



Received: 3 April, 2025
Accepted: 8 July, 2026
Published: 8 September, 2026

Piss on Pity?

A Qualified Defence of Pity and Compassion Towards Disabled People

Ally Peabody Smith – Lehigh University, USA, apsmith@lehigh.edu

Sara Protasi – University of Puget Sound, USA, sprotasi@pugetsound.edu

Abstract

Disability theorists and disability justice activists have long rejected pity as a response to disability, perceived as denigrating and as based in incorrect assumptions about disabled people. Even so, many people—even those who reject the idea that disability is inherently negative—have felt pity towards disabled individuals. In this article, we assess the moral permissibility and fittingness of pity as a response to disability, particularly when pity is felt by a non-disabled person. We start by presenting the argument according to which pity felt toward disabled people is both unfitting and morally impermissible, and consider whether compassion might be a more apt emotional response to disability. We then present alternative conceptions of pity and compassion informed by Buddhism and feminist care ethics. We conclude by arguing that pity can be fitting, but only when it responds to systemic disadvantages incurred by disabled people (and not when it responds to an alleged inherent badness of disability *per se*), and can be temporarily morally permissible, provided that it is soon replaced by a compassionate, sympathetic response that includes awareness of the pitfalls of implicit ableism and is imbued with a perception of our interconnectedness and vulnerability as human beings.

Keywords: philosophy of disability, pity, compassion, moral permissibility, fittingness, ethics of care, Buddhist ethics, disability justice

Many academics, disability rights activists, and people in general endorse the view that disability is not inherently bad, and that disabled people live flourishing lives just as non-disabled people do, provided that the obstacles and discrimination typical of an ableist society are removed. Thanks to the progress made in conceptualising disability by the disability justice movement, by more nuanced and realistic portrayals

¹ A note on language: most disability-positive or disability-neutral theorists and activists, ourselves included, use the same way of talking about disability that we do (that is, identity-first language). Identity-first language (language that describes a person as a “disabled person” as opposed to person-first language, which would have us say “person with a disability”) is analogous to how we speak about many other minoritised identity traits, like gayness, Blackness, and gender identity, all of which are considered *value neutral*. Insofar as one also considers disability to be value neutral, akin to other minoritised identity traits, one should mirror the language style and allow for the reclaiming and celebration of disability as a key component of identity and human diversity. So, just as it would be weird to say “person with Blackness” or “person with lesbianism” or “person with transgenderism,” we ought not say “person with disability.” Rather, Black person, lesbian woman, trans person, and disabled person are appropriate, and capture the way race, sexuality, gender identity, and disability status are key components of individual identity, and are an important source of solidarity that spurs social justice movements. Identity-first language is often a way of reclaiming what has been incorrectly construed as a negative identity, and it celebrates the value of disabled lives. While it is always right to ask a person what they prefer to be called—similarly to pronoun use—the majority of folks involved in disability justice and theory support the use of identity-first language.

of disabled lives in the arts and on social media, and by a growing awareness of just how problematic older assumptions about disability have been, many of us no longer *think* or *believe* that disability is tragic or that disabled lives are pitiable. Those of us familiar with the rallying cry, “Piss on pity,” or immersed in the disability justice literature, balk at the idea of a non-disabled person feeling pity for a disabled individual, and rightfully so. However, non-disabled people sometimes nonetheless feel pity towards disabled ones, whether that be in virtue of the disability itself or the disabled person’s context, and whether that emotional reaction occurs pre-reflectively, or after much consideration and despite their knowing better.

Upon reflection, and having discussed this phenomenon with others, we have realised that certain emotional reactions of non-disabled people towards disabled lives give rise to a critical self-reflection in which the non-disabled person realises their potential error, its unfittingness, and the morally problematic nature of said emotional response. People we take to be thoughtful, considerate, and progressive still find themselves feeling pity, and recognise the dissonance between their beliefs and their reactions. As such, this paper was born out of the awareness of a gap between beliefs and emotional experiences, particularly with regard to the emotional reactions of some non-disabled people towards some disabled ones.

An easy explanation of this gap could stem from the familiar distinction between implicit and explicit attitudes: one could argue that our emotional responses are the direct and obvious consequences of not endorsing these beliefs *implicitly*, at the level of the fast, intuitive and partially instinctive system of reasoning that cognitive scientists call System 1 (Evans 2003; Kahneman 2003). And in fact, this might be the right explanation in many cases: it may well be that it accounts for the *psychological* phenomenon of feeling pity despite not explicitly believing that disabled lives are pitiable. However, we think this gap is nonetheless a worthwhile starting point for a *normative* investigation concerning the fittingness and moral permissibility of the pity and compassion sometimes felt by non-disabled persons for disabled individuals.

Here’s an overview of our argument. In Section 1, we address some potential concerns about the aims and scope of our analysis, explain our background assumptions about disability, and discuss differences between disability and other historically marginalised identity traits. In Section 2, we present the case against pity as it has been traditionally made by disabled activists and scholars, according to which pity felt toward disabled people is both unfitting and morally impermissible, insofar as pity is necessarily hierarchising and condescending. We also discuss the possibility of distinguishing pity from compassion and arguing that compassion is morally permissible, and show how this move is rejected by some scholars. In Section 3, we re-examine both pity and compassion, and their distinction, through the lens of three different approaches: empirical, Buddhist, and feminist. We contend that a derogatory notion of pity is not entirely supported by empirical evidence and is influenced by a Western masculinist approach to ethics, but also concede that compassion is, in any case, morally superior to pity. Section 4 proposes that, when certain conditions are satisfied, both emotions can be fitting and morally permissible responses to disabled people (and their caregivers). To preview our conclusion, we suggest that pity can be fitting, but only when it responds to *localised* badness connected to disability or to systemic disadvantages incurred by disabled people (so, not when it responds to an alleged badness of disability *per se*). These cases are, probably, quite limited, and as such the contexts in which pity is fitting may be narrow in scope and require substantive consideration and reflection on behalf of the pitier. Additionally, pity can be temporarily morally permissible, provided that it’s soon replaced by a compassionate, sympathetic response that is aware of the pitfalls of implicit ableism, committed to bringing about justice and equality for all, and imbued with a perception of our interconnectedness and of the suffering and vulnerability of all beings.

1. Disability Versus Other Historically Marginalised Identity Traits

Now, the nature of this inquiry may rightly raise eyebrows. We're all too aware of the concerns arising from non-disabled persons speculating on the lives and well-being of disabled ones. One could see this inquiry as objectifying, suggesting that disability is an inappropriate locus of voyeuristic consideration. Furthermore, by some perspectives on disability as value neutral, asking whether non-disabled people can *ever* justifiably feel pity or compassion for disabled individuals is a non-starter.

To address the voyeurism worry, some clarifications about the scope of our analysis are in order. We focus on pity felt by *non-disabled* people for several reasons. First, because we were moved to write this paper out of an awareness of deeply-felt emotional experiences, particularly those of non-disabled people who care about disability justice. The emotional responses, attitudes, and views of non-disabled people *matter pragmatically and politically*, insofar as they have a huge impact on the lives of disabled people. Whether or not that is itself just is another question, but it is the reality of the context in which we all currently exist. In other words, this is not a paper in ideal theory; we're interested in the lived emotional and sociopolitical realities of our current day and age. We considered analysing also the emotional responses of disabled people towards other disabled individuals, but realised we couldn't handle the additional layer of complexity in a single paper.

Moving on to a second worry, namely the question of how the goodness, badness, or neutrality of disability plays a role in the permissibility of our line of questioning. We agree with many core tenets of a value-neutral perspective on disability, particularly the insistence that in the vast majority of cases, disability only makes a person's life go better or worse in virtue of other things that it's combined with, and the idea that disability, like many other identity traits, is a valuable component of human diversity worth celebrating (as is argued in Barnes 2014 and 2016 and by the disability justice movement more broadly). For example, locomotive disabilities are only bad for a person if they cannot afford a wheelchair, if they are the target of prejudice and discriminatory attitudes, if they live in environments exclusively built for bipedal locomotion, and so on. This *mere-difference view of disability* is popular among disability theorists (e.g. Begon 2020; Barnes 2016; Campbell and Stramondo 2017; Peabody Smith 2022; Reynolds 2022). Barnes powerfully conceptualises the mere-difference view in *The Minority Body* (2016), where she argues that disability is analogous to other identity minoritised traits that are themselves value neutral. On this view, just as being racialised as Black is only bad for a person in racist contexts, physical disability is only bad for a person in ableist contexts.

However, despite our overarching agreement with the mere-difference view, we diverge from certain aspects of it in that we don't think disability is wholly analogous to traits such as race, sexuality, or gender identity. (Barnes (2020), too, recognises certain differences, as do others.) The appropriateness of asking our question is sensitive to salient contextual differences between disability and other forms of human diversity. So, while we largely agree with a mere-difference view of disability, we think that there are relevant aspects of disability that explain why we might have certain emotional responses to certain cases of disability that we do not have to, say, race.

To wit: disability is an internally heterogeneous category, a feature which is reflected in the notorious difficulty of defining disability and the suggestion that it may be better thought of as a cluster concept or family resemblance (Timpe 2022; Wasserman and Aas 2023). There's a sense in which disabilities vary from each other in different ways than things like race or gender identity differ from one another, and this disanalogy affects the question of potential local intrinsic badness of disability, as we explore later in the paper. Race, for example, does not have a genetic basis, whereas many disabilities do; while there are genetic cohorts that track

group-level differences across racial groups, these do not neatly map onto extant racial categories (see, for instance, Duello et al. 2021; Dupré 2012; Lala and Feldman 2024 and Peebles 2025).

Relatedly, there is a connection between disability, technology, and medicine that is unique to disability, compared to other identity categories, even within the context of a social-constructionist approach to disability (Lim 2018). Many disabilities require medical or technological support (even where that support is, correctly, not curative in nature). While aspects of these connections impact other identity categories, the specific relationships between disability, technology, and medicine are different than the ones between, say, sexuality, technology, and medicine; attempts to tidily analogise between these analyses would be like comparing apples to oranges.

Finally, some disabilities are congenital but many are acquired, often in traumatic and painful ways. Coming out as queer or undergoing gender transition can be traumatic and painful, but *being* gay or trans is not acquired in the way that some disabilities are. Likewise with race: a person is *born that way*.² The sense in which one can *become* disabled versus become some other identity feature is quite distinct. Disability is unique in having the feature of the potential acquisition (and transformative change) that can occur at any point in a person's life. Further, we can experience short-term disability in a way in which we rarely experience short-term racialisation or queerness. So, there are differences in transition costs for disability that are absent or distinct for other identity traits (and which may in part explain the pre-theoretical intuition that disability can be something bad for a person).

In sum, we agree with the central idea of a value-neutral view of disability, that disability itself is not inherently bad. But we do not think it's fully akin to other minority traits, for the reasons outlined above. We don't make any universal claims about the nature of disability. Our argument aligns with a number of views on disability, particularly those conscious of the socially constructed aspects of disabled experience, the neutrality of disability in-itself, and the possibility of social justice improving the lives of those with disabilities.

2. The Case Against Pity (and Compassion)

At an unreflective level, it may seem like feelings of pity reflect virtuous aspects of a person's character: in recognising an unfortunate circumstance or in witnessing an injustice, feeling pity toward another is a result of one's sensitivity, not one's indifference. Further, as mentioned, at a pre-theoretical level, disability may seem a wholly appropriate cause of pity, and those feeling pity towards disabled persons may take themselves to possess a virtuous emotional character.

But it's common to hear people reject pity with expressions like "I don't want your pity!" This would be surprising if pity were universally perceived as an altruistic response. That reaction is explained by the fact that we don't tend to pity people we perceive as our equals in circumstance. We pity those we perceive as lacking, as unfortunate, or as somehow lesser than ourselves. That is, pity is commonly understood as *hierarchical*,

² More precisely, one is born with certain phenotypical characteristics that only partly determine, according to many social constructionist views of race, how one is racialised. So, it's possible for someone to move countries, for example, and be racialised in a different way. Some people from the Caribbeans or Latin America, for instance, where racial categories are nuanced and numerous, report "becoming Black" in the US, where Blackness is often assigned on the basis of the so-called "one drop rule." The difference with disability remains, but how strong it is depends on what view of race one subscribes to.

expressing the pitying person's perception (conscious or not) of some way in which they take themselves to be superior to, or better off than the pitied.

Furthermore, stereotypical understandings of certain social groups as pitiable play an important role in social hierarchies. According to the Stereotype Content Model (Fiske et al. 2007; Cuddy et al. 2009; Cikara and Fiske 2012; Cuddy et al. 2011), stereotypes toward outgroups are shaped by perceptions across two core dimensions: warmth and competence. For instance, some outgroups are the target of envy, insofar as they are seen as highly competent but unlikely (for instance, the ultra-wealthy). Some outgroups are both disliked and perceived as low in competence, such as drug addicts, or unhoused people. Disabled people (together with the elderly) are the target of stereotypes that are relatively high in warmth but low in competence, and the characteristic emotional output, according to Fiske and her collaborators, is pity.

It's not hard to see why this is the case, given that disability is often seen as the lack or damage of an intrinsic good, a curtailment of valuable opportunities, a negative departure from species norms, or a hindrance to core life functions that contribute to our survival and reproduction.³ But this approach fails to capture the huge impact played by widespread ableism, the inaccessibility of most physical and social environments, the vast heterogeneity of disability, the role assistive technology can play, and a myriad of other factors that affect disabled people's quality of life, which has been shown to be comparable to the quality of life of those without disabilities. This is referred to as the "ableist conflation," capturing the mistaken view of non-disabled persons that disabled ones must suffer because of their disabilities (see e.g. Albrecht and Devlieger 1999; Campbell et al. 2021; Reynolds 2022). An additional factor that impacts the views of non-disabled people towards disabled ones is the widespread false belief that disability itself entails a lower quality of life. This view has been debunked by multiple empirical studies of disabled persons' self-reported quality of life, which matches that of non-disabled people. The so-called "disability paradox," an outdated term coined by Albrecht and Devlieger (1999), is a misnomer, as there is sufficient data at this point to indicate that disabled people enjoying a high quality of life shouldn't be paradoxical at all.

"Piss on pity" is thus a popular slogan and rallying cry in the disability activist community. It refuses in no uncertain terms the notion that disability is an inherently tragic condition. The slogan originated in the early 90s in the United Kingdom in response to the ITV Telethon, a fundraiser that intentionally provoked pity in viewers by portraying disabled lives as tragic to raise money for various charities. Protestors stood outside the television studios with the slogan emblazoned on posters and t-shirts, amping up visibility for disabled peoples' own voices, the view that their lives were not inherently tragic, and reframing the conversation about the value and reality of disabled lives. This is also around the time when the disability rights movement achieved political victories such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990). Joseph Shapiro (1994) recounts this history in a book called, *No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement*.

³ This perspective is reflected in the *medical model* of disability, which positions disability as akin to disease, both of which are conditions to be avoided and, when possible, cured. This view remains widespread despite powerful counter-claims made by disability theorists and activists (Oliver 2004; Silvers 2003; Shapiro 1994; Williams 1996). Many disability theorists and activists favour a *social model* of disability (Oliver 1983; Silvers 1999; see also the activism of Ed Roberts and Judy Heumann in the 1970s). Against the medical model, social models of disability hold that much of the negativity of disability is in fact a contingent effect caused by systemic ableism. Impairments (physical or cognitive differences) are distinct from disability: it's society that disables persons with prevailing attitudes, including pity, and with environments built for the non-disabled majority. Note that there are philosophers who espouse the view that disability is socially-constructed while rejecting the social model of disability in its original manifestations (e.g. Barnes 2016).

It's not a coincidence that the first Disability Pride Parade was held the same year the ADA passed. Disability pride parades, much like gay pride parades, reject being shamed or pitied for one's identity, and vindicate not just the worth, but the beauty and the value of disabled lives and bodies. As Barnes vividly puts it: "Disability pride says that we may have *minority* bodies, but we don't have—we refuse to have—tragic bodies" (2016, 186). Garland-Thomson has argued for the conservation of disability, highlighting the value of its heterogeneity biologically, culturally, and politically, and emphasising its potential as a generative resource (2012). Other theorists, including Carlson (2009), Kittay (1999; 2019), Lindemann (2001; 2004), and Tremain (2005) have each advanced value-neutral or disability-positive perspectives on a range of disabilities.

Among philosophers of disability, Joseph Stramondo has directly addressed the topic of pity and argued that pity isn't merely an emotion but also a power relation, making pity directed towards disabled persons a *social harm* (2010, 122; see also Cureton 2020). In fact, Stramondo argues that unequal power relations are a *necessary precondition* to pity's existence (122). To analyse pity solely in terms of its emotional nature ignores the specific contexts in which pity is felt (that is, contexts in which a prevailing feature is attitudes of ableism and their resulting structures of power, both of which position disabled people beneath those without disabilities). Even if altruistic in intent, pity emerges from the perception of certain features as undesirable. That perceived undesirability is the product of social oppression and misguided evaluations of the lived experiences of certain types of persons—the source of whose negative lived experiences is, as a social model of disability illustrates, largely the result of negative attitudes like ableism. To add insult to injury, pity plays a role in veiling a system of domination between groups of persons using the guise of altruistic concern. The power differential between pity's subject and its object, coupled with the perceived altruism of the pitier, masks the systemic oppression faced by disabled people. Cureton refers to these impulses and the actions they spur as "offensive beneficence," capturing the added complication of undesired debts of gratitude pushed upon disabled persons who didn't want pity, or acts of beneficence, in the first place (2020).

A core feature of Stramondo's contribution to the pity and disability literature is the disambiguation of pity as a primarily emotional phenomenon, and the degree to which pity is necessarily socially and politically embedded. He emphasises how most contemporary philosophical treatments of pity continue to characterise pity as primarily emotional as opposed to contextually determined by social power relations, a point that we agree with, and with which we ultimately believe our argument to be concordant (2010, 123). We'll bracket this for now, and say more about why this is the case once we've more thoroughly investigated the questions of the fittingness and moral permissibility of pity felt by non-disabled people towards disabled ones.

Across this literature, then, pity is rejected as both *unfitting* (disabled lives aren't inherently tragic or unfortunate, so they don't merit pity) and as *morally impermissible* (pity reinforces unequal power relations and causes social harm). Therefore, anyone defending pity, even partially, would have to address two distinct problems:

1. A conceptual problem: pity involves condescension, hierarchy, and a downwards-cast gaze from the subject feeling pity towards the pitied object;
2. A practical problem: in necessarily involving condescension, pity reinforces unequal power relations.

But could there be an alternative to pity?

2.1 Ought We to Consider, Instead, Compassion?

The distinction between pity and compassion is a fairly recent one. Aristotle in the *Rhetoric* (2007, 1385b13–16) defines *eleos* as a distress at an apparent evil happening to someone who doesn't deserve it; he opposes this emotion to *nemesis* (pain at undeserved good fortune, usually translated as “indignation”). *Eleos* used to be translated as “pity,” but commentators started using “compassion” to avoid the modern negative connotation of “pity.”⁴ When we find the terms “pity” and “compassion” in Adam Smith's *A Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1976), they're used synonymously. Robert Kimball argues that it isn't until the 19th century that we start seeing a differentiation between “benevolent pity” (which later becomes compassion, as used by, e.g., Kristjánsson 2018) and “contemptuous pity” (2004, 303). Nussbaum also remarks on the fact that “in modern English [pity] has acquired connotations of condescension and superiority that it did not have earlier” (2013, 416, n. 7) and distinguishes “egalitarian compassion” from “derogatory pity” (373). While some authors, such as Cartwright (1984), argue that a negative conception of pity can be already found in Spinoza, most scholars converge in identifying Nietzsche as the fiercest and most influential critic of pity. But we should not make too much of linguistic changes, since we find the gist of the distinction between these two emotional responses, even if the terms used differ, as Darwall argues with regard to the Humean treatment of these passions in the *Treatise*.⁵ Sometimes “sympathy” or “empathy” are used to refer to the notion of compassion that we highlighted above.

In any case, the literature on sympathy, empathy, and related psychological mechanisms is enormous, and these terms are often used in different and incompatible ways.⁶ Whatever the exact reconstruction of this historical devolution of the moral status of pity may be (which can be situated, at any rate, in the modern age), in contemporary literature compassion is standardly presented as void of the problematic features that pity seems to have (Caouette and Price 2018). Pity seemingly involves a scorning gaze shared with disgust and contempt (Fiske 2011), i.e., a condescending (Snow 1991), “hierarchising” (Darwall 2018), or depersonalising⁷ attitude, such that the pitied is perceived as different, distant, and other (Carr 1999; Darwall 2018). Compassion, on the other hand, is alleged to involve a levelled gaze, according to which the other is seen as similar, close and same, a sympathetic “suffering with” (Boleyn-Fitzgerald 2003). From the detached and comparative nature of pity stems its potential passivity and inactivity: when we pity, the difference with the self is salient and we may be less inclined to relieve the pitied's suffering, whereas compassion may entail a push to make things better (Kimball 2004).

Regardless of what we term these emotional responses, the important takeaway is that one, namely pity, is seen as hierarchical in nature and may evoke feelings of disgust, superiority, fear, or other othering attitudes; the other, namely compassion, involves perceiving the other as equal in worth, though not in circumstance, may involve the desire to help the other, and may include an acknowledgement that the other's suffering could be one's own.

⁴ There's a large literature devoted to interpreting the Aristotelian notion of pity, and its relation to virtues and character traits. Among the many views, two influential ones are by Martha Nussbaum (1996, 2003, 2013), who defends a version of *eleos* (pity/compassion) as a central virtue (for a critique of her account, see Crisp 2008), and Kristján Kristjánsson (2014, 2018), who thinks of *eleos* (which he translates as “pity”) as a precondition for the virtue proper of compassion.

⁵ See Darwall 2018 for a short review of some historical accounts of pity and compassion (195–99).

⁶ For a recent interdisciplinary account of empathy that reviews much of this literature, see Maibom 2022. Caouette and Price (2018), in their introduction to a volume on the moral psychology of compassion, review some of the different and opposing ways in which scholars have presented the difference between compassion, empathy, and sympathy.

⁷ What we mean by depersonalising is that when we pity someone, we may see only their condition, not the person: the wheelchair, not the individual sitting in it. We thank Fredrik Westerlund for this point.

Most of the aforementioned philosophical distinctions have not been justified by appeal to robust psychological evidence, which is, to be fair, scarce, as we discuss later in the paper (Section 3.1). Yet, they reflect widespread cultural assumptions and the way in which these words are used in the societal contexts relevant to the present discussion. No matter the exact genealogy of the contemporary notion of pity (which we could not possibly reconstruct in full here), it's undoubtable that it has assumed a strongly negative light, one that legitimises and supports the disability activist community's imperative to "piss on" it.

2.2. Reconsidering Pity

Having now clarified two distinct problems with pity, and a distinction between a hierarchical versus a levelled emotional response towards another person's (presumed) suffering, we can analyse the emotional responses of non-disabled people towards disabled people more carefully. We can also consider the role played by *expressions* of pity, such as acts of offensive beneficence or comments ("That must be so hard!" "You are so strong").

Let's start by addressing the fittingness of emotional reactions of pity. First, imagine a person (we'll call him A) who sees a wheelchair user approach a grocery store's automatic doors, which happen not to be working that day. They've been sealed off with caution tape and bear a sign asking customers to use the other entrance. A watches someone else walk up to the alternative entrance, which has stairs and a standard hinged doorway. A feels pity for the wheelchair user. A approaches the wheelchair user, commenting, "As if your life isn't already hard enough! Can I grab anything inside for you?"

Next, take a case where a non-disabled person (let's call her B) meets a woman who tells her about her significantly and multiply disabled child. B pities the woman, who (she imagines) has tremendous caretaking responsibilities, and worries that go above and beyond those of other parents regarding the safety, social acceptance, and longevity of her child. Nonetheless, being well-versed in disability theory and prevailing anti-pity attitudes, B suppresses her pity, instead inquiring more about the personality and interests of the child.

A's emotional reaction and his expression of pity can be analysed distinctly. Now, we don't know whether A feels pity for the wheelchair user because he uses a wheelchair, or because the wheelchair user is being inconvenienced by the store's temporary inaccessibility. Supposing A isn't aware of the disabled community's general rejection of pity, and that his pity is felt for being-a-wheelchair-user itself, A's reaction is unfitting, as A knows nothing about the wheelchair user's actual experiences or quality of life. A's expression of pity is also problematic: it is exactly this sort of "your life must be so hard" sentiment that rightfully offends its recipient.

B, on the other hand, represses her pity. The first reason B is right to repress her pity is that she doesn't know, yet, how her new friend perceives her situation; expressing pity towards someone who doesn't see their situation as unfortunate would be inappropriate. Consider our reaction when someone we don't know well tells us they got a divorce: caution is warranted, since we don't know whether that is good, bad, or mixed news. For some people, divorce is cause for celebration; for others, of mourning. For most people, it's... complicated.

Furthermore, a mother of a significantly disabled child in our ableist society is probably fatigued and burdened by others' expressions of pity. Even if she did agree that her situation is pitiable, she's probably not looking forward to being pitied over and over again.

Most importantly, B is aware of the rejection of pity in the disability-positive community, and aware of the social harms pity causes. Even if the caregiver of a disabled person feels her situation is pitiable, and even if she's not burdened by constant expressions of pity (a big "if"), it might still be impermissible to *express* or *act on* such pity, given that it risks reinforcing the oppression of disabled individuals. As Cureton (2016) suggests, absent significant empirical information relevant to offering help, and lacking moral or political knowledge about the specific ways in which our institutions have failed to accommodate or support a person, we don't have the same sort of good judgement that we do with, say, helping to carry a stroller up a set of stairs (86–87). Because social norms and awareness surrounding disability are already sub-par, we should be even more cautious in expressing or acting on pity than in other cases, because we cannot rely on our standard knowledge base.

However, we aren't sure that B's mere *feelings* of pity were wholly unfitting. Or, that A's mere feeling is unfitting, were his feeling a response to the lack of access as opposed to the disability itself. One could argue that B's pity was about the *circumstances* of the individuals involved, and not disability itself; pity felt towards the lack of support for the mother, or the limited access available for the child may have been fitting. Recognition of the fact that disability can be negative for a person when mixed with other factors is consistent with a mere-difference view of disability, thus making pity about those factors fitting. In other words, it matters whether the emotional reaction is towards the disability itself or the context of the disability.

So, it seems that, as a tentative conclusion, pity can be *fitting*, but only when it's felt for *extrinsic factors or circumstances*. Again, pity towards disability itself is not fitting; however, because disability can be bad depending on other factors, pity can be fitting when those extrinsic factors make it the case that the disability shapes individual experience in certain ways. In these limited occasions, it is a fact of the matter that the pitied person is experiencing something that creates a hierarchy between that individual and the observer, whether that be extreme vulnerability, a certain type of lacking, or an unavoidable suffering.

Let's then think more seriously about pity's moral permissibility. We'll set aside the worry that emotional arousal may not be wholly within a person's control, and thus that a person cannot be held responsible for their emotions. This is a vexed and complex question that we cannot deal with here.⁸ Let's assume that people have *some* control over their emotional responses, by habituation and cultivation of alternative patterns of reaction to stimuli, and by actively engaging with members of communities where these alternative patterns are experienced and expressed. Assuming that, can *unexpressed* pity ever be morally permissible?

It seems even unexpressed pity (whether felt towards the disability itself, or its extrinsic and mitigating factors) could be taken to be morally impermissible because of the sense in which unreflective pity necessarily entails hierarchical and condescending evaluations of the other.

A plausible counterargument at this point is that the emotional response that *should be* felt (independently of whether we felt it) is a compassionate one. As Roger Crisp writes: "Shapiro's book on the civil rights of people with disabilities, *No Pity*, could not comprehensibly have been called *No Compassion*" (2008, 234). Compassion might be the response to cultivate when faced, for example, with the recognition of extreme vulnerability in certain cases of disability.

⁸ Holroyd et al. (2017) provide a review on implicit bias and moral responsibility; Sherman (1999) defends the view that we are responsible for our emotions.

Stramondo, however, preempts this move from pity to compassion, when he claims that “whether we call it pity, empathy or compassion” (2010, 123–24), pity is reflective not just of affect but of the power relations between the pitier and the pitied. He’s responding here to Susan Stocker’s (2002) defence of pity toward disabled people. Stocker encourages a translation from pity to what she calls empathy (and which others call sympathy, see e.g. Darwall 1998). Stramondo objects that Stocker seems unaware of the social sources of the suffering felt by disabled people (123). He writes, “Describing and analyzing pity only in terms of emotion does not seem to recognize that the suffering of disability, and any other form of existence that would be pitiable, is socially created” (124). We accept this point, and agree that pity is only fitting or morally permissible when it is felt both *in conjunction with* awareness of the socially constructed components of the suffering of disabled people, and *because of* those external features that cause that suffering. This claim seems responsive to Stramondo’s insistence on the social context that undergirds pity. The same can be said of compassion: even with the levelled gaze compassion entails, it is only fitting or morally permissible when aware of the social context of disabled people.

Other authors support a broader sense of compassion as a fitting response to at least some disabilities. For instance, Lawrence Becker (2020) talks about “kind and compassionate ways” in which people with “serious agentic disabilities” (80) may be helped in care centres. More generally, compassion has been defended as a crucial emotion in relations of care and in medical settings (Boleyn-Fitzgerald 2003; Ekstrom 2012; see Sinclair et al. 2016 for a review of the vast empirical literature).

However, recall Stramondo’s insistence that “pity, empathy or compassion” are equivalently problematic. Even though we have spent some time articulating the differences between pity and compassion, and the different fittingness conditions of each, we understand why: there is such a prevalent ableist bias in our society that even when an emotion may be fitting, it may still end up reinforcing ableist biases and misguided conceptions of disability, and it might still exacerbate extant relations of power. After all, if a disabled person perceives themselves to be on the receiving end of unexpressed compassion (and, even more so, pity), they might still rightly assume it stems from a wrongheaded conception of their lived experience.

So, it seems that we’re still bound to reject both pity and compassion even when they may be, in limited circumstances, fitting, insofar as they both end up evoking, in our society, pity’s hierarchical and downgrading attitude toward its *target* and not merely towards one’s circumstances. Perhaps, then, we need a stronger move, one that requires us to introduce a more nuanced approach to how we think of these emotions.

3. Pity and Compassion Re-Examined

The philosophical perspectives on pity and compassion that we’ve presented so far, even when divergent, have in common that they mostly proceed from the armchair. Such a method of investigation is unavoidably affected by the biases and perceptions of a fairly localised subject base: scholars from the anglosphere, a restricted sample of perspectives which has been robustly criticised elsewhere (see, e.g., Knobe and Nichols 2017 for a review; Flanagan 2016, 2021; Van Norden 2017). As noted above, the derogatory characterisation of pity that seems so intuitive to anglophone philosophers today is arguably an invention of Western modern philosophy, to be especially credited to Spinoza, Kant, and, above all, Nietzsche (Cartwright 1984; Stocker 2002; Breen et al. 2025).

Both pity and compassion as discussed in the previous section are culturally constructed, rather than universals. In this section, we present alternative perspectives on pity and compassion, and suggest, first, that a wholly negative outlook on pity shouldn't be assumed or conceded too quickly, and, second and relatedly, that its relation to compassion may be more complex than it appears. We draw from the cognitive sciences, Buddhism, and feminism, so as to expand our reference values and incorporate different cultural and disciplinary perspectives. We chose these approaches for their heterogeneity of perspective and evidence, along with our own areas of awareness. Data in all three subsections suggest that a more sympathetic perception of pity is associated with feminine-coded approaches to morality. We concede that this section falls short of providing a truly cross-cultural examination of these emotions, which goes beyond the scope of the paper and isn't currently possible due to the paucity of empirical data on these emotions.

3.1 Empirical Approaches to Pity and Compassion

There's surprisingly little evidence on *pity alone*. Even more surprisingly, studies that are *widely* cited as providing evidence about pity (such as Dijkers et al. 1996, which aims to study "pity" arousal processes) include, in their discussion and references, work on *any pro-social attitudes and motivations*, including empathy, sympathy, and altruism, and which therefore cannot provide any reliable evidence for our purposes.

However, four studies by Florian et al. (1999) attempt to analyse pity itself in a systematic way.⁹ After highlighting the paucity of empirical work on pity, the authors stress how the recent literature is influenced by the negative view of the aforementioned modern European philosophers. They then draw from previous research to show that other people's suffering activates in an agent a cognitive process of causal attribution. If the suffering is perceived as uncontrollable, then the perceiver feels pity and is motivated to help the pitied (*contra* what is speculated, e.g., by Kimball 2004). If the suffering is perceived as caused by the sufferer, then the resulting emotional response is anger and withholding help. This hypothesis has been supported by subsequent studies.

Florian et al. apply a *multidimensional approach* to pity, and develop the Pity Experience Inventories, which identify *three patterns of pity*. (Following other multidimensional approaches to emotion types—e.g. Protasi 2021—we could call them *varieties of pity*.) These patterns "vary along the prosocial-egocentric and passive-active dimensions and consist of coherent clusters of feelings, cognitions, wishes, and behaviors" (1999, 19).

The first pattern is labelled "compassionate caring" and involves feelings of attachment and sympathy toward the sufferer, action-oriented thoughts, wishes, and behaviours that are directed at caring for and alleviating the suffering. It's a pro-social approach that correlates with confidence in being able to help others. The authors

⁹ It's important to note that cognitive sciences have been criticised as parochial and guilty of generalising from a "WEIRD" (Western, educated, industrialised, rich, and democratic) set of subjects (Henrich et al. 2010), and this set of studies does suffer from such limitations, having been conducted on Israeli people only, a limitation the authors themselves acknowledge. However, this concern is assuaged here by the fact that the very notions of pity and compassion we have been discussing so far also emerge from a Western tradition, so these studies still represent a valuable empirical counterpoint. Furthermore, they surely fare better compared to the aforementioned Dijkers et al. 1996, which studied emotional responses *towards people with AIDS in the 90s*—not the most generalisable results.

note how this pattern may track what many philosophers have called compassion, sympathy, or empathy, even though this is associated with the word “pity” in the language of the study subjects (Hebrew).¹⁰

The second pattern is labelled “false superiority,” and involves condescension, insecurity, and distancing, with associated feelings of arrogance, repulsion, and superiority, thoughts of asymmetry between the subject and the sufferer, a sense of personal insecurity, anxiety, discomfort, fear, and relief at one’s own better position. The distancing position is expressed though wishes that one may forget and escape the pity-evoking situation. This pattern tracks the modern philosophical conception of pity and is positively associated with low level of personal control.

The third pattern is labelled “passive identification,” and is somewhat intermediate between the first two. On the one hand, it resembles compassionate caring insofar as it involves genuine concern for the sufferer and is not egoistic; on the other, this altruistic concern doesn’t materialise into actual concrete steps to alleviate suffering, and it instantiates a personal distress coupled with a sense of helplessness and despair, due to its association with low level of personal control. So, the person is flooded with a sort of inert discomfort. This pattern has, however, a unique value component: an emphasis on security and tradition.¹¹ This pattern has components that sometimes enter into the philosopher’s condemnation of pity.

Florian et al. remark that a person’s value system and beliefs about control partially determine which pattern is more prominent in their pity experiences, and that *gender and religiosity* are also contributors. In another study, women and religious people scored higher than men in both passive identification and compassionate caring, with the two factors being independent of each other (15).

These data can be interpreted in different ways. One option is to suggest reserving the term “pity” only for the false superiority pattern. However, if this analysis is correct, then a multifactor characterisation better explains the complex ways in which people experience pity. In another instance, a cross-cultural study by Cuddy and collaborators (2011) shows that in East-Asian collectivist cultures (such as Japan, Hong Kong, and South Korea), non-disabled subjects perceive a smaller gap between themselves and disabled people, and feel *less* pity (which the researchers conceptualise as a condescending emotion) than non-disabled subjects in individualistic cultures such as the United States. So it could be the case that a more empirically- and culturally-responsive option is for philosophers to rethink their conceptions of pity (as necessarily derogatory and hierarchising), while still emphasising that the compassionate caring pattern (or, for simplicity, compassion) is the morally preferable attitude.

^{10.} The term used is “rachamim” a word that is usually translated in English as “pity,” but the first study that constituted the basis of this research also used “hemla,” which is usually translated as “compassion.” This first study showed that the two words were used interchangeably by speakers, and so the authors chose to use in subsequent studies the more common word, namely “pity.” One might cast doubt on the general validity of their results insofar as Hebrew does have significant semantic differences with English, and is just one language among many others. But so is English, and yet much evidence gathered from pools of English-speaking subjects (in WEIRD communities such as US universities) is often taken to be indicative of emotional experience that generalises to other Western contexts. More importantly, *the inventories developed by these researchers was shown to be significantly associated with other theoretically-relevant psychological constructs*, such as attachment styles and attitude toward prosocial behaviour, thus additionally validating the scales.

^{11.} This may be the kind of pity that Sartre identifies in his critique of the pity felt towards Jews in WWII, which Stramondo refers to in his paper and which he instead interprets along the lines of “passive superiority,” which seems to be more morally problematic insofar as it is more derogatory and selfish.

3.2 Buddhist Approaches to Pity and Compassion

Traditional Buddhism is, like most other ancient religions across the world, ableist in many ways. “Buddhist texts mention disability as one of several impediments to progressing on the path to liberation” (Harris 2016, 37). Disabilities are thought to be caused by negative karmic merit (*kamma*), i.e., by having committed bad actions in a present or past life (Naemiratch and Manderson 2009; Harris 2016; Kumari 2019).¹²

Compassion (*karuna*) is one of the four *brahmavihāras*, the central virtuous affective experiences in Buddhist ethics, together with love (*mettā*), sometimes translated as loving-kindness, sympathetic joy (*mudita*), and equanimity (*upekkha*). The *brahmavihāras* are also referred to as the four boundless or immeasurable qualities, because they can be extended to all sentient beings and felt in a “boundless,” that is, increasingly deep and sincere, way (Eppert 2020; McRae 2018).

Compassion is the affective and cognitive response to suffering, and is importantly different from grief or sorrow, which is its “near-enemy” (*contra* Boleyn-Fitzgerald’s (2003) claim that pity is compassion’s near-enemy). The Four Boundless Qualities are mutually supportive. Importantly for our discussion, compassion cannot be achieved without equanimity, a neutral attitude towards all sentient beings, disconnected from pleasure or aversion towards them. McRae defines equanimity as freedom from vicious habits of the mind, a state positively characterised by feelings of tranquillity and spaciousness which allow one to engage in virtuous ways with oneself and others (2017). True compassion isn’t biased, and thus is arguably free from a mistaken understanding of disability as inherently negative or tragic. True compassion, within this tradition, is neither patronising nor belittling, and it’s compatible with fighting against injustice and discrimination.¹³

Pity, in its contemporary philosophical connotation, isn’t discussed in ancient Buddhist texts. A study by Naemiratch and Manderson (2009) of a Thai rural community analyses the use of the word *songsarn*, which denotes feelings of sympathy towards someone who has experienced a misfortune or disadvantage, but in a detached way—not a “feeling with”—and is thus interpreted by the researchers as closer to Western pity. *Songsarn* played a central role in responses to disability. Importantly, *all* non-disabled people interviewed by the authors expressed feeling it toward disabled people, but it was received by disabled people in different ways, depending on their own experience of disability.

Those who were born with disabilities or acquired them early in life didn’t think of themselves as being disabled (given the negative connotation of disability in that context), but accepted being the object of *songsarn* for pragmatic reasons: it motivated others to be inclusive and provide accommodations and opportunities in terms of education and employment.

Those who had lost physical function and mobility later in life, and felt “incomplete” because of it, had a more varied response to *songsarn*. Some accepted it as instantiations of loving-kindness (*metta*) and compassion (*karuna*), while others felt looked down upon. Elderly people, who conceived of physical disability as an

¹². The same belief is also held in Hinduism (Gupta 2011; Kumari 2019). Many monotheistic religions traditionally see physical disability as an expression of divine punishment (see Al-Aoufi et al. 2012 on Islam). For a historical review of representative Christian views on disability, see Timpe 2020, where he writes: “Even though it’s not a central theme, many of the Christian Scriptures contain a close connection between disability, on the one hand, and sin, impurity, or disobedience on the other” (208). See also Reynolds 2022 on suffering as a form of divine punishment.

¹³. We don’t have the space to do justice to even just Emily McRae’s rich interpretive work on the boundless qualities (2013, 2017, 2018, 2019), let alone the Buddhist tradition as a whole. McRae also discusses the role of equanimity in remedying ignorance (2019) and defends a Buddhist-feminist approach to the elimination of bias (2013).

inevitable life stage, accepted *songsarn* as an apt emotional response young people should feel toward the elderly, motivating filial piety.

Finally, there was a third group, which was the most negatively affected by disability. These subjects were mostly men and had become severely physically disabled due to injuries. They all spoke angrily and were the most likely to cry, appear depressed, and even suicidal in some cases. They felt stripped of their dignity and personhood, and seemed not only influenced by shared Thai notions of incompleteness and bad *kamma* but also by *normative expectations of masculinity*. They felt like a burden to their relatives (some of them going as far as to voluntarily divorce their wives and go away from the home), ashamed they couldn't be family providers anymore.

While the distinction between *songsarn* and *karuna* may seem to mirror the one between pity and compassion, the similarity is only partial insofar as in Buddhism disability is perceived as part of the *suffering inherent to all life*, despite being understood to be a result of bad *kamma*. Furthermore, in this Thai rural context we find a striking similarity to the patterns found in the urban Israeli context examined by Florian et al.: men, more frequently than women, tend to interpret expressions of sympathy as necessarily patronising. (That said, *songsarn* is decidedly more morally problematic than *karuna*, insofar as it lacks equanimity and relies on the perception of disabled people as suffering *in virtue of their disability*, seen as bad-difference and thus feared.)

In general, the concern with *equality and autonomy* that characterises much post-Nietzschean modern philosophy is absent in Buddhist philosophy. To reiterate, Buddhism is infused with an awareness of shared suffering and the vulnerability of all beings. In Stephen Harris's words: "Disability studies can benefit from the careful analysis of impermanence, fragility and suffering developed in Buddhist texts, which suggests all humans lie somewhere in a spectrum of dependence and vulnerability that is often erroneously attributed to disabled persons alone" (2016, 45). Seen within this framework, neither compassion nor pity need be patronising, hierarchical, or incompatible with fighting against injustice or addressing avoidable suffering and discrimination.

3.3 Feminist Approaches to Pity and Compassion

Finally, let's return to contemporary Western philosophy, but with a different flavour. Again, we contend that the seeming consensus that pity *necessarily* involves condescension has been unduly influenced by the Nietzschean critique of Judeo-Christian morality as "slave morality" in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, and the related condemnation of pity in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (2014; 2019). But Nietzsche's condemnation may reflect more his own values than an essentially contemptuous or degrading nature of pity itself, and, as we're about to further argue, it may also reflect a gendered experience of pity and a *masculinist* approach to ethics and relationships. Within this approach, pity is perceived as emasculating, as feminising, and then, as a consequence, as downgrading and disrespectful. Care ethics, and in general feminist perspectives, suggest an alternative understanding.

Eamonn Callan (1988) acknowledges that pity in *typical* cases involves a perception of the pitied as helpless, as lacking control over their circumstances. However, he also suggests that our greatest misgivings stem from a particular variety of pity, namely *contemptuous* pity, involving disrespect for the other. Furthermore, he argues that respecting the personhood of others renders us "necessarily susceptible to feelings of pity when another is overwhelmed by misfortune, despite the fact that we would be disinclined to dwell on that emotion and ready to disguise its presence" (7). He draws from ethics of care to highlight that "the pitiless heart reveals a

pervasive and not just an isolated failure in the moral life. We obviously expect no pity from those who have pitiless hearts but we should also expect, with as much assurance, no mercy or justice or kindness because we know that they do not value us as persons” (10–11). In other words, while pity can often go wrong, it also expresses our care for people.

Among philosophers of disability, Eva Kittay has vindicated the importance of feminine-coded approaches to morality. She writes: “Love, empathetic concern, commitment, loyalty, compassion, and other attachments and emotions are important motivators to act on behalf of another” (2019, 174), and pushes back against Nietzsche-inspired critiques that care ethics is akin to slave morality (181–82). While she doesn’t reevaluate pity, she rejects the idea that autonomy and equality are preconditions of legitimate moral relations and actions.

The prominent feminist scholar and activist bell hooks espoused a Buddhist (and Christian) approach to oppression (Medine 2022; Nittle 2023). She was much less sanguine than feminists who preceded her (such as Audre Lorde and Marilyn Frye) about the productiveness of anger, and instead championed *love* as a remedy to social problems (hooks 2000), and not just love towards oneself and members of one’s communities as Lorde (1984) did.¹⁴ As recounted by Nadra Nittle (2023), hooks was inspired by Buddhist scholar and activist Thích Nhất Hạnh to “compost” her anger and transform it into the useful energy of compassion.¹⁵

Darla Schumm (2010) takes inspiration from both the main tenets of Buddhism and from central notions in ethics of care to advocate for a “feminist disability ethics of compassion” (133) which aims to be political and transformative:

A feminist disability ethics of compassion also demands that we work to change the social and cultural structures and institutions that historically have subjugated persons with disabilities. A feminist disability ethics of compassion also insists on a rigorous refusal of a charity-based system of care, which reinscribes structures of domination and oppression and which does not work toward true social change and inclusion and justice for all. (136)

Schumm’s approach may be the closest to ours. However, there are elements in Schumm’s discussion that risk reinforcing the idea that disability necessarily involves suffering, such as when she writes of “an understanding that we are all interconnected and that the suffering and healing of your flesh is the suffering and healing of my flesh” (135). Locating the source of suffering in the “flesh” seemingly locates the harm of disability primarily in the body (or mind) of disabled people rather than in social oppression.¹⁶ We therefore need to be very careful not only in how we define pity and compassion, but also with the ways in which we let ourselves feel them. To this implementation we turn now.

¹⁴ However, Rima Vesely-Flad (2022) identifies elements of Theravada Buddhism in Audre Lorde’s writings. More generally, Vesely-Flad argues that Buddhism is a tool for liberation against racist oppression and highlights the continuity and crosspollination between Black Buddhism and the Black Radical tradition. While the fact that prominent Black philosophers, such as Martin Luther King Jr. and bell hooks, were influenced by Buddhism is well-known, Vesely-Flad argues that even the writings of authors who did not explicitly identify as Buddhist, such as Audre Lorde and James Baldwin, “illuminate core dharma teachings” (216). In particular, Lorde “demonstrates the synthesis between Buddhism and Black Feminism and her relevance for contemporary dharma teachers and practitioners” (216).

¹⁵ We thank Megan Smithling for supporting our research on this topic.

¹⁶ We thank Joseph Stramondo for highlighting this risk to us.

4. Limited Fittingness and Occasional Moral Permissibility of Pity and Compassion

Imagine the following scenarios:

The Unlucky Disabled Activist

Two disabled people with fluctuating impairments plan to attend a huge march on Washington for disability rights. On the morning of the march, one of them has a flare-up and cannot go. The other person gets to go, and is thus better off and feels quite relieved about that. They pity the person who can't go, even though there is no condescension or denigration involved. After all, the same could have happened to them.¹⁷

Pity Among Sisters

Jamila is an academic, while her sister Saba is a nurse. Jamila sometimes calls her sister to complain about the difficulties of writing a paper, explicitly asking: "Give me some pity!" She wants Saba to say: "Oh poor you!" even though Saba doesn't really understand or "feel with" Jamila, because Saba doesn't have any experience with paper writing. Jamila also reciprocates the favour when needed. The sisters "give each other pity" but their relationship is equal and respectful.¹⁸

In these scenarios, we disentangled two elements that are often conflated, namely the pitier's perception of being in an objectively more favourable situation than the pitied and the normative implication that the pitied is socially or morally inferior. In both cases, we can identify an emotion that isn't quite like compassion, in that the agent is aware of their better fortune in that moment and thus aren't "feeling with" but rather "feeling for" the other. In both cases, it's a matter of bad luck, not of injustice, that the other person is suffering. And, in both cases, there's no disrespect or belittlement.¹⁹ This is pity among equals—equality not in fortune, but in dignity.²⁰

Nonetheless, we have acknowledged that pity is frequently condescending and socially harmful, and that ableist pity is widespread. Furthermore, compassion can also be inappropriately directed at disabled people just in virtue of their disability due to ableist prejudice and ignorance. Therefore, without critical reflection on the distinction between circumstances and disability in-itself, deeming compassion to be a morally permissible and fitting response to some cases of disability still risks supporting the general notion that disability is inherently bad and tragic. This might in turn reinforce the notion that disabled people are inferior to non-disabled people in some ways. *A fortiori*, the same holds for pity.

Therefore, anyone who finds themselves feeling compassion or pity arise in response to disability or a disabled person shouldn't indulge in their feelings but should instead examine them attentively, starting with a critical look at one's possible implicit bias and then moving to evaluate the sources of *perceived* suffering in each situation: is the perception accurate? And, if there is suffering, where does it stem from?

¹⁷. We owe this example to Sara Goering and Erica Bigelow.

¹⁸. We owe this example to Kathryn Norlock.

¹⁹. One might argue that what we see here is "solidarity." But solidarity is better characterised as a pattern of feeling and action—it's not an emotion itself. We suggest that pity is an emotional component of the kind of solidarity we see expressed here. We thank a reviewer for prompting us to consider this objection.

²⁰. Indirect evidence for the fact that pity doesn't necessarily involve the concept of moral superiority or condescension comes from the experience of self-pity: when I throw myself a "pity party" I do not feel inferior to myself in any moral sense.

Surely nobody denies that some disabilities can bring much suffering; that some disabled people have much lower quality of lives than other non-disabled people; and even that some caretakers of disabled people suffer greatly because of the condition of their loved ones (Hiller 2023). All of that seems to deserve compassion and, at times, even pity.

In the case of disabilities that are associated with a very short life span or with chronic and intense pain, the suffering may be intrinsic to the nature of the disability itself, and, if one is sufficiently informed about such conditions, one can reliably infer the existence of this type of suffering. Thus, compassion is likely to be fitting in the sort of case captured by what Reynolds (forthcoming) has termed the *hard problem of disability*: conditions that cause early mortality, severe chronic pain or depression, and other disabilities in that vein are difficult to reconcile with a mere-difference view of disability. Ableism isn't the problem here, and mitigating one's emotional response with an awareness of the effects of ableism will not render the circumstances of the person facing them any better. In these cases, not only is compassion appropriate, but, in fact, *not* feeling compassion may constitute a moral shortcoming. Even pity, here, might be fitting: the fact of the undesirability of, for example, a life cut tragically short by a genetic disability *does* create a stratification between the pitier and the pitied. It's a matter of fact, without entailing any lack of respect or downgrading gaze in the moral sense.

Extreme vulnerability may be another family of cases where compassion and pity may be fitting. Severely disabled children lacking the material or caregiving resources to meet their basic needs represent a case of this sort. Kindness, care, and support are warranted when faced with a case where the individual cannot, for whatever reasons, access the care they need due to a particular type of vulnerability, such as the vulnerability that arises in young children, or with those with certain, more significant, intellectual impairments that render them particularly dependent on others.

Even in these cases, however, the emotional response of the non-disabled person must be always mediated by self-reflection and by knowledge of whether this is, in fact, a case where the suffering is intrinsic to the disability, and not an effect that might be improved by (for example) better social supports for persons with that disability type, and their caregivers.

Furthermore, these emotional responses ought to be accompanied by the altruistic motive of improving the material and emotional circumstances of a person who cannot improve those things themselves—the kind of altruism Martin Luther King invites us to be moved by in his speech “On Being a Good Neighbor” (2017).

Within this approach, there's still a difference between pity and compassion. Even pity among equals risks *devolving* into its problematic forms, and, as Stramondo powerfully argued, this is more likely when pity occurs within the context of power relations such as those between a non-disabled person and a disabled person. Therefore, we suggest pity could play a special role, as a *transitory* and *transitional* emotion, one that prepares us to feel the right type of compassion (Kristjánsson 2014, 2018). For instance, when B started with feeling pity towards her new friend and her child, yet suppressed it and asked questions about the child's personality and interests, we can imagine that she became more acquainted with them, and more capable of seeing the similarities between their parenting situations, thus becoming able to *feel with* and not merely *feel for*.

Nevertheless, her pity may well have remained fitting due to the external features combined with the child's disability, for instance the immense practical difficulties faced by her new friend's family, and which she herself did not face and was unlikely to ever face (although of course not at all impossible, given that anyone can become disabled).

Thus, we conclude that pity can be fitting only when it responds to an actual systemic disadvantage incurred by some disabled people (but not when it responds to an alleged inherent badness of disability *per se*), and can be temporarily morally permissible, provided that it's soon replaced by a compassionate, sympathetic response that is aware of the pitfalls of implicit ableism, committed to bringing about justice and equality for all, and imbued with a perception of our interconnectedness and of the suffering and vulnerability of all beings.^{21,22}

References

- Al-Aoufi, H., N. Al-Zyoud, and N. Shahminan. 2012. "Islam and the Cultural Conceptualisation of Disability." *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth* 17 (4): 205–19.
- Albrecht, G. L. and P. J. Devlieger. 1999. "The Disability Paradox: High Quality of Life Against All Odds." *Social Science and Medicine* 48 (8): 977–88.
- Aristotle. 2007. *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*. 2nd ed. Translated by G. A. Kennedy. Oxford University Press.
- Barnes, E. 2014. "Valuing Disability, Causing Disability." *Ethics* 125 (1): 88–113.
- . 2016. *The Minority Body*. Oxford University Press.
- . 2020. "Replies to Commentaries." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 100 (1): 232–43.
- Becker, L. 2020. "Habilitative Health and Disability." In *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Disability*, edited by A. Cureton and D. Wasserman, 63–81. Oxford University Press.
- Begon, J. 2020. "Disability, Rationality, and Justice: Disambiguating Adaptive Preferences." In *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Disability*, edited by A. Cureton and D. Wasserman, 343–62. Oxford University Press.
- Boleyn-Fitzgerald, P. 2003. "Care and the Problem of Pity." *Bioethics* 17 (1): 1–20.
- Breen, J. S., V. J. Shiffman, and S. J. Forwell. 2025. "Disability, Pity, and the Workplace." *Journal of Occupational Rehabilitation* 35: 876–87.
- Callan, E. 1988. "The Moral Status of Pity." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 18 (1): 1–12.
- Campbell, S. M. and J. A. Stramondo. 2017. "The Complicated Relationship of Disability and Well-Being." *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 27 (2): 151–84.

^{21.} One might be concerned that even transitional, unexpressed pity might still be perceived by the target of the emotion, and thus reinforce perceived power dynamics and be harmful. We concede this is a risk, but we contend that it can be mitigated by a partial revision of contemporary Western attitudes towards compassion and pity. This might sound like a lofty idea, but we are witnessing a surge of public-facing philosophy of emotion that seeks to re-evaluate and reconceptualise emotions. Martha Nussbaum has been engaged in this work for decades, but many more philosophers have joined her. Myisha Cherry's (2021) defence of the societal benefits of anger and rage, for instance, has reached large swaths of the public; Samir Chopra invites us to embrace anxiety in a deeply moving philosophical memoir (2024), while Krista Thomason defends all "negative" emotions in a book provocatively titled *Dancing With The Devil* (2024). Many other philosophers have popularised their revisionary approaches to emotions in essays available online or in podcasts (e.g. Elpidorou 2015; Protasi 2022; Chopra 2018; Thomason 2023). So, we are optimistic about the power of philosophy in reshaping cultural norms and the way everyday people speak and think about emotions, and we hope that this article may contribute to this project, by offering a more nuanced approach to pity and compassion.

^{22.} There are many people to thank for helpful feedback on different versions of this paper, including: Sean Aas, Alfred Archer, Erica Bigelow, Sara Goering, Eva Feder Kittay, Charlie Kurth, Ditte Marie Munch-Jurisc, Kathryn Norlock, Astrid Oredsson, Joel Michael Reynolds, Tom Roberts, Joseph Stramondo, Fredrik Westerlund, Jessica Imanaka, Stephen Campbell, audience members of the European Philosophical Society for the Study of Emotions meeting in 2022 and of the American Philosophical Association Pacific Division Meeting in 2024, and several anonymous reviewers. We apologise for any inadvertent omissions.

- Campbell, S. M., S. Nyholm, and J. K. Walter. 2021. "Disability and the Goods of Life." *The Journal of Medicine and Philosophy: A Forum for Bioethics and Philosophy of Medicine* 46 (6): 704–28.
- Carlson, L. 2009. *The Faces of Intellectual Disability: Philosophical Reflections*. Indiana University Press.
- Carr, B. 1999. "Pity and Compassion as Social Virtues." *Philosophy: The Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy* 74: 411–29.
- Caouette, J. and C. Price, eds. 2018. *The Moral Psychology of Compassion*. Routledge.
- Cartwright, D. E. 1984. "Kant, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche on the Morality of Pity." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 45 (1): 83–98.
- Cherry, M. 2021. *The Case for Rage: Why Anger Is Essential to Anti-Racist Struggle*. Oxford University Press.
- Chopra, S. 2018. "The Usefulness of Dread." *Aeon*, 21 February, 2018.
<https://aeon.co/essays/dread-accompanies-me-through-life-but-it-is-not-without-consolation>.
- . 2024. *Anxiety: A Philosophical Guide*. Princeton University Press.
- Cikara, M. and S. T. Fiske. 2012. "Stereotypes and Schadenfreude: Affective and Physiological Markers of Pleasure at Outgroup Misfortunes." *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 3 (1): 63–71.
- Crisp, R. 2008. "Compassion and Beyond." *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 11: 233–46.
- Cuddy, A. J. C., S. T. Fiske, V. S. Y. Kwan, et al. 2009. "Stereotype Content Model Across Cultures: Towards Universal Similarities and Some Differences." *British Journal of Social Psychology* 48 (1): 1–33.
- Cuddy, A. J. C., P. Glick, and A. Beninger. 2011. "The Dynamics of Warmth and Competence Judgments, and Their Outcomes in Organizations." *Research in Organizational Behavior* 31: 73–98.
- Cureton, A. 2016. "Offensive Beneficence." *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 2 (1): 74–90.
- . 2020. "The Limiting Role of Respect." In *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Disability*, edited by A. Cureton and D. Wasserman, 380–98. Oxford University Press.
- Darwall, S. 1998. "Empathy, Sympathy, Care." *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 89 (2/3): 261–82.
- . 2018. "Contempt as an Other-Characterizing, 'Hierarchizing' Attitude." In *The Moral Psychology of Contempt*, edited by M. Mason, 193–215. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Dijker, A. J., G. Kok, and W. Koomen. 1996. "Emotional Reactions to People with AIDS." *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 26 (8): 731–48.
- Duello, T. M., S. Rivedal, C. Wickland, and A. Weller. 2021. "Race and Genetics Versus 'Race' in Genetics: A Systematic Review of the Use of African Ancestry in Genetic Studies." *Evolution, Medicine, and Public Health* 9 (1): 232–45.
- Dupré, J. 2012. "What Genes Are, and Why There Are No 'Genes for Race'." In *Processes of Life: Essays in the Philosophy of Biology*, edited by J. Dupré, 261–74. Oxford University Press.
- Ekstrom, L. W. 2012. "Liars, Medicine, and Compassion." *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 37 (2): 159–80.
- Elpidorou, A. 2015. "The Quiet Alarm." *Aeon*, 30 July, 2015. <https://aeon.co/essays/life-without-boredom-would-be-a-nightmare>.
- Eppert, C. 2010. "Heartmind Literacy: Compassionate Imagining & the Four Brahmavihāras." *Paideusis* 19 (1): 17–28.
- Evans, J. S. B. 2003. "In Two Minds: Dual-Process Accounts of Reasoning." *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 7 (10): 454–59.
- Fiske, S. T. 2011. *Envy Up, Scorn Down: How Status Divides Us*. Russell Sage Foundation.
- Fiske, S. T., A. J. C. Cuddy, and P. Glick. 2007. "Universal Dimensions of Social Cognition: Warmth and Competence." *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 11 (2): 77–83.
- Flanagan, O. 2016. *The Geography of Morals: Varieties of Moral Possibility*. Oxford University Press.
- . 2021. *How to Do Things with Emotions: The Morality of Anger and Shame Across Cultures*. Princeton University Press.
- Florian, V., M. Mikulincer, and G. Hirschberger. 1999. "The Anatomy of a Problematic Emotion—The Conceptualization and Measurement of the Experience of Pity." *Imagination, Cognition and Personality* 19 (1): 3–25.
- Garland-Thomson, R. 2012. "The Case for Conserving Disability." *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry* 9 (3): 339–55.
- Gupta, V. B. 2011. "How Hindus Cope with Disability." *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health* 15 (1): 72–78.
- Harris, S. E. 2016. "Buddhism and Disability." In *Disability and World Religion: An Introduction*, edited by D. Y. Schumm and M. Stoltzfus, 25–45. Baylor University Press.

- Henrich, J., S. J. Heine, and A. Norenzayan. 2010. "The Weirdest People in the World?" *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 33 (2–3): 61–83.
- Hiller, A. 2023. "How Does Disability Affect Wellbeing? A Literature Review and Philosophical Analysis." *Journal of Philosophy of Disability* 3: 7–46.
- Holroyd, J., R. Scaife, and T. Stafford. 2017. "Responsibility for Implicit Bias." *Philosophy Compass* 12 (3): e12410.
- hooks, b. 2000. *All About Love: New Visions*. William Morrow.
- Kahneman, D. 2003. "A Perspective on Judgment and Choice: Mapping Bounded Rationality." *American Psychologist* 58 (9): 697.
- Kimball, R. H. 2004. "A Plea for Pity." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 37 (4): 301–16.
- King, M. L. 2017. *A Gift of Love*. Penguin Classics.
- Kittay, E. F. 1999. *Love's Labor*. Routledge.
- . 2019. *Learning From My Daughter: The Value and Care of Disabled Minds*. Oxford University Press.
- Knobe, J. and S. Nichols. 2017. "Experimental Philosophy." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2017 ed., edited by E. N. Zalta. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/experimental-philosophy/>.
- Kristjánsson, K. 2014. "Pity: A Mitigated Defence." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 44 (3–4): 343–64.
- . 2018. *Virtuous Emotions*. Oxford University Press.
- Kumari, N. 2019. "Karmic Philosophy and the Model of Disability in Ancient India." *Shanlax International Journal of Arts Science and Humanities* 7 (1): 39–43.
- Lala, K. N. and M. W. Feldman. 2024. "Genes, Culture, and Scientific Racism." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 121 (48): e2322874121.
- Lim, C.-M. 2018. "Disabilities Are Also Legitimately Medically Interesting Constraints on Legitimate Interests." *Mind* 127 (508): 977–1002.
- Lindemann, H. 2001. *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair*. Cornell University Press.
- . 2004. "Damaged Bodies, Damaged Identities." *Philosophy in the Contemporary World* 11 (1): 7–11.
- Lorde, A. 1984. "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power." In *Sister Outsider*, edited by A. Lorde, 53–59. The Crossing Press.
- Maibom, H. 2022. *The Space Between. How Empathy Really Works*. Oxford University Press.
- McRae, E. 2013. "Equanimity and Intimacy: A Buddhist-Feminist Approach to the Elimination of Bias." *Sophia* 52: 447–62.
- . 2017. "Equanimity in Relationship: Responding to Moral Ugliness." In *A Mirror Is for Reflection: Understanding Buddhist Ethics*, edited by J. H. David and O. Flanagan, 336–52. Oxford University Press.
- . 2018. "The Psychology of Moral Judgment and Perception in Indo-Tibetan Buddhist Ethics." In *The Oxford Handbook of Buddhist Ethics*, edited by D. Cozort and J. M. Shields, 335–58.
- . 2019. "Feeling Ignorant: A Phenomenology of Ignorance." *Journal of Buddhist Philosophy* (5): 26–43.
- Medine, C. M. J. 2022. "bell hooks, Black Feminist Thought, and Black Buddhism: A Tribute." *Journal of World Philosophies* 7 (1): 187–96.
- Meyer, H. D. 2010. "Framing Disability: Comparing Individualist and Collectivist Societies." *Comparative Sociology* 9 (2): 165–81.
- Naemiratch, B. and L. Manderson. 2009. "Pity and Pragmatism: Understandings of Disability in Northeast Thailand." *Disability & Society* 24 (4): 475–88.
- Nittle, N. 2023. *bell hooks' Spiritual Vision: Buddhist, Christian, and Feminist*. Fortress Press.
- Nietzsche, F. 2014. *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Penguin Classics.
- . 2019. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Penguin Random House.
- Nussbaum, M. 1996. "Compassion: The Basic Social Emotion." *Social Philosophy and Policy* 13 (1): 27–58.
- Nussbaum, M. C. 2003. *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*. Cambridge University Press.
- . 2013. *Political Emotions*. Harvard University Press.
- Oliver, M. 1983. *Social Work with Disabled People*. Red Globe Press.
- . 2004. "The Social Model in Action: If I Had a Hammer." In *Implementing the Social Model of Disability: Theory and Research*, edited by C. Barnes and G. Mercer, 18–31. The Disability Press.

- Peabody Smith, A. 2022. "How Should (and Shouldn't) We Think About Profound Intellectual Disability?" *The Journal of Philosophy of Disability* 2, 1–25.
- Peebles, I. S. 2025. "To Race or Not to Race: A Normative Debate in the Philosophy of Race." *Philosophers' Imprint* 25 (36).
- Protasi, S. 2021. *The Philosophy of Envy*. Cambridge University Press.
- . 2022. "Beyond Envy's Dark Side: And How It Can Lead to Self-Actualization." *IAI News*, 21 February, 2022. <https://iai.tv/articles/beyond-envys-dark-side-auid-2056>.
- Reynolds, J. M. 2022. *The Life Worth Living: Disability, Pain, and Morality*. University of Minnesota Press.
- . Forthcoming. *The Meaning of Disability*. Oxford University Press.
- Schumm, D. Y. 2010. "Reimagining Disability." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 26 (2): 132–37.
- Shapiro, J. 1994. *No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement*. Times Books.
- Sherman, N. 1999. "Taking Responsibility for Our Emotions." *Social Philosophy and Policy* 16 (2): 294–323.
- Silvers, A. 1999. "Formal Justice." In *Disability, Difference, Discrimination*, edited by A. Silvers, D. Wasserman, and M. Mahowald Lanham, 13–145. Rowman & Littlefield.
- . 2003. "On the Possibility and Desirability of Constructing a Neutral Conception of Disability." *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics* 24 (6): 471–87.
- Sinclair, S., J. M. Norris, S. J. McConnell, et al. 2016. "Compassion: A Scoping Review of the Healthcare Literature." *BMC Palliative Care* 15: 6.
- Smith, A. 1976. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Edited by D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie. Oxford University Press.
- Snow, N. E. 1991. "Compassion." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 28 (3): 195–205.
- Stocker, S. 2002. "Facing Disability with Resources from Aristotle and Nietzsche." *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy: A European Journal* 5: 137–46.
- Stramondo, J. 2010. "How an Ideology of Pity is a Social Harm to People with Disabilities." *Social Philosophy Today* 26: 121–34.
- Thomason, K. K. 2024. *Dancing with the Devil: Why Bad Feelings Make Life Good*. Oxford University Press.
- Thompson, K. 2023. "We Need Negative Emotions for a Good Life." *The Institute of Art and Ideas*, 4 December, 2023. <https://iai.tv/articles/the-emotion-double-standard-kirsty-thomason-auid-2686>.
- Timpe, K. 2020. "Disability and Uniting Ourselves to God." In *Voices from the Edge: Centring Marginalized Perspectives in Analytic Theology*, edited by M. Panchuk and M. Rea, 206–32. Oxford University Press.
- . 2022. "Denying a Unified Concept of Disability." *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 47 (5): 583–96.
- Tremain, S., ed. 2005. *Foucault and the Government of Disability*. University of Michigan Press.
- Van Norden, B. W. 2017. *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto*. Columbia University Press.
- Vesely-Flad, R. 2022. *Black Buddhists and the Black Radical Tradition: The Practice of Stillness in the Movement for Liberation*. New York University Press.
- Wasserman, D. and S. Aas. 2023. "Disability: Definitions and Models." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Fall 2023 ed., edited by E. N. Zalta and U. Nodelman. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entries/disability/>.
- Williams, G. 1996. "Representing Disability: Some Questions of Phenomenology and Politics." In *Exploring the Divide*, edited by C. Barnes and G. Mercer, 194–212. The Disability Press.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.