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Helena Béjar, or the Progressive Potential of Philanthropy and Compassion

Helena Béjar, o el potencial progresista de la filantropía y la compasión

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Abstract: From Karl Marx to current critics of ‘effective altruism’, the elements of the political left demanding systemic change toward durable equity have long doubted the efficacy of private acts of charity in achieving progressive goals, including material equality or social justice. This article challenges this position, through an investigation of Spanish thinker Helena Béjar’s philosophical analyses of volunteer philanthropy and compassion as potentially conducive to progressive aims. It finally claims that Béjar illuminates new avenues of inquiry into existing questions, though her voice has been absent from relevant debates outside her native Spain, where one of her major works, *The Bad Samaritan* [*El mal samaritano*], was a finalist for the prestigious Anagrama Essay Prize.

Keywords: Helena Béjar, progressivism, philanthropy, charity, compassion, effective altruism

Resumen: Desde Karl Marx hasta los actuales críticos del ‘altruismo efectivo’, los

elementos de la izquierda política que reivindican cambios sistémicos orientados hacia una equidad duradera han dudado desde hace mucho de la eficacia de los actos privados de caridad para lograr objetivos progresistas, como la igualdad material o la justicia social. Este artículo cuestiona esta postura, mediante una investigación de los análisis filosóficos que la pensadora española Helena Béjar ha hecho de la filantropía voluntaria y la compasión, que ella considera potencialmente útiles para alcanzar fines progresistas. Finalmente, se afirma que Béjar ilumina nuevas vías de investigación sobre preguntas abiertas, aunque su voz no suene en los relevantes debates filosóficos fuera de España, donde una de sus grandes obras, *El mal samaritano*, fue finalista al prestigioso Premio nacional de ensayo Anagrama.

Palabras clave: Helena Béjar, progresismo, filantropía, caridad, compasión, altruismo efectivo

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Introduction

From Karl Marx to current critics of ‘effective altruism,’ elements of the political left demanding systemic change toward durable equity have long doubted the efficacy of private acts of charity in achieving progressive goals, including material equality or social justice. While granting the persuasiveness of these arguments, this article argues that private charity is both compatible with and conducive to progressive political aims, and bases its findings on analysis of the work of Helena Béjar, a politically progressive Spanish thinker and proponent of voluntary philanthropy.^{1 2 3} The article begins with a brief intellectual historical survey of left-wing

¹ Helena Béjar is professor at Madrid’s *Universidad Complutense*. Her intellectual output, which dates to the 1980s, is thematically diverse, including critiques of individualism in modern, liberal societies (*La cultura del yo* [*The Me culture*] and *El ámbito íntimo* [*The Personal Sphere*]), defenses of republicanism (*El corazón de la república* [*The Heart of the Republic*]), studies of patriotism and nationalism in Spain (*La dejación de España* [*Abandoning Spain*]), and, most recently, critical assessments of contemporary positive psychology’s asocial prescription that individuals should increase their happiness not by exploring possible causal connections between social circumstances and individual well-being, but through private introspection and self-help (*Felicidad: la salvación moderna* [*Happiness: Modern Salvation*]). If clearly thematically diverse, Béjar’s academic oeuvre has consistently focused on defending the socio-political importance of human communities—as counterbalances to individualism, as foundations of republican polities, as examples of socially salutary forms of patriotism, or, as she writes in a recent article critiquing individualistic ‘self-help’ strategies for achieving happiness, to push back against “una concepción del yo reflexiva y autoconstituida” in favor of “una comprensión moral y social de la identidad personal” (2015, 1). Béjar’s ideas on the essentially relational concepts of philanthropy and compassion, which will be the focus of the present article, represent this overarching theme.

² By calling Béjar “politically progressive,” I mean something that is in an important sense uncontroversial, since Béjar herself has sought to carve out a “republican, patriotic, and progressive” conceptual space in the progressive tradition (2001e). However, to the extent that this label relies on my interpretation, I should stress that, though I do mean to assert that Béjar is typically progressive in being axiologically committed to material equality and social justice, I do not mean to reduce her complex thought to a relatively simple category. In fact, one of this article’s central claims is that Béjar is significantly different from progressive thinkers who are skeptical of the political value of philanthropy and compassion, so I imply that progressive political thinkers are a diverse group. I also do not mean to suggest that Béjar could not appropriately be included in other political traditions that uphold similar values. Indeed, Béjar ties together strands of progressivism—which, she argues, rightly understands society’s problems as having both social (not individual, moral) origins and collective solutions—and Christian social teaching, which is typically more reliable as a fixture of society because its adherents generally believe they have been called to social service by a morally authoritative, transcendent God. However, Béjar also distances herself (1) from those elements of progressivism, such as former hippies, *soixant-huitards*, and other “lefties who became yuppies,” whose solidarity is circumstantially useful in securing particular socio-political gains but tends to wane as a superficial attribute of youthful idealism and (2) from Christianity’s typical emphasis on the individual, moral dimension of social solidarity, which may undesirably ignore the essentially social practice of civic humanist republicanism, as theorized by Hans Baron or Hannah Arendt, the latter of whose relevance to Béjar’s work is analyzed below (Béjar 2001a, 22, 102-103).

³ This article follows Robert Putnam in using synonymously the terms altruism, volunteering, philanthropy, and such closely related concepts as charity. Though one could surely identify diverse motivations behind altruism or distinguish between acts typically associated with volunteering (e.g. community service) and philanthropy (e.g. financial donations), the synonymous use of these concepts seems justified, given this article’s objective, which does not rely on such nuances, but tries to present as compatible with and conducive to progressive political goals that kind of social behavior which one might generally call private acts of social assistance, or, with Putnam, “our readiness to help others” (116).

skepticism of volunteer philanthropy's progressive potential, which should serve as background for a favorable presentation of Béjar's multi-faceted retort to this position. This examination will attempt to sharpen our understanding of Béjar's ideas by comparing and contrasting them with those of numerous past and present thinkers, some of whom —such as Saint Paul, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Hannah Arendt— Béjar references explicitly, but others of whom —e.g. Sophocles, Leo Tolstoy, Guy Debord, or Susan Sontag— are, it is argued, implicitly relevant in Béjar's work. Indeed, beyond marshaling her ideas in the service of a progressive argument for philanthropy and compassion, this article —by proposing many, diverse points of contact and distinction between Béjar, whose work is little studied beyond Spain's borders, and such canonical intellectual figures as those just named— claims for Béjar a more important place in the history of ideas than has hitherto been acknowledged.

Background: An Intellectual Historical Survey of Competing Positions

Progressive suspicion toward private giving dates at least to Marx, whose ideal of a society that distributes resources (not contingently but essentially) “from each according to his ability” and “to each according to his needs” implies that to understand discretionary aid as contributing to justice is to get things reversed; discretionary aid is, rather, a symptom of existing injustice (1978, 531). Echoing the notion that justice is achieved through public, not private means, J.A. Hobson —whose negative assessment of European *Imperialism* (1902) would influence such later Marxist critics of Western colonial expansion as Vladimir Lenin— argued in the early-20th century that it was “more socially injurious for the millionaire to spend his surplus wealth in charity than in luxury,” because the former “substitutes the idea and the desire of individual reform for those of social reform” (185). And more recently, Oxford philosopher Neil Levy, writing explicitly “Against Philanthropy,” has argued that, because the voluntary provision of social services is essentially “subject to fluctuation” and therefore “sporadic at best,” it is preferable that “income and other taxes should generate the revenue to fund the services in question,” rather than “hav[ing] the wealthy donate to charities” (100-01); and Spanish thinkers Daniel Raventós and Julie Wark position themselves similarly *Against Charity*, because charity assumes basically unequal social

relationships, and in favor of a universal basic income to establish lasting reciprocity among equals.⁴

There are, to be sure, examples of progressive minds favoring private benevolence. The early-19th-century radical William Blake said that, to “help another man, you must do so in minute particulars,” and human rights activist Desmond Tutu encouraged us to “[d]o our little bit of good where [we] are” (in Zinsmeister; Tutu). And perhaps most famously, Peter Singer’s seminal “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” reasons not only that we should give generously to aid the destitute, but that people who refuse to do so are morally blameworthy, if their gift would not cause as much suffering to themselves or their dependents as it would relieve (239-41).

However, there remain powerful critiques of calls for voluntary giving that might divert attention from the need for structural reform. Specifically, philosophers Judith Lichtenberg (Georgetown) and Amia Srinivasan (Oxford) charge that ‘effective altruism’ —a Singer-inspired philanthropic project that urges individuals’ “taking [evidence-based] action” “to benefit others as much as possible” (MacAskill 2)— fails to support the kind of “political and structural change [that is] essential for addressing the deeper roots of poverty” (Lichtenberg); or that (despite its apparently progressive goal of reducing inequality) it is truly “a conservative movement” that (surely in effect and maybe by design) leaves “our institutions as they are” by “not [addressing] the deep sources of global misery,” as it comfortably “shields us from the full blast of [Singer’s] conclusion” by permitting the kind of cushy lifestyles that presumably can only exist in conditions of considerable class inequality (Srinivasan 5-6).⁵

⁴ In considering the socio-political efficacy of private charity, Béjar, Raventós, and Wark were preceded in the Spanish tradition by Aurelio Arteta, whose 1993 article on “Recovering Pity for Politics” argues that compassion —a term Arteta uses synonymously with pity— is politically insufficient if it “amounts only to passive sympathy in the face of another’s pain,” and should lead one, rather, “to confront the causes of pain” (123), whose remedy will be most effective if undertaken through “institutional action,” not privately (143). Beyond this typically progressive call for public intervention in matters of justice, Arteta’s most original insight may be his prescription that, since “no legal system could satisfy” all conceivable demands for compassionate responses to social problems, a limit should be placed on the extent to which political institutions can be used to address such ills. Creating an interesting problem for left-wing thought in general, Arteta prescribes that calls for compassionate social remedies should cease once what he calls Marx’s “supreme rule of distributive justice” —whereby all give according to their abilities and receive according to their needs— has been realized (143). In effect, Marx, arguably the quintessential theorist of emancipatory revolution, represents here a potential conservative limit to political demands.

⁵ For more on effective altruism, see Singer 2015; for additional critique of it, see Reich.

Béjar's Progressive Defense of Philanthropy and Compassion

In answering criticisms such as Lichtenberg's and Srinivasan's, Béjar would grant that volunteer philanthropy could hardly be more than a "band-aid solution," unsatisfactory not only because it only superficially addresses social ills, but also because it usually fails to mobilize benefactors to look beyond particular acts of assistance to more appropriately appreciate what she calls "the collective nature of social problems" (2001a, 37-38).⁶ Béjar would also largely agree with standard, left-wing, pro-public, anti-private arguments against charity, including Levy's suggestion that "[a]ll essential services ought to be provided to our fellow-citizens by government, not by philanthropic organizations" (99). Indeed, though Béjar defends volunteer philanthropy as necessary because the modern welfare state is, as she puts it, "in inevitable decline," she, like Levy, fears that states' transferring social responsibility to the private sector creates precarious conditions for the poor, by leaving them in the essentially unpredictable, if well-intentioned "hands of altruistic individuals" (16).

Béjar establishes value distinctions between three types of voluntary philanthropic activity, or what she calls "three general discourses regarding organized aid": "individualistic, Christian, and civic" (2001a, 22). The first, which she dislikes, is an individualistic expression of what Jerzy Karylowksi has called "endocentric altruism," whereby, as Béjar disapprovingly observes, "volunteering is part of a lifestyle," not expressive of one's commitment to helping (essentially external) others, or of Robert Wuthnow's ideal of "establishing lasting ties with the people served," but representing what Wuthnow called the kind of "individualism" that "centers more on the caregiver than on relationships."⁷ This kind of volunteer selfishly seeks to achieve, in Béjar's contemptuous phrasing, "the inner satisfaction that results from having provided assistance" (100), where helping others is primarily a means of self-realization. Béjar's second kind of volunteer activity is Christian charity and compassion, which she defines as an essentially non-individualistic, "shared activity" that reveals its practitioners' "community-oriented commitment," and whose relevance to her broader argument will be discussed below (22-23). Béjar's third, preferred, and appropriately "civic" type of volunteering is of course intended to help others, but also, functioning as her desired "link between the public and the private," has the more radical consequence of enabling volunteers to experience political life in a way that is unusual in our

⁶ All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

⁷ Karylowksi 1982; Béjar 2001a, 47; Wuthnow 1991, 303.

socially atomized modernity. Through civic participation, volunteers can appreciate society as being defined by (public) interdependence among (private) members and as a space where individuals can engage in what Arendt called the “action” that shapes political life.

Thus, Béjar supports volunteering not because it confronts injustice directly, but because it can transcend its initially private nature to open dynamic political fora “in which social equals can deliberate about collective projects” (2001a, 127). Béjar would therefore disagree with Levy’s framing of the debate for and against private sector philanthropy, arguing that the most relevant question is not about the provenance of Levy’s “essential services,” or, in Béjar’s words, about whether “volunteerism is or is not useful to the State” (18), but rather what is volunteering’s (potential or actual) impact on how society’s members perceive relationships with their fellows. Formulated as a pair of questions: what kinds of socio-political climates could a population’s widespread practice of volunteer philanthropy bring about? and which such climates really can be observed in modern socio-political landscapes?

Béjar holds that volunteering is politically important because it bridges the gap between private and public spheres, or “between liberal individualism [. . .] and civic participation” (2001a, 120).⁸ Béjar thus resembles Salvador Giner, a Spanish thinker who also defends volunteering against progressive skeptics by arguing that it occupies a socio-political space—which Giner straightforwardly calls “lo privado público”—located between public and private realms, where engaged, private citizens can “assume responsibility for the commons” (145).⁹ By recovering what she calls such an “ethical dimension of social activity [and] active engagement with the social collective” —wherein, as Putnam would predict, “altruism of all sorts is encouraged” and “volunteering fosters more volunteering”— Béjar believes volunteering creates conditions favorable to what Arendt called “action,” or the fact of cooperation of a plurality of citizens that, quoting Arendt, “[founds] and [preserves] political bodies.”¹⁰ Arendt contrasts action—which is the necessarily public “appearance” of human plurality that, in turn, can also manifest itself only via public interaction—to her concepts of “labor” and “work,” which, if mutually distinct, are

⁸ Since her earliest publications, Béjar has sought solutions (e.g. volunteering) to her consciously Tocquevillian preoccupation with limiting modern individuals’ alleged “worship of private life” and corresponding “separation [from] collective affairs,” and to her general concern that, in modern society, “the Classical ideal of good citizenship has disappeared in the face of a (perhaps unstoppable) advance of the *homo clausus*, whose most meaningful points of reference are found in private life and who takes little interest in the *res publica* (1990, 17).

⁹ I leave Giner’s concept of “lo privado público” untranslated because an equally concise translation —e.g. the public private— would be unclear, and because approximate definitions appear immediately before and after.

¹⁰ Béjar 2001a, 120; Putnam 120-121; Arendt 8.

similarly private behaviors in tending toward the preservation of discrete lives more than the establishment of public connections (50). Below, I discuss labor and work before examining action and its relationship to volunteering and Béjar's writings.

Hannah Arendt: A Basic Philosopher for Béjar

Labor, which Arendt calls “the most natural and least worldly of man’s activities,” is what humans are naturally compelled to do to preserve their biological existence, by “[obeying] the orders of immediate bodily needs” such as food production and consumption (100-01). Let us appreciate Arendt’s implied contempt for labor’s ‘naturalness,’ which she distinguishes from action’s positively-connoted artificiality, or creativity. Surely, Arendtian labor is essential to life, and therefore good in at least that sense. It is, however, politically irrelevant, as it involves only natural, “immediate bodily needs,” which one can satisfy on one’s own, without human companionship, or a-politically. So, when performing labor, humans are at their “least worldly,” or they are least obliged to have public contact with (naturally non-immediate) others.

Considering Béjar’s critique of the liberal individual(ist)’s presumed self-sufficiency, or, implicitly, of Locke’s proto-liberal assertion that humans naturally are in “a state of perfect freedom to order their actions, and dispose of their possessions, and persons as they think fit [. . .] without asking leave, or depending upon the will of any other man” (269), we appreciate that, for Arendt, Locke’s understanding of human beings accounts only for one of their three aspects. Locke describes humans insofar as they are self-sufficiently engaged in labor, but says nothing about Arendtian work or action, which presuppose social interdependency. No wonder Arendt argued that labor (as she conceptualized it) has taken over public life in modern liberal democracies, which are defined largely by the collective production and rapid consumption of things, and thus increasingly resemble “nature’s never-ending process” of cyclical growth, decay, death, and rebirth (152). In such systems, public priority is given to the satisfaction of basic (or natural) human necessities, the most important of which surely is mere biological survival. So, not a space of creative action, i.e., not generative of political significance through social intercourse, public life is where human laborers (or, borrowing Arendt’s term, “*animal laborans*”) limit themselves, literally, to “mak[ing] a living,” as Arendt put it with pointed irony, or to ensuring their survival, not to participating in the potentially life-expanding interpersonal exchanges whose realization demands public interaction (127).

Turning from labor to work: humans are working (as what Arendt called *homo faber*) when building and maintaining their material, “man-made world of things,” “from the simplest use object to the masterwork of art” (121). Unlike labor, work’s aim is “not primarily [. . .] to help the human life process” (151), but to build more durable things that give humans’ life-world physical “stability and solidity” and offer them “a dwelling place more permanent and more stable than themselves” (136; 152). By creating objects “more stable than themselves” (and so, logically, more stable than the cycles of their biological necessities) humans at work transcend nature’s “never-ending process” of production and consumption. Work is thus politically more valuable than labor, because it is worldlier. When working, people are in contact with the stuff of the world, while *animal laborans* is, as it were, merely in contact with herself. However, despite overcoming the natural urgency driving labor, work is still less politically relevant than action; for although action, by generating novelty through public intercourse, is intrinsically creative in political terms, work is not so creative. Since work only creates things for humans to use, it is essentially utilitarian, privileging instrumentality over creativity, and requiring, as Arendt stressed its incomplete political character, that “everything must be of some use, or must serve instrumentally to achieve something else” (154).

If humans’ work degrades the world by filling it with instrumental means to ends, action —“the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter” (7)— goes beyond humankind’s vital or practical concerns to devote itself to ends with “intrinsic and independent value,” like the essentially political “doing of great deeds and the speaking of great words” (173). In political terms, action’s goals represent the pinnacle of the human experience, not its base, which is satisfied through essentially apolitical labor. Work, therefore, can be politically valuable not by constructing a life-world fit only for the basic cycle of labor, but by making an eminently political world that is “fit for action and speech, for activities not only entirely useless for the necessities of life [i.e. useless for labor] but of an entirely different nature from the manifold activities of fabrication by which the world itself and all things in it are produced [i.e. entirely different from work]” (173-74). Arendt’s “action [. . .] is boundless” and so not limited to bodily needs or the practical concerns of material existence (201). To transcend the boundaries inherent in labor and work is to enter a space populated by others, where un-bounded social interaction is the essence of Arendtian action.

Béjar believes Arendtian action can happen in spaces devoted to volunteer altruism, or when interacting individuals shape common space with what Béjar calls, echoing Arendt, “a creative dialogue of several voices” (2001a, 127). Béjar’s words allude to two related concepts that are central to Arendtian action: natality and plurality. For Béjar, “dialogue” among people can be “creative” because all humans (by virtue of the novelty entailed by their coming into the world, i.e. by their natality) are irreducibly distinct from all others. Crucially, however, such distinctness is not the liberal idea of self-sufficient private persons who can publicly reveal their uniqueness. For liberalism, public space is one suitable context among others for self-revelation, the preferred one being the private sphere. For Arendt and Béjar, individuals’ public interaction is a necessary condition for the actualization of their distinctness.

The Miraculous Creativity of Volunteering

Volunteer activity, of which Béjar cites as examples “organized altruism” and “associative communities,” curbs liberalism’s “tendency toward privatism” by creating what Béjar calls “a stimulating communitarianism,” which exemplifies “the collective power” of political actors, and encourages a plurality of people to engage in “the exercise of deliberation about common problems” (2001b, 110). Or, in clearly republican terms, Béjar’s “stimulating communitarianism” fosters a collective sense of “republican liberty,” which Béjar, explicitly referencing Arendtian action, defines as the feeling that groups of people can “do things [. . .] in Arendtian fashion,” i.e., participate in action (2001d, 89).

In this way, volunteering is important less for its practical ability to tackle socio-political challenges than because (in the republican tradition of civic pedagogy of Aristotle, Rousseau, and Tocqueville) it can be effective as a kind of “moral education” (Béjar 2000, 203). By creating a spirit of community and enabling group action, it can teach its participants to appreciate what Arendt called the “miracle” of natality, or the newness that each person can bring into the world only through social interaction (247). Finally, if one understands, with Arendt, that the peers one encounters in public are defined by innate, mutual diversity, or, borrowing Arendt’s concept, by the plurality that follows from their unique births, then volunteer activity, by potentially making one aware of differences among humans, may compel the taking on of greater responsibility for the resolution of socio-political problems that, if not directly affecting oneself, adversely impact others. For Béjar, “philanthropic organizations” not only give participants a shared and

emotionally valuable “strong sense of belonging,” but also contribute to the “humanization of the ‘marginalized other,’” including “prisoners, immigrants, the physically handicapped” (2001c, 128). So, volunteer activity can make participants see the public realm differently; for example, by seeing it as the preferred space for addressing issues that concern its inhabitants and as being populated by individuals whose miraculous natality and natural plurality require publicity to pass from latent to actual form. Therefore, even if volunteering’s real socio-political achievements are somehow unsatisfactory, as Levy and Béjar may believe they are, that volunteering should invite a reimagining of public life should make it politically interesting for progressivism.

Cases against and for Compassion

In addition to asking whether one’s experience of acting publicly might lead to better appreciation of others’ potential as political actors, Béjar has wondered if public interchange might also sharpen one’s capacity to feel others’ pain; that is, to experience compassion, or, literally, to suffer with others. Since she has affirmed confidently that “the proximity” that people experience among others in public space “strengthens compassion” (2001a, 77), her question is whether compassion is a fruitful emotion, given progressive political aims.

In crafting a progressive defense of compassion, Béjar confronts the fact that, traditionally, the left has been as suspicious of this feeling as of private charity. Here I understand compassion (as Béjar does) in three ways, (1) as an element of Christian ethics, (2) as being entailed by the Christian virtue of charity, and (3) as a quality inhering in Rousseau’s ideal, naturally good, human being. Reservations aside, the left is straightforwardly compassionate in prioritizing the alleviation of people’s suffering over, say, such a typical conservative priority as privileging the interests of social elites —be they (ancient) Roman patricians, (medieval) nobles, or (modern) businesspeople— whose power is supposed to benefit the general welfare. But compassion has seemed too sentimental and paternalistic to the left. Regarding sentimentality, Marx’s lambasting his overly romantic, “utopian” socialist contemporaries —“Saint-Simon, Fourier, and Owen”— has been enduringly influential. In his *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Marx, together with Fredrich Engels, attacked what he labeled “Critical-Utopian Socialism and Communism” for “reject[ing] all political, and especially all revolutionary, action,” and for preferring instead their own “fantastic” plans for a better society (1967, 116). Following Marx, many on the left (e.g. Louis Althusser) have scorned what one might call fanciful or wishful thinking that lacks a practical

theory for its actualization. For Marx, the likes of Saint-Simon, Fourier, and Owen, by “standing apart from” the political fray and urging inter-class understanding to “reconcile the class antagonisms,” “form mere reactionary sects” (117). Their alleged reactionaryism is understood to follow from their compassion, as they care chiefly for the working class’s interests not because they see it as Marx’s collective agent of revolution, but because workers are “the most suffering class” (116). From the utopians’ perspective, because workers suffer most, they are most deserving of compassion in unequal modern societies, and, contra Marx, modern inequality demands class reconciliation, not revolution. Against such moralistic socialism, Marx and Engels’s anti-sentimental legacy has done much to turn the left generally against idealistic pleas for compassion, the goal being, rather, to achieve a society so egalitarian that compassion is unnecessary.

Turning to compassion’s association with paternalism, Guy Standing—a British economist and author of the eloquently titled book *Beyond the New Paternalism: Basic Security as Equality*—reasons that “the notion of compassion seems to imply a sort of privatised paternalism” (170). Like many on the left, Standing rebukes the left’s and the right’s purportedly compassionate attempts to mitigate socio-economic marginalization under capitalism that do not challenge capitalism’s structural failings (e.g., the center-left’s Third Way or center-right Compassionate Conservatism). Instead of such *ad hoc* poverty relief, Standing, who co-founded the Basic Income Earth Network, wants to ensure, as he suggests in his book’s subtitle, a fundamental equality among people through a guaranteed income that is basic and provides security in the sense that it is enough to live on.

A Nuanced Study of Christian Compassion

Béjar disputes Standing’s view, defending compassion based on an assumption about human nature and a related conclusion: if humans are defined by their “natural fragility” and their “unavoidable dependence on their fellows” (2001b, 113), they must rely on society’s recognition of human “interdependence” (2001a, 103). Though her goal is always the basically materialist one of effecting “the transformation of the structures [of society],” (rather than idealistically encouraging moral improvement), Béjar, assuming human frailty, makes a two-part defense of compassion’s relevance to progressivism, drawing on Christian ethics and Rousseau (2001b,

108).¹¹ In Christian terms, Béjar argues that compassionate acts need not be perceived, as Marxian anti-idealism is wont to do, as insufficient (because superficial or *ad hoc*) remedies to social problems, whose seriousness might demand some more radical approach. Rather, urging readers to rid themselves of “antireligious prejudice,” she writes that compassion can be “lasting” if compassionate actors assume a Christian (or any effectively similar) worldview, which, like Béjar’s preferred method of sociological analysis, is characterized by “a holistic conception of the world” that makes the object of compassion essentially dependent on social peers.^{12 13} In Béjar’s words, the object of compassion “is no longer an Other to be tolerated, but a fellow who is loved, a recipient of brotherly love” (2001b, 113). Citing scripture, Béjar quotes (as a rhetorical tool against individualism) Saint Paul’s arguably holistic enjoinder that Christians “[b]ear one another’s burdens,” lest anyone think “he is something, when he is nothing” (Gal. 6.2-3). Thus, Béjar calls attention to kinship between the apostle’s and her own non-liberal assumptions about the relational nature of human ontology.

For Béjar, this Biblical injunction and the deep identification experienced with others in “brotherly love” can mean moving away from social separateness—or from what Charles Taylor criticized as liberal “atomism,” whereby “men are self-sufficient outside of society” (200)—and toward what Béjar, referring to Zygmunt Bauman (and to Bauman’s debts to Norbert Elias), calls “human togetherness” (2007, 132). In Béjar’s own words, the lessons of Pauline ethics and the practice of mutual assistance “can give way to deep bonds that transcend distance” (2001b, 113). Though she is ever-cognizant of what she and others (e.g. Marxists) see as Christianity’s political “weakness” (i.e. that its means of moral transmission are sentimental, not structural), she nonetheless asks: if the “distance” between people is overcome, could the resulting “deep bonds” be part of “the foundation of an enduring democratic altruism?”¹⁴

In any case, despite her optimism about Christian ethics, Béjar echoes classic progressive, anti-conservative, republican attacks against it, which have existed at least since Machiavelli’s

¹¹ In the Spanish intellectual tradition, Béjar here follows Arteta (1996), whose *Apology* in favor of compassion argues that society’s general acknowledgement of the universality of human fragility would provide a “nourishing soil,” or ideal conditions for what Arteta indistinctly calls compassion or pity: “We are able to feel for each other because we are alike and imagine ourselves as such, and we are alike because we are similarly vulnerable” (40-41).

¹² See Wuthnow (2006) for a U.S.-based discussion of an observed “positive correlation between” religion and “being involved in charitable volunteering” (101) and, more broadly, for an American sociologist who, like Robert Putnam and Robert Bellah, with whom Béjar worked at the University of California, Berkeley, has considerably influenced Béjar.

¹³ Béjar 2001b, 113; Béjar 2001a, 176.

¹⁴ Béjar 2001a, 179; Béjar 2001b, 113.

Discourses on Livy and were basic to Edward Gibbon's explanation of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*: that Christianity saps public spirit. Béjar is further aware of Christianity's thoroughly conservative, anti-republican, principled deference to political authority, in whose most extreme manifestations, Béjar acknowledges, "the poor are to accept their fate according to the hierarchical medieval conception of the great chain of being" (2007, 181). Béjar tries to forge a middle path, indicating potential social benefits of Christian moral decency, which "[makes] men righteous, temperate, and peaceful," as she criticizes Christian passivity, which "weakens the force of political initiative" (2000, 101).

But Béjar does more than seek compromise between Christianity and progressivism. She also argues that, properly understood, Christianity and progressivism are both antithetical (and so important intellectual opponents) to the individualism that prevails in two (apparently different but importantly similar) groups: (1) liberal, free-market conservatives and (2) certain self-proclaimed progressives, who, by limiting their political demands to the governmental recognition of rights, are in a sense indistinguishable from liberals, and whose individualism conflicts with such traditionally progressive values as solidarity and collective action. Despite their differences, then, Christianity and progressivism could jointly strengthen the social fabric weakened by individualism, by, as Béjar urges, speaking of "duties (rather than an individualistic insistence on rights)" or of "actions motivated by moral references that transcend the ego" (2001a, 20). It is true that, in progressive or anti-conservative writings (except Rousseau's), compassion hardly appears alongside public liberty or active citizenship as a political virtue, but Béjar nevertheless reasons soundly that it does not follow that compassion and progressivism are incompatible. Indeed, by prompting social cooperation, the institutional promotion of compassion could be a Christian means to a conventionally progressive end: what Béjar referred to as "a general concern for the public welfare" (2001c, 139).

Rousseau, or Suffering with Others

Béjar's belief in the potential benefits of institutionally promoting compassion (and political virtues generally) links her to Rousseau, whose writings consider what socio-political institutions (such as structures of authority or education systems) should be like, given what humans presumably are like, or "by taking men as they are," as Rousseau famously opened his *Social Contract* (2012, 249). Defying those political theories from both the right (e.g. classical

liberalism) and the left (e.g. forms of epistemological or moral skepticism) that eschew assumptions about human nature, Béjar assumes, with Rousseau, that compassion (or, using Rousseau’s synonymous term, “pity”) is innately human. Béjar follows Rousseau, whose *Discourse on Inequality* distinguishes between “men as they have been made to be” —that is, men who are theoretically uninteresting by virtue of their having been socially conditioned— and “the primary and most elemental workings of the human soul,” which, because they inhere in humans before the impact of society’s morally corrupting effect, Rousseau’s political philosophy seeks primarily to understand (1989, 20). Hypothetically, two principles obtain in humans’ simple (i.e. natural, uncorrupted) souls: (1) a desire for self-preservation and (2) more importantly for our purposes, compassion, pity, or, to quote Rousseau, “a natural repugnance at seeing any sentient being, and especially our fellow, perish or suffer.” Given this premise, a reasonable political aim—which Rousseau and Béjar seek— will be to favor a society in which people see each other as fellows, or as being somehow related—or, in Rousseau’s French, as “semblables,” whose eventual suffering they naturally will want to mitigate.

Compassion: A Philosophical History

To achieve this aim, Béjar suggests raising public awareness of suffering’s actual urgency and hypothetical universality, effectively continuing an intellectual tradition that dates to Classical tragedians and includes Aristotle and more recent thinkers.¹⁵ According to this tradition, given that suffering really affects many and could affect anyone, it should elicit everyone’s (Rousseauian) repugnance and corresponding efforts to alleviate it. Béjar’s suggestion is bold, given the widespread, liberal assumption that individuals are, in principle, disconnected from society and not necessarily responsible to it. Contrary to an idea at the core of modern democracies—that people are equal exercisers of socially guaranteed rights to, e.g., Jefferson’s “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” or Locke’s right to property— Béjar asks if people might better appreciate their equality not in terms of their potential to pursue private enterprise, but in terms of their natural weakness. Either way, and regardless of compassion’s political importance, a society’s recognition of human weakness, or, quoting Béjar, of the fact that “the human condition [is] inseparable from

¹⁵ I am indebted to Martha Nussbaum’s article entitled “Compassion: The Basic Social Emotion,” which presents some elements of the intellectual lineage outlined in the present section.

precariousness,” is necessary if compassion is to exist in it (2001a, 71). With this assertion, Béjar reverses a key assumption of Locke, Jefferson, and the entire liberal tradition—while the U.S. Declaration of Independence presupposes the existence of citizens ready to take advantage of their rights, and while the same document contains no provision for those unable to do so, Béjar suspects that the potential inability to participate in social life is inseparable from the human condition.

When Béjar expressed her preference that we see those who suffer not as “distant,” but “metonymically as ourselves” (2001a, 151), she was both extending her assault on liberalism (according to which those ill-prepared to exercise individual rights are most appropriately understood as anomalies, special cases, or, per Béjar’s metaphor, as ‘far’ from what is supposedly normal) and giving voice to a traditional defense of compassion that can be traced at least to Sophocles’s *Philoctetes* and has continued through Tolstoy’s literary fiction and U.S. president Bill Clinton’s political thought. At the beginning of *Philoctetes*, the Chorus imagines with horror the plight of the title character, a Bronze-age Greek soldier who, years before the opening scene, having been bitten by a snake, was left writhing in pain on an island by his companions en route to Troy. It is crucial that the Chorus imagines Philoctetes’s horrific condition, rather than describing it based on observation. Without having seen him or even knowing where he is, the Chorus claims to “[pity] him for all his woes” and so implies that it suffices to imagine suffering to be moved by it (17). In emotional and psychological terms, we learn that suffering is never far away, or, as Béjar would have it, “distant.” Even if it happens somewhere physically remote, it can be felt strongly, or, as Béjar suggests, “metonymically,” as a sobering reminder of humanity’s general susceptibility to misfortune.

Indeed, Sophocles’s fifth-century-B.C.E. Chorus feels suffering remotely, and, proving the durability of the tragedian’s insight, generalized compassion was a central theme in 1993 in the first inaugural address of U.S. president Bill Clinton, who, by telling his audience that “but for fate we, the fortunate and the unfortunate, might have been each other” (in Warshaw, 370), effectively argued that Philoctetes’s painful state is universal(izable). And generalized compassion is an equally important theme in Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*: a cautionary tale against the ethical individualism of the eponymous protagonist, a small-minded judge who has spent his career uncompassionately “ruining anyone he fancied ruining” (173) only to be struck down by a painful, untimely death. Béjar implicitly laments contemporary society’s deficiency of the likes of Sophocles’s sympathetic Chorus and its excess of the kind of thoughtless individualism displayed

by Ivan Ilyich, who is oblivious to what Béjar calls “the dark side of life that our individualistic, civilized culture has ignored” (2001a, 177). As Béjar wants to cultivate a collective capacity to “put ourselves in the place of the other” and “feel his pain” (51), so Sophocles teaches that adversity exists whether one sees it or not, Tolstoy shows that failing to appreciate others’ adversity is so tragically short-sighted as to lead to death, and Clinton tempers “the very idea of America” to include both those with Jefferson’s wherewithal to pursue happiness and those who, like Philoctetes, are downwardly-mobile on Fortuna’s wheel. In each case, not to acknowledge others’ pain is to betray ignorance of the reality of human affairs—like those of Philoctetes, the hapless Russians in Ivan Ilyich’s courtroom, Clinton’s “unfortunate,” or Béjar’s “other.”

If Sophocles, Tolstoy, and Clinton compel audiences to recognize suffering’s ubiquity, Aristotle and Rousseau similarly present misfortune as a phenomenon that, properly understood, can make evident two things: the folly of an individual naively secure in his self-sufficiency, and humans’ basic equality as creatures ever susceptible to hardship. But Aristotle and Rousseau are different from the others in speaking not primarily of humans’ capacity to feel compassion for hypothetical sufferers, but of compassion, or *pitié* (Rousseau) for those perceived concretely as one’s fellows, or, recalling Rousseau, as “semblables.” Aristotle —though doubtless the most famous, and perhaps the most laudatory critic of Classical Greek theater (and of Sophocles, in particular)—wrote in his *Rhetoric* that the pain of others will arouse compassion most acutely not when it compels one to confront humanity’s general needs, but when “we are in the condition of remembering that similar misfortunes have happened to us or ours, or expecting them to happen in the future” (1984, 113-14).

Likewise, Rousseau, who told readers to “distrust” the abstractions of “cosmopolitans who search out remote duties in their books and neglect those that lie nearest” (1966, 39), insisted that pity is felt most intensely when preceded by a sense of commonness with its potential object. In *Émile*, his treatise on education, Rousseau focused on this connection, urging educators to instill in pupils, of which Emile is exemplary, the idea that sameness should be the basis of social relationships. Conversely, to quote Rousseau, where a student “sees [others] as being alien to him,” no teacher should “expect to teach [the student] to pity [them]” (291). In other words, and now I paraphrase Rousseau, kings and the rich will have no pity, respectively, for their subjects or the poor if they believe (however naively, and contra Clinton) that their lots could never be reversed. But if perceived sameness obtains, Rousseau’s “natural repugnance” toward others’ pain becomes

likely. For Rousseau, then, the teacher must show the student he is united with others by “the vicissitudes of fortune,” or the “misfortunes [that] lie beneath his feet.”

On the Political Impact of Regarding the Pain of Others

Differences notwithstanding, the cited defenses of compassion are compatible, as they share the view, central to Béjar, that public notoriety of suffering’s reality can lead a society’s members to feel compassion for their fellows. Significantly, Sophocles’s Chorus *publicizes* Philoctetes’s anguish; Aristotle’s community is humbled as it *gains knowledge* of others’ misfortunes; and Rousseau’s ideal student is taught to *see* the destitute differently (as “semblables”), and, significantly, *never to avert his eyes* from them. Like Tolstoy and Clinton, who imply the importance of public awareness of societal problems by communicating via mass media (respectively, a widely distributed novella and a televised speech), Béjar has similarly adapted ancient and early modern references to modern times. Though Béjar does not explicitly reference him, her recommendation that modern media technology be used to make suffering visible to (and thus emotionally to move) millions amounts to a penetrating reworking of Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*. If, for Debord, images distract from real, lived experience, for Béjar, they potentially have another, more positive function, unnoticed by Debord. Where Debord’s images distort one’s perception of reality, Béjar adds that they can also compel visual confrontation with (and so raise awareness of) hitherto ignored problems, like scenes of distress in places—such as nursing homes, dangerous neighborhoods, or exploitative workplaces—of which the public, as if enthralled by a spectacle, is often blissfully unaware. So, Béjar approaches this problem in a subtly different way than Luc Boltanski, whose study of the potential political impact of seeing *Distant Suffering* presupposes, unlike Béjar, that such observations really happen on a sufficiently broad scale and subsequently explores how best to effect “the transition from individual speech and concern” about what has been witnessed to a politically relevant “collective commitment” to alleviate it (xv). Rejecting Boltanski’s premise and assuming, rather, that much painful reality is insufficiently familiar to the public, Béjar urges institutions to “explicitly publicize images,” only after which it will be possible, as Boltanski wanted, to “generate crucial discussion” toward change (2001a, 176).

Thus, Béjar’s work, published in 2001, both anticipates and complements Susan Sontag’s better-known 2003 essay, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, where the author revised her reflections

On Photography from decades earlier, when she had described this medium, unconventionally, as “a powerful instrument for depersonalizing our relation with the world” (1977, 167)—“living with the photographed images of suffering,” she had maintained, “does not necessarily strengthen conscience and the ability to be compassionate. It can also corrupt them” (20).¹⁶ In 2003, Sontag recapitulated her previous argument that “we become callous” “[i]n a world [. . .] hyper-saturated with images” only to modestly cast doubt on it, stating “I’m not so sure now” if this is true (105). Sontag went on to argue that images, particularly those of “human suffering caused by war,” can have positive political effects, by being an “invitation to pay attention [. . .] to examine the rationalizations for mass suffering offered by established powers” (117), or raising important questions such as: “Who caused what the picture shows?; or, Is there some state of affairs which we have accepted up to now that ought to be challenged?”

Two years before Sontag’s critical self-assessment, which dealt mostly with photos of the horrors of international war, Béjar published complementary ideas on the social function of those pictures that revealed not distant violence, but the hidden “harshness of life” closer to home, including “the loneliness of the elderly, deaths by terminal illness, [and] the helplessness of the poor” (2001a, 177). If geographically closer than Sontag’s wars, Béjar was nonetheless calling attention to realities just as far from the average person’s mind, as they are from that of Tolstoy’s egotistical bourgeois prototype, or Béjar’s similarly self-centered, modern individual, whom she, in an eloquently inverted Biblical reference, calls *The Bad Samaritan* [*El mal samaritano*]. Like the late Sontag, and against Gilles Lipovetsky’s observation that “apathy is the response to information’s abundance” (57), Béjar suggests generalized public consciousness of “images of misfortune” need not end in indifference, but could prompt engagement that “results in one’s providing assistance” (33). Béjar explores this idea in relation to her usual themes of volunteer philanthropy (“One chooses to become a volunteer upon experiencing pain”) and Christian ethical compassion (“The discovery of suffering can be vicarious,” or have the effect of a religious authority encouraging the faithful to effect social change) (77). For Béjar, even if the early Sontag rightly said that a surfeit of tragic images can saturate sensibility, it is only in seeing misfortune that we can gain the wisdom to *foresee* it, and thus be more likely to prevent it.

¹⁶ I am grateful to Dr. Maite Zubiaurre (UCLA) for recommending that I include Sontag in this discussion.

Conclusion

When compared to Béjar's thought, the standard debate about what proportions or forms of private charity or public investment can more justly address social inequality seems to center too narrowly on the immediate impact of the provision or absence of material resources—typical advocates for voluntary action rhetorically ask: is it not preferable (from a beneficiary's perspective) that there be volunteer contributions to good causes rather than none at all?; and proponents of governmental solutions generally inquire: don't democratically-accountable, state entities allocate resources more fairly, on the whole? Béjar effectively argues that such questions offer a false choice, as she implies that (regardless of how one responds) private-sector philanthropy can generate (immediately or in the more distant future) social conditions favorable to and perhaps necessary for the maintenance of progressive polities, such as an Arendtian appreciation for radical individual uniqueness that is based on disinterested public discourse (of which charitable work can be an example); an enduring awareness (be it based in Christian ethics or Rousseau's 'pity') of humans' essential interdependence and, therefore, of the importance of frequent demonstrations of social solidarity; or some kind of emotional connection that renders unbearable what Sontag called "the pain of others." With a unique focus on determining not if voluntary benevolence *per se* is conducive to justice, but on its structural role in an ideally progressive society, Béjar's should be an indispensable, original voice in ongoing philosophical inquiry about the role of private charity in modern democratic societies.

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