

### Raízes metapsicológicas da compaixão

#### *Metapsychological roots of compassion*

#### *Raíces metapsicológicas de la compasión*

#### *Les racines métapsychologiques de la compassion*

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#### Abstract

Based on conceptual distinctions between compassion, sympathy, empathy, and pity, we propose a theoretical psychoanalytic understanding of the meanings of the ability to sympathize with the suffering of others. The reflections led us to ask: how can we understand compassion from a psychoanalytic point of view? To theoretically articulate this issue, we resort to the Freudian conceptual framework in search of historical and philosophical roots of compassion, recovering meanings, semantic domains, values, affections, and sensitivities. We undertake a journey that identifies the vicissitudes of the transformation of the psychic apparatus in dealing with the threats of the death drive. In this aspect, we include the work of compassion, defined as the possibility of sharing the suffering of others, enhancing conditions that can strengthen the stitching of narcissistic contours on more mature bases, dignifying the work of Eros, and placing narcissism at the service of life. We conclude that the psychoanalytic understanding of compassion requires an attitude of availability to welcome and listen to those facing a disruptive moment, considering feelings arising from this situation. The implications and developments for thinking about the responses of psychoanalytic clinics to contemporary sources of suffering are addressed.

**Keywords:** Psychoanalysis, compassion, empathy, narcissism, bond.

#### Resumo

*A partir de distinções conceituais entre compaixão, simpatia, empatia e piedade, propormos uma compreensão teórica psicanalítica sobre os significados contidos na capacidade de compadecer-se com o sofrimento do outro. As reflexões nos levaram a indagar: como podemos compreender a compaixão do ponto de vista psicanalítico? Para articular teoricamente essa questão, recorreremos ao arcabouço conceitual freudiano em busca do enraizamento histórico e filosófico da compaixão, recuperando sentidos, domínios semânticos, valores,*

afetos e sensibilidades. Empreendemos um percurso que identifica as vicissitudes da transformação do aparelho psíquico no lidar com as ameaças da pulsão de morte. Nessa vertente, inserimos o trabalho da compaixão, definida como possibilidade de partilhar do sofrimento do outro, potencializando condições que podem fortalecer a costura dos contornos narcísicos em bases mais amadurecidas, dignificando o trabalho de Eros e colocando o narcisismo a serviço da vida. Concluimos que a compreensão psicanalítica da compaixão requer atitude de disponibilidade para acolher e escutar aquele que enfrenta um momento disruptivo, considerando sentimentos decorrentes dessa situação. As implicações e desdobramentos para pensarmos as respostas da clínica psicanalítica face às fontes contemporâneas de sofrimento são abordadas.

**Palavras-chave:** *Psicanálise, compaixão, empatia, narcisismo, vínculo.*

### **Resumen**

*A partir de distinciones conceptuales entre compasión, simpatía y piedad, propusimos una comprensión teórica psicoanalítica sobre los significados contenidos en la capacidad de compadecerse con el sufrimiento ajeno. Las reflexiones nos llevan a indagar: ¿Cómo podemos comprender la compasión del punto de vista psicoanalítico? Para articular teóricamente esta cuestión, recurrimos al andamiaje conceptual freudiano en búsqueda del enraizamiento histórico y filosófico de la compasión, recuperando sentidos, dominios semánticos, valores, afectos y sensibilidades. Emprendimos una trayectoria que identifica las vicisitudes de la transformación del aparato psíquico al lidar con amenazas de la pulsión de muerte. En esta vertiente, inserimos el trabajo de la compasión, definida como posibilidad de compartir del sufrimiento del otro, potenciando condiciones que pueden fortalecer la costura de los contornos narcisistas en bases más maduras, dignificando el trabajo de Eros y poniendo el narcisismo a servicio de la vida. Concluimos que la comprensión psicoanalítica de la compasión requiere actitud de disponibilidad para acoger y escuchar aquel que enfrenta un momento disruptivo, considerando sentimientos resultantes de esta situación. Las implicaciones y desdoblamiento para pensar las respuestas de la clínica psicoanalítica ante las fuentes contemporáneas de sufrimiento son enfocadas.*

**Palabras-clave:** *Psicoanálisis, compasión, empatía, narcisismo, vínculo.*

### **Résumé**

*À partir des distinctions conceptuelles entre compassion, sympathie, empathie et pitié, nous proposons une compréhension théorique psychanalytique des significations contenues dans la capacité à compatir avec la souffrance des autres. Les réflexions nous ont amenés à nous demander : comment pouvons-nous comprendre la compassion d'un point de vue psychanalytique ? Pour articuler théoriquement cette question, nous recourons au cadre conceptuel freudien afin de rechercher l'enracinement historique et philosophique de la compassion, en récupérant ses significations, domaines sémantiques, valeurs, affections et sensibilités. Nous entreprenons un parcours qui identifie les vicissitudes de la transformation de l'appareil psychique face aux menaces de la pulsion de mort. Dans ce sens, nous situons le travail de compassion, défini comme la possibilité de partager la souffrance de l'autre, en améliorant les conditions susceptibles de renforcer les contours narcissiques sur des bases plus matures, dignifiant ainsi le travail d'Eros et plaçant le narcissisme au service de la vie. Nous concluons que la compréhension psychanalytique de la compassion nécessite une volonté d'accueillir et d'écouter ceux qui traversent des moments perturbateurs, tout en tenant compte des sentiments générés par ces situations. Les implications et les répercussions pour réfléchir aux réponses de la clinique psychanalytique face aux sources contemporaines de souffrance sont abordées.*

**Mots-clés:** *Psychanalyse, compassion, empathie, narcissisme, lien.*

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In recent decades, we have seen a growing production of psychoanalytic knowledge that seeks to articulate the different dimensions involved in contemporary forms of subjectivity in the face of widespread situations of psychological suffering. We can see that such a profound understanding is in sync with the intensification of processes of violence and social exclusion, which have been increasingly accentuated by the current crisis of capitalism and the crumbling of social protection in the production of life. The spread of hate speech and the resurgence of cruelty directed at vulnerable social groups are some of the symptoms of the exacerbation of contemporary malaise, producing a continuous movement of depersonalization and psychosocial helplessness (Aiello-Vaisberg, 2017; Birman, 2021; Maia & Santos, 2022; Santos et al., 2020).

Nowadays, discomfort presents itself in many ways, which leads us to the need to choose certain vertices to build our analyses of the phenomena. In this study, we chose to analyze the compassion affect. We identified the meanings of the term from its genealogical bases and etymological roots, establishing a comparison with the concepts of sympathy and

empathy. We also sought to understand the meanings and place attributed to compassion in Freudian thought, locating its relevance for the construction of the main social pillars, such as family, groups and religion. We looked at compassion from the perspective of the fragility observed in the current scenario, in terms of the development of this essential component for the formation and maintenance of social ties.

Echoing the extreme situations that have led to contemporary impasses, we note that literature has emphasized critical issues that permeate the constitution of subjectivity in situations of adversity, denial, and non-acceptance of differences, which are recognized as constitutive marks of contemporary malaise (Maia, Santos, & Okamoto, 2023; Risk & Santos, 2022; Santos et al., 2020). The deadly and perverse ways in which subjectivity has been affected in multiple ways are placed in the foreground, by the fraying of otherness and the spread of destructiveness, without the symbolic mediations that, if they were present, could modulate the impetus and control the intensities of pulsional outbursts.

In contrast, little attention has been devoted to understanding the singularity of the psychic forces that act in the opposite direction to the destabilizing pressure of the death drive, that is, to the instinctual movements that are at the service of preserving life and emotional development (Green, 1997/2000). Therefore, in this study we are interested in shedding light on the subjective and intersubjective processes of integration and differentiation that fuel resistance against the flattening of standards of civility in relationships and the caustic and oppressive forms of occupation of public space in contemporary times.

In view of this concern, in this article we propose to focus on human phenomena that can confront the uncontrolled manifestations of the annihilating forces of the Self and resist the weakening of bonds in the contemporary era (Kaës, 2012), with an emphasis on experiences of compassion, sympathy and empathy. These experiences will be highlighted in our reflections because we understand them as facilitators of inter-human encounters (Aiello-Vaisberg, 2017) that promote a sense of integration, belonging and authenticity of the Self. Thus, with this theoretical-reflective study, we intend to begin a conceptual understanding that highlights some conceptual elements that we consider crucial for a theoretical framework that serves to articulate the aggregating and strengthening psychic conditions of the Self. We refer, especially, to the protective factors of the psychic apparatus, to the dimensions that would allow the contemporary subject to navigate the darkness of the so-called dark times, preserving the integrity of the Self and without having to waste precious opportunities to creatively continue their personal path of emotional growth.

The development of this study follows an organizational plan that will be outlined below. Starting from conceptual distinctions between compassion, sympathy, empathy and pity, we propose a psychoanalytic theoretical understanding of the meanings contained in the capacity to empathize with the suffering of others. The reflections lead us to ask: how can we understand compassion from a psychoanalytic point of view, and how can it enhance psychic configurations in the face of contemporary sources of suffering? To articulate this question theoretically, we resort to the psychoanalytic conceptual framework in search of the historical and philosophical roots of compassion, recovering meanings, semantic domains, values, affections and sensitivities. Thus, preliminarily, we explore the etymological roots of compassion in order to then undertake a theoretical psychoanalytic path that identifies the vicissitudes of the transformation of the psychic apparatus in dealing with the dissipating threats of the death drive, without losing the sense of internal cohesion and, at the same time, without showing itself impervious to drive demands.

### Compassion, sympathy, empathy: intertwining

The singularities, divergences and similarities between compassion, sympathy and empathy are not always properly understood. There is an aura of ambiguity surrounding the word compassion, which can take on different meanings that, if not clarified, can lead to confusion between terms that gravitate around its semantic field. To demarcate the conceptual boundaries and ensure their intelligibility, the first dimension to be highlighted is that the word *compassion* has a Latin origin, while *sympathy* and *empathy* have a Greek origin. The three words, however, refer to a certain relationship that we assume in the face of the suffering of others.

Etymologically, the word compassion derives from the Latin *compassio* (“common suffering”, “common feeling” or “union of feelings”), which has its roots in the verb *compatior*, which means to have compassion or to feel sorry for someone. The verb *compatior*, in turn, is formed by the joining of the first syllable, the Latin prefix *cum* – indicative of company, contiguity – and the verb *patior*. *Cum*, which gives rise to the preposition *com* in the Portuguese language, indicates company, and can mean “together with” or “at the same time as”. The verb *patior* means to suffer, to endure, to endure some difficult situation that inflicts suffering. *Patior* can also be used in the sense of tolerating or allowing something, despite it being a source of discomfort or personal suffering. So, from an etymological point of view, *compatior* means *to suffer together with the other or at the same time*.

Therefore, in the first reading, having compassion designates the virtue of sharing in the suffering of another. It does not mean approving of their reasons or motivations that may have triggered such suffering, no matter how good or bad they may seem to us. The attitude of being compassionate or having compassion can be understood as not remaining indifferent to the affliction of another. It describes the act of sharing in the suffering of another person in the face of an

adverse situation. It means *understanding the journey of pain of another person through experience*, which presupposes establishing a special bond with their suffering. The person who feels compassion is able to “put themselves in the shoes” of the other person who is suffering, in the sense of being available to walk alongside them and, on the path to be taken in a shared way, being able to emotionally approach what the other person is going through in their life.

From this perspective, according to Lima (2016), passion – an ingredient contained in the term compassion – arises from the relationship between the subject and its object. Or rather, from the relationship between the subject and the value he or she invests in the object. To understand it, it is necessary to investigate its narrative paths, which is precisely what occurs during an analytical process. For those who are willing to approach this phenomenon through the exploration of the unconscious via transference (Birman, 1989), the experience of compassion is crossed by the challenge of getting in touch with one’s own feelings awakened by the disturbing proximity to the unknown. It requires an attitude of willingness to welcome and listen to the other person who is facing a disruptive moment. The understanding that is produced is, above all, of an emotional nature; it does not stop at or limit itself to the cognitive level, and when – and if – it is processed, it can transform into *insight* and lead to a propensity that mobilizes the desire to care for that sensitive aspect of the experience that suffering has allowed to be revealed.

The satisfactory unfolding, which paves the way for psychic elaboration, occurs when compassion triggers the possibility of putting anguish to work, allowing it to move in search of new and promising possibilities for resignification. It is no exaggeration to say that the way in which suffering is shared, also encourages the subject to move toward the other to help him or her commit to and care for his or her pain. In the constitution of the transference field, caring is moving and circulating through the pain of the other. Making oneself available to give voice to the suffering that until then remained silenced and helping the other to find ways to organize the chaos that produce transformation, in search of a life with more meaning.

Sympathy is another word that is often evoked in its connections with the term compassion as being in the orbit of – or close to – the semantic field of compassion. Sympathy derives from the Latin *simpathia*, “communion of feelings”, from the Greek *sympatheia*, the ability to feel the “same” as another, to be affected by the feelings of others, whether positive or negative. Thus, in the etymological sense of the word sympathy, the prefix *syn* -indicates simultaneity, contiguity and, in Portuguese, gives rise to the preposition *com*, denoting “being together”. The rest of the word corresponds to the noun *pathos*, whose meaning in Greek is “feeling”. Articulating with psychoanalytic thought, it is worth highlighting, for now, that, for Klein (1959/1975), human situations that arouse sympathies or antipathies express archaic anxieties related to unconscious fantasies.

Going back a few centuries before the advent of psychoanalysis, the Scottish philosopher and historian David Hume (1738/2009), when discussing the concept of sympathy, stated that no human being is (or at least should not be) completely indifferent to the happiness or misery of others. Seen from this perspective, sympathy can be understood as a virtue, although some argue that it is a feeling, and as such it would be very close to or equivalent to empathy. We will return to this distinction later.

As we have seen, the word *sympathy* means to feel with, to feel together – or, more generally, the ability to experience a feeling together with another and share it. This does not mean feeling exactly what the other feels but rather having a willingness to tune in to a feeling that, in its origin and essence, does not belong to us. In this sense, sympathy has a natural affinity with compassion. Thus, *compassion* and *sympathy* have in common perception, which also involves an understanding and a particular form of reaction to suffering, which establishes the need for transformation, as it moves the search for other ways of feeling and existing.

Empathy comes from the Greek word *empathia*, a combination of *en-* and the word *pathos*. The Greeks used the prefix *en-*, which can be defined as “movement inwards”, before *pathos*, to form *empathia*. *Pathos* can be understood as all the feelings that a person experiences: suffering, love, sadness, joy, anger, rage. Empathy, therefore, can be understood as the ability of a person to put themselves in someone else’s shoes, to participate affectively in that emotional experience, without the pretense of feeling exactly what the other person actually feels.

Empathy presupposes being able to build a connection, an affective communication with another person and, as such, it is one of the foundations of the identification and psychological understanding of the other. Therefore, the meaning of empathy is *very close* to sympathy. Empathy is often defined as the psychological ability to feel what another person would feel if they were in the same situation that they are experiencing. The ability to put yourself in another person’s shoes, seeking to see, think or act the way they would see, think or act. It is the ability to identify with the other person, “feeling” what they feel if they were in the same situation that they are in. By “putting yourself” in the other person’s shoes, you seek to think and feel the way *they* would think or feel -here, the “how” makes all the difference. In short, having empathy is being able to feel *how* you would feel if you were in the situation and in the specific circumstances experienced by another person and only by that person.

The ability to understand emotionally presupposes identifying, having affinity, leaning in and remaining close, respecting differences. Being empathetic is being able to identify with another person or with the situation they are experiencing without getting mixed up with them, that is, keeping the boundaries of the self intact. It is knowing how to listen to the

other person and trying, but without excessive effort, to understand their perspective, their strengths and weaknesses in dealing with their emotions. Empathetic listening would therefore be one of the aspects that make up the analyst's stance when offering a space of hospitality so that the other person's pain finds shelter.

Having defined these conceptual bases, we will articulate our study interest – the phenomenon of compassion – with the theoretical formulations that underpin the psychoanalytic clinic in accordance with the principles of Freudian doctrine. Supported by the principles of metapsychology, Freud developed an original treatment method, based on the investigation of the unconscious, seeking to understand the human being in its entirety (Birman, 1989). Freudian discourse fought the therapeutic nihilism of his time, marked by a medicine exclusively focused on diagnosis and without compassion for the suffering of the patient. Hence the attention given to the speech of the subject in suffering.

### Psychoanalytic understanding of compassion

In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud (1930[1929]/1976h) suggests that the development of civilization occurs at the expense of the libidinal economy, that is, the renunciation of complete instinctual satisfaction is the founding basis of the civilizing process. By instinctual renunciation we mean abstaining from both the full gratification of the sexual drive, death drive and cruelty. In this essay, civilization refers to all the achievements, goods and devices of culture that distance us and differentiate us from our animal ancestors on the evolutionary scale, whose purposes refer to the protection of human beings against the inexorability of the forces of nature, aiming to establish the regulation of mutual relationships and exchange excesses of selfishness for a dose of altruism that makes life in society possible. The regulation of relationships was a decisive step for humanity to make organized community life possible; otherwise, human relationships would be subject to the arbitrariness of the strongest individual, who would decide solely in accordance with his interests and in tune with his instinctual drives. Freud (1930[1929]/1976h) emphasizes that the replacement of the autocratic power of the individual by the shared power of a community was essential for the development of the civilizing process and, therefore, of the ideals of justice and cooperation.

Therefore, life organized around a human community imposes restrictions on individual freedom. One of the challenges facing humanity is to find an appropriate balance between individual demands and the cultural desires of the group. It is up to civilization to allow itself to know and decide whether and when such a balance can be achieved through social configuration – and to negotiate the price to be paid for granting the renunciation of instincts – or whether such a conflict is irreconcilable with the selfishness that resides in people's hearts. In any case, it is unquestionable that this process requires psychic elaboration work that results in consistent modifications in human instinctual dispositions (Barbosa & Santos, 2005). This is the path to personal and collective maturation. In any case, the *discomfort* resulting from the instinctual renunciation imposed by the civilizing ideal is inherent to the process of differentiation of humanity. In any case, the fact is that we all pay, in some way.

With *Totem and Taboo*, Freud (1913/1976b) postulated a model of the evolution of the family towards communal life, organized by means of a group of siblings who, once united by the celebration of a pact, overcame the all-powerful father of the primeval horde, demonstrating that unity can be stronger than the exercise of an individual's isolated strength. In this way, a totemic culture was established based on restrictions imposed and mutually accepted for the preservation and maintenance of life established in a group. From then on, social life would be organized according to work and the predominance of love, transformations that result from the sublimation of destructive drives (death drive) (Barbosa & Santos, 2005).

In the Freudian conception, the recognition of Eros as one of the emotional foundations of civilization points to the importance of genital love as a source of instinctual gratification, constituting a prototype of possible happiness and inserting genital eroticism as the fundamental point of psychic life. We can understand the condition of compassion as one of the sublimated expressions of genital eroticism. However, this question exposes a paradox: if on the one hand genital satisfaction results in pleasure, in its various possible manifestations and configurations, this can make the human being dependent on the chosen object of love, so much so that the sudden loss of such an object can result in suffering and be a source of unhappiness.

It is important to highlight that, when postulating love as one of the founding pillars of civilization, Freud (1913/1976b) points to the existence of one organizer that results in direct satisfaction, organizing families beyond a modified version of love inhibited in its purpose, tenderness. In its origin, tenderness was sensual love and will continue to be so, from an unconscious point of view. Love and tenderness go hand in hand, and both are responsible for the organization of new families, as well as contributing to the establishment and maintenance of bonds of friendship, that is, they extend to other people with their exogamous potential and assume social value as the cement of social ties and the emotional basis of relationships of cooperation, solidarity and compassion for others.

Freud (1905/1976a) points out that the tenderness aspect develops as a direct consequence of repression, which lessens the intensity of the libidinal current. Thus, behind tenderness lie the remote infantile sexual aspirations that, due to the effect of repression, are attenuated. In *The Unconscious*, Freud (1915/1976c) points out that the essence of the repression process does not consist in eliminating or nullifying the ideational content of the drive, but in preventing it from becoming

conscious, which does not mean that the repressed cannot produce effects, including effects that reach consciousness.

Freud (1930[1929]/1976h, p. 107) also links inhibited love in its purpose to the founding of religion, resulting in a “a state of impartially suspended, constant, and affectionate feeling, which bears little external resemblance to the stormy agitations of genital love, from which, nevertheless, it derives”. This new modality of loving bond is responsible for the development of a universal love for men and the world, which is built on the feeling of belonging to the human community. Such propensity can be considered as one of the highest positions that human beings can achieve, according to the social parameters in force in each era.

This inclination is the basis of compassion. In Freud’s conception, inhibited libido occupies a leading role in the genesis of civilization, contributing above all to the strengthening of community ties through friendships, resulting in large human groups, strengthened by bonds of belonging and cooperation. With this, we point out that, in order to achieve these purposes, the corollary of restrictions on sexual life is inevitable, with the regulation of impulses being the main factor in lasting bonds between individuals. The main characteristic of Eros lies in the work of bonding (Green, 1997/2000).

Although the development of the concept of death drive only came to light in 1920 (Freud, 1920/1976 d ), the author had previously pointed out cruelty as a component of partial drives, alongside the pleasure of looking and displaying (Freud, 1905/1976a). In this work, the author presents cruelty as a natural element in childhood and points out that the ability to feel compassion in the face of another’s pain has a relatively late development. Preponderant in childhood sexuality, cruelty is a component that presents a certain independence in relation to erogenous zones and that, in later development, establishes a close relationship with adult genital life.

Furthermore, Freud (1905/1976a) establishes cruelty as a pre-genital impulse linked to the drive for domination, which arises at a stage in which the genitals have not yet assumed the preponderant role in sexual life. Thus, although cruelty is not originally linked to genital primacy, the absence of the barrier of compassion increases the risk that the relationship between cruel drives and erogenous drives will become indissoluble throughout life.

As we have seen from Green (1997/2000), the regulation of libidinal impulses requires the inevitable restrictions of sexual life, a *sine qua non* condition for the establishment of stable and lasting connections under the aegis of Eros. With the constitution of bonds, the social acquires metapsychological status in Freudian psychoanalytic theory, which is evidenced in *Group Psychology and Analysis of the Ego* (Freud, 1921/1976e). Identification is a metapsychological concept that can be simultaneously understood as a support for the psychic processes of insertion of the subject in the group (i.e., in the culture) and as a fundamental device for understanding the constitution of the self and the possibilities of overcoming the Oedipal conflict (Guimarães & Celes, 2007). Identification allows us to understand the psychic and the social as instances of the subject that constitute each other, and which, for this reason, cannot be thought of in isolation or in a stagnant way (Maia & Santos, 2022). In this integrative understanding, we propose that the mechanism of identification is also the psychic basis of compassion. To feel compassion for someone, we need to have a way of identifying with the other person, which leads to empathy, that is, the condition of being able to genuinely *suffer together*.

This psychic configuration is also present in the foundations of religion. The appropriation that religion makes of the inhibited libidinal force also shaped the organization of the main commandments of the Christian faith, such as: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” and “Love your enemy”, as Freud (1927/1976g) points out in *The Future of an Illusion*. It is not our purpose to delve into the analysis of the meaning of such commandments, but to recognize that these superegoic imperatives point to another aspect beyond love: the tendency towards destructiveness, constitutive of the death drive.

Due to the unavoidable existence of this drive (death drive) that incessantly seeks to put the drive to rest (Freud, 1920/1976d), civilized society is constantly threatened. To counter the tendency toward disintegration, all efforts are made to block the free expression of destructive drives and contain their disintegrating power (Freud, 1927/1976g). The work of civilization often resorts to the intensification of inhibited drive investments in its purpose, mainly through identifications that stimulate the strengthening of libidinal bonds between people. United by the “chains of Eros,” through multiple bonds of identification (Green, 1997/2000), human groups organize themselves around those who identify with each other by having certain traits, recognized as common elements, which facilitate the union with the sense of imaginarily consolidating a social unit that serves as the matrix of identity.

On the one hand, this connection work aims to unify the bonds between individuals who organize themselves into groups, intensifying libidinal work, even if inhibited in its purpose; on the other hand, it favors groupings among those who consider themselves equal, strengthening the feeling of belonging. With this, destructive drives can easily be redirected to those who are not part of the group, a phenomenon called by Freud (1921/1976e) “narcissism of small differences”. This is a strange and disturbing composition of words, which seems to be an antithetical construction of words with opposing meanings, since it brings together, in the same expression, opposing terms: narcissism and difference.

For Freud (1921/1976e), hostility is present in all human relationships. The only relationship ideally free from hostile feelings would be between mother and child. In all other relationships, mutual aversion and intolerance distinguish individuals who interact with each other. Members of a *formless mass* cling to small differences to express this reciprocal hostility. However, at certain times, this primary hostility is suspended, temporarily or permanently. Individuals behave

within the mass as if they were homogeneous and support the specificity of the other, becoming equal to them and thus not feeling mutual repulsion (Freud, 1921/ 1976e), which allows them to reaffirm common social ties and identity values.

The libidinal connection between members within a mass allows the members to support the *specificity of the other*. The members become “comrades”, they perceive themselves as undifferentiated brothers, as if they had acquired the same form, becoming uniform. They reject any detail that could differentiate them. At a later moment, the narcissism of small differences returns with great intensity, in the opposition that is established in the formation of groups, parties, gangs, factions and associations. In this way, just as the narcissism of small differences had previously functioned as a guarantee of the existence of an imaginary unity of the Self, this becomes the guarantee of the cohesion and singularity of the mass.

When this tendency predominates, the recognition of otherness as a constituent of social circles is erased and the attempt to develop universal love, as previously mentioned, contributes to the dilution of the constitutive differences of subjectivity. The ideal of equality is valued, especially in the form that is socially appreciated, including by religions, such as kindness and piety, to the detriment of the recognition of otherness. We postulate that compassion is inscribed in another register, and that it does not require the dilution of the *Self* in the mass. On the contrary, the *Self* is strengthened to the extent that it can “emerge” from its narcissistic self-encapsulation and genuinely sympathize with the suffering of others.

As regards the control of destructive tendencies, the means used by civilization consist of the introjection and internalization of aggressiveness, which is installed in a specific psychic instance: the superego (Freud, 1923/ 1976 f). In this structure, which originates from a differentiation of the Self, aggressiveness is housed as moral conscience, which can turn against the Self itself in the form of feelings of guilt, thus giving expression to the need for atonement and self-punishment, while at the same time ensuring self-restraint.

### Compassion and pity: two distinct states of mind

If, as we have seen, empathy is an attitude that makes us prone to consider the possibility that there is a perspective different from our own, the absence of empathy is equivalent to not admitting differences in points of view. The lack of empathy disregards the person in their singularity, with their own values, their belief system and their aspirations.

We find, especially in the way of life privileged by our society, a certain tendency to confuse compassion and pity. When we examine Portuguese dictionaries, we observe that, in general, compassion and pity are conceived as a feeling of regret that the misfortune of others awakens in us. Thus, in the most basic dictionaries, the definitions overlap, and one word appears as a synonym for the other. In this more simplistic perspective, *compassion* is confused with pity, sorrow, commiseration, a feeling of regret awakened by contact with the afflictions of others. While pity, from the Latin *pietas*, *peitatis*, evokes the idea of devotion, affection and respect for religious things. Lima (2016) notes that this definition is the most common, although, when we observe it carefully, we can see that it already points to a difference. The author proposes the hypothesis that, although they maintain semantic relations of proximity and overlap, compassion and pity retain specific syntactical particularities and can be conceived as distinct states of mind. Compassion is more closely linked to the feeling of grief itself, to passionate awareness, and is more of the order of sensitivity. Pity has more to do with a moral evaluation of the situation and is more linked to intelligibility. For the author, this distinction is interesting as it allows us to think about the different modes of interaction between the subject and what is the field of presence and their different reactions to contact with the other in a state of suffering.

When we turn to the most detailed explanations found in the reference dictionaries of the Portuguese language (Houaiss & Villar, 2009), we identify the entry compassion as a pious feeling of sympathy for the personal tragedy of another person, accompanied by the desire to alleviate their suffering. Compassion mobilizes a desire for spiritual participation in the misfortune of another, which arouses an altruistic impulse of tenderness towards the person who is suffering, while pity is a virtue of devotion to religious things, an expression of religiosity, of a duty of reverence and worship of the divine. To experience compassion is to be filled with commiseration for the suffering of another, to have mercy on the evil that plagues them.

Lima (2016) points out that the difference becomes clearer when we base ourselves on the etymological definition of the terms. In this delimitation, the confusion disappears and the difference between the two meanings becomes clear: on the one hand, we have the emphasis on *common suffering*, and on the other, on the *fulfillment of duty, fidelity, virtue*. Even so, the terms in dictionaries are often taken as synonyms, since the term compassion also includes the expression “pious feeling”, and the definition of pity also refers to compassion. In any case, there is a common characteristic: *feeling towards the other*. What varies, however, is the way in which this feeling is configured in each of the modalities of interaction between the subjects: in the word compassion we find the characteristic of “common”, “community”, which expresses a sharing of suffering, a feeling *together*; a feeling *with*, while piety refers to the idea of “duty” and “virtue”, meaning an “obligation” of feeling, characterizing a compassion for the other, a feeling *for*. This only becomes clearer from the definitions presented in Latin dictionaries (Lima, 2016).

It is interesting to compare these symbolic resonances with the psychoanalytic concept of identification, which can be seen in the difference between “feeling with” (compassion) and “feeling for” (pity). According to Klein (1959/1975),

there is a close connection between identification and the work of reparation, which is a powerful concept coined by the author. Reparative mechanisms refer to the ability to transform the damages unconsciously inflicted on the love object, which makes it possible to integrate destructive and loving drives into a total object. This process is fundamental in the formation of interpersonal bonds based on the mitigation of hatred, as well as being the basis for the development of epistemophilic impulse and creativity.

The creative arrangement mobilized allows the subject to articulate his/her history with his/her current condition in a completely original and innovative way, attributing new meanings to his/her relational plot (Santos, Okamoto, Emídio, & Maia, 2020), replacing the tendency to crystallize defenses against primitive anxieties awakened by intersubjective relationships. In life in society, this set can compose collectively organized defensive strategies, depending on the way in which the subject chains his/her fantasies and incorporates the shared reality.

In this way, in the interplay with material reality, the singularity of the subject, his psychic intimacy, stands out, with the interpolation of his personal history and his internalized models, sometimes in an idealized form. For Klein (1952/1982), idealization has a defensive meaning against destructive drives. This defense is largely tainted by narcissism. For there to be a transformation in the sense of reparation towards a relationship of gratitude for the object, it is necessary that there be, with the support of analytical work, a softening of the subject's perception of the reality that makes him suffer.

While compassion presupposes being able to share the pain and suffering of others, pity is the same as feeling sad and powerless when faced with the sadness of others. In this sense, it is possible to say that pity amplifies and widens sadness, adding, in a way, our sadness to the unhappiness of others. In the writings of thinkers such as Nietzsche, Hannah Arendt and Foucault we see the logic of this pious compassion questioned, which, according to these authors, establishes a peculiar form of exercising power that is structured based on the binomial serve-obey (Caponi, 2000). The history of humanity is permeated by examples that highlight the ills of exercising this "cruel compassion" (Szasz, 1994). Cruel because it does not respect the limits of others, because it is a denial of the emancipatory nature of egalitarian relationships and because it conceives of others as someone to be objectified and colonized by the will of others.

Accepting suffering based on the ethics of solidarity, and not on a pious ethic, requires the precaution of considering the other as an individual capable of self-determination and argumentation, and never as part of an anonymous and faceless mass (Caponi, 2000). The act of sympathizing with the suffering and pain of others is in the realm of sharing, of genuine closeness to the other, understood in their right to the radicality of their refusal to subordinate themselves to me, to be my *avatar*; that is, their right not to be an extension of my narcissism, for having their own and singular existence. Although it is not exclusive to it, this capacity (to sympathize with the suffering of others) has been exhaustively explored by religion and, therefore, in a certain way, the proximity to pity persists in common sense.

This deep-rooted relationship demonstrates a position of power that is established between the one who suffers and the other who dedicates himself, in the name of universal love, to accepting the suffering of others as an act of charity, under the pretext of doing good to the detriment of evil, seeking to strengthen the loving tendency inhibited in the name of religious dogma. This stance is often rationally justified by a supposed search for reward and salvation that would come through the persistent exercise of charity as a moral and ethical duty to be fulfilled. Such a relationship, if it is the tone of what moves the Self toward the other, establishes a symbolic debt contracted by the welcomed sufferer, generating eternal gratitude, contrition and humility. Consequently, the other is imprisoned in the need to reciprocate the action, occupying a place of inferiority or of someone who is worthy of pity, which perpetuates subordination and disparity in relation to the one who welcomed and shared his suffering.

For Szasz (1994), the non-gratuitousness of the compassionate act is assumed, which does not prevent the act from being sincere. However, to be authentic, it cannot admit asymmetry and generalization. To this end, the moral values of those involved (benefactor and beneficiary) in the compassionate gesture cannot be antagonistic, and the relationship must be between subjects who recognize themselves as similar (Caponi, 2000). This resource allows love, inhibited in its purpose, to be extended to everyone, indistinctly and independently, whether it is intended for someone who truly deserves this affection or for a stranger, diluting differences and equalizing people, making everyone capable of being beneficiaries of this universal love. Amid this action, not only love is its focus, but also destructive drives, mitigated around the performance of acts of kindness and pity. However, this places the protagonist on a different level, establishing a hierarchical relationship and, therefore, a relationship of power.

On the other hand, if we think of compassion as an experience that is distanced from this connection with pity and kindness, we can approach a notion of *intersubjectivity*, considering the component of sharing, of making oneself available to someone who is suffering. An example that is often evoked is what happens when we look at bodies that do not conform to the standards established by culture. Courtine (2008) argues that it is necessary to assume a mutation in the way we look at bodies marked by deformities, since the assumption of the existence of suffering often awakens in us a feeling of pity instead of compassion, when we recognize in those creatures a fellow human. In the register of compassion and empathy, we can locate the possibility of an *action between two or more subjects*, which involves an intersubjective and

empowering dimension. This sense differs from the one previously presented, since it considers the existence of otherness as an irreducible dimension, a component of a joint action that presupposes that each psychic subject imposes its presence in the world, and this establishes the basis of the bond between the subjects involved.

Although the concept of compassion is treated as secondary in Freud's work, it is important to highlight that it is related to the idea of inhibited love in its purpose, the basis of which is the mechanism of repression, which, in the works mentioned above, constitutes an important argument in favor of the mental processes necessary for the organization of life in society. In this way, it is possible to bring together different individuals around certain ideals, despite all the differences that configure otherness. The guarantee that ensures this union is given by the alleviation of cruelty and hatred. The individual would give up these components in favor of the benefits received in exchange for the feeling of belonging to community life, with the strengthening of social bonds and group cohesion (Freud, 1930[1929]/1976h).

### Final Considerations

To discuss the roots of the development of compassion in Freud's work, the path taken by this essay used as a starting point the text presented in 1905 (Freud, 1905/ 1976a), covering the author's main social works, culminating in the work written in 1929 and published by Freud in 1930 (Freud, 1930[1929]/1976h). It is important to remember that the 1929 text was produced in the context of intense global economic and humanitarian crisis, with the *crash* of the New York stock exchange, an episode that became known as the Great Depression. This crisis of capitalism precipitated an unprecedented economic recession and threw the world into a scenario of hunger, despair and social anomie, on the eve of the rise of Nazism in Germany. It is no coincidence that in this seminal text Freud reflects on the demands and benefits of the constitution of the civilizing process and supports his well-known thesis that the production of culture occurs at the cost of renouncing drives. In this way, the author states the main paradox of human communal life: the high drive cost is the driving factor that impels us to join groups, families and institutions, establishing human connections and the production of intersubjective life.

The status of happiness remains a challenge in its complexity, but it is a fact that Freud's work remains more relevant than ever, in the contemporary period of history in which insecurities prevail in the establishment of social ties and life seems to be surrounded by uncertainties and destabilizing threats, with the preponderance of the violence of destructive drives over the integrative forces of Eros. Certainly, if current life is placed in such a fragile position, Freud already warned us about this situation a century ago in his visionary reflections.

Kaës (2012) points to the context of social and political transition that served as a backdrop to produce Freud's work. He argues that, in contemporary times, we are facing new and extraordinary challenges in a globalized world on the brink of collapse, with environmental issues, such as the climate crisis and the depletion of natural resources, which call into question the viability of the continuity of life and the very survival of the planet. This disruptive situation has become even more explicit with the recent advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has exposed the abysmal inequalities that are ongoing and made it possible to expose new forms of social oppression.

Thus, the themes of compassion and empathy are pressing to support the construction of research agendas in an environment of ideological polarization, when threats of institutional collapse are spreading and living conditions are becoming increasingly precarious. This appeal is especially urgent in a torn world, in which love and tenderness require incessant and repeated work so that Eros prevails and can ensure the continuity of human life. Psychic life needs the oxygenating and vitalizing presence of another human interested in caring, for the sake of not only the survival of the species, but also the preservation of the highest human values and the cultural heritage condensed in the civilizing experience of humanity.

The dissolution of respect for the boundaries of otherness, fragmented by the violence of these dark times, places an urgent need to cultivate spaces where the Self can emerge. To achieve this goal, the task of care must be shared and directed towards expanding actions of inclusion and belonging, contributing to the establishment of stable references in a world increasingly intoxicated by authoritarianism and depersonalization. Thus, we highlight the fundamental role of the Democratic State of Law, since modernity, as one of the main institutions responsible for guaranteeing mechanisms that ensure the survival of society in the face of uncontrolled manifestations of hostility. The work of Eros acts as a factor of cohesion, allowing society to organize itself into groups capable of living with differences and respecting otherness.

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