loved ones, knowing that an infinitely long martyrdom is in store for them while your own life here stays relatively idyllic, is something few can bear” (1996: 297; *Letters*, dated 5 July 1943).

Here, Etty pushes herself to extend compassion to everyone. This “everyone” is not an abstract other, but everyone “who may cross your path.” In Etty’s itinerary, unreserved compassion is always about particular beings with whom she is sharing her life and fate. In Etty’s experience, parochial compassion is not transformed into a universal disposition that risks becoming blind to the particular needs and qualities of a particular person she meets. On the contrary, it is always an intimate encounter with a concrete other. This is made possible by the power of love:

Why not turn the love that cannot be bestowed on another, or on the other sex, into a force that benefits the whole community and that might still be love? And if we attempt that transformation, are we not standing on the solid ground of the real world, of reality? A reality as tangible as a bed with a man or a woman in it. (1996: 208; *Diaries*, 20 September 1942)

Here Etty finally finds the reality she sought by immersing herself in real suffering. She feels that love can be a force directed towards the whole community, and yet be as intimate and personal as the way it is experienced in a romantic encounter.<sup>21</sup> I say that she “feels” this because the reality she is referring to is “tangible,” i.e., it is not imprisoned behind the bars of ideas. It is not abstract, but concrete, namely situated in her daily life experience. In my understanding, this is a powerful alternative to two degenerations of love: love as self-interest and love as universal.<sup>22</sup> Although opposite, these two types of love share an important feature, namely that they both leave out engagement with a concrete other. Etty’s aim, on the other hand, was to meet reality. In the tangible encounter with another human being, Etty discovers love as an unrestricted force that is due to everybody. By helping that specific concrete other, her compassion can take part in this broader force of love and find the strength to help another human being.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, love is also situated in Etty’s itinerary. It shapes her itinerary in a manner that does indeed extend the threads of compassion but, at the same time, it takes place in the particular encounters with those who cross her path; therefore, her path is not simply one of suffering. In meeting suffering, she found love.<sup>24</sup> And with love, beauty, meaning, and acceptance come:

When one has once reached the point of experiencing life as something significant and beautiful, even in these times, or rather precisely in these times, then it is as if everything that happens has to happen just as it does and in no other way. (1996: 200; *Diaries*, 15 September 1942)

Before moving on to the next section, I want to highlight another important feature of Etty’s itinerary into and through compassion. Emotional friction is not only the trigger of transformation, and does not operate just

---

21 It might be argued, as for example by Hoffmann (1996: x), that in doing so, Etty made a transition from *eros* to *agape*. If it is true that her experience of love at the camp was characterized by the other-oriented attitude that is typical of *agape*, at the same time she never denied the sensual dimension that is typical of *eros*. For Etty this embodied dimension of love is important because it makes the meeting with the other real, concrete, and tangible. The kind of love she is looking for is like the one that is experienced in a bed with a woman and a man in it. So, if we were to take *agape* as a selfless attitude that contrasts with *eros*, as Hoffmann (1996: x) does, this would dismiss the deeply embodied dimension of her love and compassion.

22 For a discussion of these two degenerations, see Candiotta and De Jaegher 2021.

23 This is a powerful alternative to the much-debated ethical limits of empathy as directed only to those nearby. In Etty’s experience, helping a concrete other made it possible to extend compassion to everyone, and did not result in parochialism.

24 Although Etty’s first commitment was to the extension of love to humanity, it is important to notice how sensitive she was to the beauty of nature, even in something as small as the grounds in Westerbork, and how aware she was of the healing power of nature. For instance, “My red and yellow roses are now fully open. While I sat there working in that hell, they quietly went on blossoming. Many say, ‘How can you still think of flowers!’ Last night, walking that long way home through the rain with the blister on my foot, I still made a short detour to seek out a flower stall, and went home with a large bunch of roses. They are just as real as all the misery I witness each day” (1996: 188; *Diary*, 23 July 1942).

at the beginning of the itinerary. Being able to extend compassion does not mean that Etty no longer feels the tension between her vulnerability and her desire to care for everyone. Later in her journey, in 1943 when her parents were sent to Westerbork, she found herself overwhelmed by pity for them. Every day, she also faced the tension between her (limited) power to postpone her parents' departure for Auschwitz and the awareness that, by doing so, she would have sent someone else who deserved the same compassion that she devoted to her parents (and herself – because she wanted to have them alive).<sup>25</sup> For me, this is not a failure of her ethical itinerary. On the contrary, it demonstrates how moral betterment is a constant practice that needs to be kept alive on a daily basis. The tensional ambivalence in emotional friction is precisely what feeds the itinerary.<sup>26</sup> An ethical itinerary is made of ups and downs; it is not linear progress. There may be roundabouts, points where one has to turn back, or has to stay longer. There may be uphill and downhill sections. Moments when one goes faster and others when one trudges. However, these diversions actually contribute to the process of transformation through emotional friction. But we can also observe a discipline in it – Etty does not let herself be overwhelmed by emotional friction. Etty is often as severe with herself as she is kind to others. She is aware that she needs to undertake this itinerary seriously if she wants to resist the temptation of hating the oppressors, as we will see in a moment. Even if the real itinerary is made while walking a path, the destination is fixed. There is a *moving towards* in her ethical itinerary, although very often the practices she engages in have to do with a *moving away from*, in particular from moral egoism. In both movements, her discipline is nourished by the power of aspiration.

Aspiration is an important force in Etty's ethical itinerary. It is what gives her the strength to continually find meaning in a degraded life in Westerbork. Early on, and before definitively moving to the camp, Etty wrote that she wanted to be "the thinking heart of the barracks" (Hillesum 1996: 225). This aspiration – or prayer (as she depicts it on the same page) – helped her maintain her commitment in voluntarily joining the Jewish fate, even though she was given an opportunity to escape. This aspiration supported her when a narrower form of compassion grew in her heart, especially in meeting the sorrow of her parents. And this aspiration of acting as "a balm to all the wounds" (1996: 231; *Diary*, 11 October 1942) was always there, even on the last page of her diary.

## 5. Moral Betterment 2

Etty's ethical itinerary, explicitly understood as guided by compassion, helped her keep her hatred for Nazi officials at bay, even in the face of the enormous suffering they inflicted on their victims, including herself. For Etty, to keep the distinction between oppressor and victim does not necessarily mean to love the victim and hate the oppressor. This would have tarnished her soul and her passionate recognition of the meaning of life. How could she resist the shortcut of indifference and the temptation to hate the oppressors?

---

<sup>25</sup> Etty was not involved in selecting who to send to Auschwitz, but she could put pressure on those who had the power of making the list since she was working for the Jewish Council. But, with the worsening of the situation, this privilege was lost. She tried to remove her parents from the list even on that Monday in September when the whole family was sent to Auschwitz, but without success.

<sup>26</sup> I cannot delve into the much-debated problem of complicity in the oppression of the Jewish Council's members here. On this, see Arendt 1963 and a discussion in Lederman 2018. Especially in the Netherlands, the "well organised" Jewish Council contributed towards having the highest number of Jewish victims in Western Europe. But I would like to suggest that the emotional friction Etty experienced in compassion might be also be what helped her avoid complicity and maintain an indignant stance, all the while not hating her oppressors.

In this section, I depict three crucial steps that mark her ethical itinerary: 1. the thinking heart; 2. allowing oneself to be a battlefield; and 3. believing in humanity.

Etty engages in the constant work of introspection by writing her diary. The ethical itinerary comprises a constant relation with oneself, others, the world, and all of the problems and goodness that come from them. Writing a diary and sending letters to her acquaintances helped her do the inner work of reflecting on the experience. Etty is not just a woman of feelings. She wants to be the *thinking* heart of the barracks. This means that, by exploring her heart through writing a diary, she aims to better understand her choices, commitments, and aspirations. In fact, her commitment to constant introspection is what allows her ethical transformation to take place.

At night, as I lay in the camp on my plank bed, surrounded by women and girls gently snoring, dreaming aloud, quietly sobbing and tossing and turning, women and girls who often told me during the day, “We don’t want to think, we don’t want to feel, otherwise we are sure to go out of our minds,” I was sometimes filled with an infinite tenderness, and lay awake for hours letting all the many, too many impressions of a much-too-long day wash over me, and I prayed, “Let me be the thinking heart of these barracks.” And that is what I want to be again. The thinking heart of a whole concentration camp. I lie here so patiently and now so calmly again, that I feel quite a bit better already. I feel my strength returning to me; I have stopped making plans and worrying about risks. Happen what may, it is bound to be for the good. (1996: 225; *Diaries*, end of September 1942)<sup>27</sup>

By aspiring to be the thinking heart of a whole concentration camp, Etty committed herself to avoiding two emotional reactions: indifference and hatred.

For those who have been granted the nerve-shattering privilege of being allowed to stay in Westerbork “until further notice,” there is the great moral danger of becoming blunted and hardened. The human suffering that we have seen during the last six months, and still see daily, is more than anyone can be expected to comprehend in half a year. No wonder we hear on all sides every day, in every pitch of voice, “We don’t want to think, we don’t want to feel, we want to forget as soon as possible.” It seems to me that this is a very great danger. (1996: 250–1; *Letters*, dated 18<sup>th</sup> December 1942)

Indifference is here understood as a great moral danger because it obstructs compassion. Etty is aware that indifference is a common response to all the suffering that is around. Still, she thinks it is a danger she needs to avoid. And she does it by allowing herself to be a battlefield. She does not close the door of her heart to avoid suffering. On the contrary, she allows emotional friction to take place:

I feel like a small battlefield, in which the problems, or some of the problems, of our time are being fought out. All one can hope to do is to keep oneself humbly available, to allow oneself to be a battlefield. . . . In that respect, I am probably very hospitable; mine is often an exceedingly bloody battlefield, and dreadful fatigue and splitting headaches are the toll I have to pay. (1996: 32; *Diaries*, 15 June 1941)

Avoiding indifference is one thing, but how can one avoid leaving this battlefield full of hatred?

---

<sup>27</sup> Notably, in mid-September she would already sign the diary as “the thinking heart” (Hillesum 1996: 199).

Yesterday afternoon we read over the notes he had given me. And when we came to the words, “If there were only one human being worthy of the name of ‘man,’ then we should be justified in believing in men and in humanity,” I threw my arms round him on a sudden impulse. It is the problem of our age: hatred of Germans poisons everyone’s mind. “Let the bastards drown, the lot of them” – such sentiments have become part and parcel of our daily speech and sometimes make one feel that life these days has grown impossible. Until suddenly, a few weeks ago, I had a liberating thought that surfaced in me like a hesitant, tender young blade of grass thrusting its way through a wilderness of weeds: if there were only one decent German, then he should be cherished despite that whole barbaric gang, and because of that one decent German it is wrong to pour hatred over an entire people. That doesn’t mean you have to be halfhearted; on the contrary, you must make a stand, wax indignant at times, try to get to the bottom of things. But indiscriminate hatred is the worst thing there is. It is a sickness of the soul. Hatred does not lie in my nature. If things were to come to such a pass that I began to hate people, then I would know that my soul was sick and I should have to look for a cure as quickly as possible. (1996: 11; Diaries, 15 March, 9:30)

Etty chose to believe in humanity despite everything. But this was not a result of a universalist imperative. As in the case of love just presented in the previous section, this commitment came from engaging with a concrete other. Etty says to herself that, if there were even one single decent German, she would not have to hate all of them. This resolution arose as a liberating thought. This thought is liberating because it goes beyond the dualism of loving the victim and hating the oppressor. This thought takes the shape of an ethical commitment that appreciates *difference*. What is wrong is *undifferentiated* hatred. It might be objected that it is wrong to hate all the Germans but that, as one might love the one decent German that one meets, at the same time one should hate the one evil German one meets. And, unfortunately, there were many, not just one, at the camp. Although Etty discovered at the end of her journey that it was extremely hard to find even this one decent German at the camp – she noticed that the camp guards transformed too, unfortunately for the worst<sup>28</sup> – she strongly claimed that hatred was always bad because it would have tarnished her soul. Why is this the case? Because it would make one like the oppressor:

Take one of my colleagues. I see him often in my thoughts. The most striking thing about him is his inflexible, rigid neck. He hates our persecutors with an undying hatred, presumably with good reason. But he himself is a bully. . . . Klaas, all I really wanted to say is this: we have so much work to do on ourselves that we shouldn’t even be thinking of hating our so-called enemies. We are hurtful enough to one another as it is. (1996: 210–1; Diaries)

At the same time, she stresses that avoiding hate does not mean refusing to take a stand or express moral indignation.<sup>29</sup> It is not the case that as we love one concrete other we should hate another concrete other. There

---

28 “On earlier transports, some of the guards were simple, kindly types with puzzled expressions, who walked about the camp smoking their pipes and speaking in some incomprehensible dialect. One would have found their company not too objectionable on the journey. Now I am transfixed with terror. Oafish, jeering faces, in which one seeks in vain for even the slightest trace of human warmth. At what fronts did they learn their business? In what punishment camps were they trained?” (1996: 349; Letters, dated 24 August 1943).

29 Already before going to Westerbork, Etty had a clear opinion about the difference between hatred and indignation: “But genuine moral indignation must run deep and not be petty personal hatred, for personal hatred usually means little more than using passing incidents as excuses for keeping alive personal hurts, perhaps suffered years ago. Call it psychology, but we can’t let ourselves be led astray any longer; we must look at all that indignation we feel and discover whether its roots are genuine and deep and truly moral” (1996: 130; *Diary*, 29 April 1942).

is no equivalence between love and hatred.<sup>30</sup> Hatred, for Etty, is always a sickness of the soul (Hillesum 1996: 11), and so it should be cured as quickly as possible.<sup>31</sup> But this does not mean that one should be impartial:<sup>32</sup>

The absence of hatred in no way implies the absence of moral indignation. I know that those who hate have good reason to do so. But why should we always have to choose the cheapest and easiest way? It has been brought home forcibly to me here how every atom of hatred added to the world makes it an even more inhospitable place. And I also believe, childish perhaps but stubbornly, that the earth will become more habitable again only through the love that the Jew Paul described to the citizens of Corinth in the thirteenth chapter of his first letter. (1996: 255–6; *Letters*)<sup>33</sup>

Etty stood against the oppression in the camp with the power of an extended form of compassion. This form of compassion is beyond the opposing logic of loving the victims and hating the oppressors because it is unreservedly extended to all humanity. This means that sometimes Etty was even capable of feeling compassion for the guards. But this did not mean turning a blind eye to the horror and misery or disavowing the violence perpetuated by the oppressors. Still, compassion moved by love was what could help build a “whole new world” after the war:

All I wanted to say is this: The misery here is quite terrible; and yet, late at night when the day has slunk away into the depths behind me, I often walk with a spring in my step along the barbed wire. And then time and again, it soars straight from my heart – I can’t help it, that’s just the way it is, like some elementary force – the feeling that life is glorious and magnificent, and that one day we shall be building a whole new world. Against every new outrage and every fresh horror, we shall put up one more piece of love and goodness, drawing strength from within ourselves. We may suffer, but we must not succumb. And if we should survive unhurt in body and soul, but above all in soul, without bitterness and without hatred, then we shall have a right to a say after the war. (1996: 294; *Letters*)

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper, I stressed that there is more to compassion than suffering, through engaging with Etty’s writings. There is resilience and vulnerability, aspiration and presence, weakness and strength. Far from being made of just a simple, polarised feeling, the affective dimension of compassion is characterised by a tensional ambivalence in emotional friction. I took the emotional friction inherent to compassion to be a tension

---

<sup>30</sup> This contrasts one important equivalence in the virtue-theoretical discourse about good and evil, namely that if *x* is intrinsically evil, hating *x* for itself is intrinsically good. See Hurka 2001: 16.

<sup>31</sup> There might be religious reasons in support of this choice. For example, it might be argued that Etty needed to cure her soul and avoid hatred for an afterlife salvation. There is a debate about the religious character of Etty’s faith, if Jewish, Christian, or neither. I cannot go deeper into it here (see Coetsier 2014: 71–123 for references). But I would like to stress that my reading supports an understanding of Etty’s commitment to take care of her soul as a practice relevant to her life in the camp and under the pressure of the history. In this manner, I tend to read her spiritual journey alongside the ancient model of care of the soul, as I have already explained.

<sup>32</sup> Impartiality seems to be a core characteristic of ethical judgment. However, as has been skillfully remarked by Maibom (2022: 220–47), impartiality in ethics presupposes an ideal observer who can rightly judge a situation by being outside of it. But moral agents are actors that hold specific perspectives, not indifferent spectators. And this is what can make them care more about others, not less, as in Etty’s moral experience that is so much rooted in her personal encounter with others’ suffering.

<sup>33</sup> See Adinolfi 2011: 49–50, 96–97, 135, 168 for the important role played by Saint Paul’s exhortation to reply to hatred with love in Etty’s ethical itinerary.

between weakness and strength while facing suffering that is caused by oppression. I argued that emotional friction is experienced in meeting a concrete other who is suffering from oppression. Then, I showed how this emotional friction kindles moral betterment by analysing two types of moral betterment in and through compassion. Emotional friction can be simply destructive. But in Etty's experience it was constructive, because she found love through bearing real suffering. In Etty's ethical itinerary, meeting with suffering didn't take the shape of martyrdom. On the contrary, her ethical itinerary unfolds as a passionate aspiration to a greater and more profound form of compassion, one that is oriented by the love for every concrete other she meets in her journey.

## Aknowledgments

This publication has been supported by grant no. 22-15446S "ECEGADMAT" of the Czech Science Foundation.

I would like to thank those with whom I shared my interest in Etty's writing over the years, in particular Isabella Adinolfi and Arianna Sperandio. I also express my gratitude to my colleagues at the Centre for Ethics of the University of Pardubice, University of Tours, University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, and University of Graz for the very helpful feedbacks provided to my talks on this paper when it was still a work-in-progress. In particular, I am thankful to Rebecca Ruth Tietjen, Rick Furtak, Andreas Weber, and Hanne de Jaegher for the insightful discussions about Etty's style of writing, how to relate to it, and its spiritual relevance.

## References

- Adinolfi, I. 2011. *Etty Hillesum: La Fortezza Inespugnabile*. Il Melangolo.
- Arendt, H. 1963. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. Viking Press.
- Bagnoli, C. 2018. "Compassion and Practical Reason: The Prospective of the Vulnerable." In *The Moral Psychology of Compassion*, edited by C. Price and J. Caouette, 125–45. Rowman and Littlefield.
- Baracchi, C. 2008. *Aristotle's Ethics as First Philosophy*. Cambridge University Press.
- Betzler, M. 2019. "The Relational Value of Empathy." *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 27 (2): 136–61.
- Bloom, P. 2016. *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*. Ecco.
- Bowie, F. 1995. "Modern Women Mystics: Etty Hillesum and Simone Weil." *New Blackfriars* 76 (892): 175–87.
- Brady, M. 2018. *Suffering and Virtue*. Oxford University Press.
- Brenner, R. F. 1997. *Writing as Resistance: Four Women Confronting the Holocaust: Edith Stein, Simone Weil, Anne Frank and Etty Hillesum*. Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Candiotta, L. 2021 "Care of the Self and Politics. Michel Foucault: Heir of a Forgotten Plato?" In *Platonism: Ficino to Foucault*, edited by V. Rees, A. Corrias, F. M. Crasta, L. Follesa, and G. Giglioni, 297–313. Brill.
- Candiotta, L. and H. De Jaegher. 2021. "Love In-Between." *The Journal of Ethics* 25: 501–24.
- Carel, H. and I. Kidd. 2020. "Suffering as Transformative Experience." In *Philosophy of Suffering*, edited by D. Bain, M. Brady, and J. Corns, 165–179. Routledge.
- Carr, B. 1999. "Pity and Compassion as Social Virtues." *Philosophy*, 74: 411–29.
- Coetsier, M. G. S. 2014. *The Existential Philosophy of Etty Hillesum: An Analysis of her Diaries and Letters*. Brill.
- Colombetti, G. 2005. "Appraising Valence." *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 12 (8–10): 103–26.
- Cooper, J. M., ed. 1997. *Plato: Complete Works*. Hackett Publishing Company.
- Douglas, T. 2008. "Moral Enhancement." *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 25 (3): 228–45.
- Ferrari, M., N. M. Weststrate, and A. Petro. 2013. "Stories of Wisdom to Live By: Developing Wisdom in a Narrative Mode."



- In *The Scientific Study of Personal Wisdom*, edited by M. Ferrari and N. M. Weststrate, 137–64. Springer.
- Fridja, N. 1986. *The Emotions*. Cambridge University Press.
- Gaarlandt, J. 1996. "Introduction." In *Etty Hillesum, An Interrupted Life: The Diaries, 1941–1943, and Letters from Westerbork*, edited by J. G. Gaarlandt, xiii–xxi. Henry Holt and Company.
- Graham, D. W., ed. and tr. 2010. *The Texts of Early Greek Philosophy: The Complete Fragments and Selected Testimonies of the Major Presocratics*. 2 vols. Cambridge University Press.
- Hadot, P. 1993. *Plotinus, or The Simplicity of Vision*. Translated by M. Chase. Chicago University Press.
- . 1995. *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*. Edited by A. I. Davidson, translated by M. Chase. Basil Blackwell.
- . 2001. *La Philosophie comme Manière de Vivre. Entretiens avec Jeannie Carlier and Arnold I. Davidson*. Albin Michel.
- Hämäläinen, N. 2017. "Three Metaphors toward a Conception of Moral Change." *Nordic Wittgenstein Review* 6 (2): 47–69.
- Hillesum, E. 1996. *Etty Hillesum, An Interrupted Life: The Diaries 1941–1943 and Letters from Westerbork*. Edited by J. G. Gaarlandt, translated by J. Cape, foreword by E. Koffmann. Henry Holt and Company.
- Hoffman, E. 1996. "Foreword." In *Etty Hillesum, An Interrupted Life: The Diaries, 1941–1943, and Letters from Westerbork*, edited by J. G. Gaarlandt, vii–xii. Henry Holt and Company.
- Hurka, T. 2001. *Virtue, Vice, and Value*. Oxford University Press.
- Johnson, M. 1987. *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination and Reason*. University of Chicago Press.
- Jotterand, F. and S. B. Levin. 2019. "Moral Deficits, Moral Motivation and the Feasibility of Moral Bioenhancement." *Topoi* 38: 63–71.
- Kahneman, D. 1999. "Objective Happiness." In *Well-Being: The Foundations of Hedonic Psychology*, edited by D. Kahneman, E. Diener, and N. Schwarz, 3–25. Russell Sage Foundation.
- Kraut, R. 2007. *What is Good and Why: The Ethics of Well-Being*. Harvard University Press.
- Lederman, S. 2018. "Hannah Arendt's Critique of the *Judenräte* in Context: Modern Jewish Leadership and Radical Democracy." *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 32 (2): 207–23.
- Maibom, H. L., ed. 2014. *Empathy and Morality*. Oxford University Press.
- Maibom, H. L. 2022. *The Space Between*. Oxford University Press.
- Medina, J. 2019. "Racial Violence, Emotional Friction, and Epistemic Activism." *Angelaki*, 24:4, 22–37.
- Murdoch, I. 1992. *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. Chatto & Windus.
- Nilsson, P. 2011. "On the Suffering of Compassion." *Philosophia* 39: 135–44.
- Russell, J. A. 1980. "The Circumplex Model of Affect." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 39 (6): 1161–78.
- Scholnick, E. K. 1994. "Route Metaphors." *Psychological Inquiry* 5 (3): 254–56.
- Weil, S. 2003. *Gravity and Grace*. Routledge.
- Zagzebski, L. 2017. *Exemplarist Moral Theory*. Oxford University Press.