**Besnik and a social philosophy of compassion:**

**A small ethnography**

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**Abstract**

In this essay, I investigate the social philosophy of compassion and the practice of 'doing a good deed' as opening up possibilities for ethnography. I present the case of Besnik, a homeless village dweller and study the moral consequences of offering him help. By doing so, I engage in moral practices beyond my involvement as an anthropologist and learn some valuable lessons. These lessons are then discussed in a wider literature framework on compassion and toward an ethical anthropology in times of superdiversity.

At the end of last year an article was published in the *Groene Amsterdammer* about the fact that a majority of the Dutch Lower House supported a motion by Forum for Democracy - which had not yet been disbanded - stating that the Netherlands should make a case in Brussels for making the saving of human lives in the Mediterranean a punishable offence. This then begged the question of what the state of *compassion* is in this country. From this point of view, compassion is thus presented as a social fact, and not as an interpersonal act. Another feature of compassion would then rather coincide with justice, as the minister's "discretionary power" causes partiality and arbitrariness. After all, "The way a society treats vulnerable people reflects on the society itself. A society from which compassion has disappeared, which wants to drown people at sea, which does not want to help vulnerable people hardens".

In this paper, I want to explore the notion of compassion in greater depth using the example of a good deed. I went out with a homeless person and let him shop at my expense. In what follows, I will question what compassion is in literature and how it relates to my own good deed. I initially wanted to help Besnik, a 43-year-old Roma man who always positions himself in front of the local Albert Heijn, with some issues around his health. Through our small talk, we have become acquaintances and he sometimes tells me how he and his family are doing. He also knows my twelve-year-old son and often refers to him when we see each other. Since offering medical assistance for his hip pains was too difficult, and I still wanted to help Besnik, I decided that instead of giving him a few cents, I would ask him to go shopping with me at the Albert Heijn supermarket. This intuitively seemed like a "good thing to do.

Questions that came to mind: To what extent is Besnik at my 'compassion', or 'discretion', to me deciding whether or not to give him money or coffee, or ask him into the store with me? To what extent is Besnik lavishing and feeding a work of compassion (Grun 2009)? And what is the difference between justice and compassion?

**A good deed**

I discuss, as mentioned, the virtue of compassion and in it specifically the good deed of feeding the hungry (contrary to the prejudice, Besnik did not buy beer, neither cheap nor expensive).

Here, according to de Wit (2009), we come to a limit of ethics: when does something become compassion? Besnik, as a job seeker, is morally unapproachable, otherwise he would not be standing there. He drew these conclusions, namely that it is impossible for him for one reason or another to seek 'regular' work, i.e. already for himself (selling homeless newspaper, accepting donations from people,...). In this way, I go into the desert with Besnik, as a form of prayer beyond ethics, as with an uninvited guest who has no place at the table. More than that, there is a here a tension between being outside the community (selling homeless newspaper as a "job") and participating in that community (greeting people, building friendships as with me).

But, says Moyaert (2007), compassion cannot be reduced to being mild and community-promoting. In other words, we must not cut the link with the Christian tradition but deepen the notion of helpfulness (Christian). When we honor a person, we recognize his exceptional place in the universe (Moyaert, 2007: 719). There is the defenselessness and dignity of human beings. For example, people lose their dignity through exposure to deprivation (Ibid: 719). In the case of Besnik, we see someone begging for money with which they can feed themselves afterwards. This concrete action, helping Besnik, cannot be reduced to benevolent assistance: compassion, according to Moyaert, takes place from person to person, and not as universal benevolence and/or assistance (Ibid: 723). In this case, ordinary reciprocity is also suspended, as Besnik cannot meaningfully participate in meaning interactions without it (lack of knowledge of language and social framework). I therefore enter into this good deed with the fact that I do not "expect" anything from Besnik (no gratitude or appreciation).

I regularly see 43-year-old Besnik standing at the entrance of the local Albert Heijn with the Homeless newspaper (*Daklozenkrant*). We chat regularly and he also gets to know my son. He even babysits him once when I go in. In both our poor English and French, we talk about fatherhood and motherhood, poverty and Rutte's neglect. One day I decide to go and help him with a medical problem, but because that seems too complicated I spontaneously decide to ask him to come into the store with me. My intention is not to interfere, just to do my shopping, and him his, and then to pay together.

I plan to suggest the idea to Besnik the next time I see him. I will accompany him to the store door and try to explain to him what the idea is. Then I will withdraw and meet him at the cash register for the checkout.

**A possible learning process**

With this good deed, I would like to work on the following learning goals: (1) reflecting on daily reality (mindfulness); (2) character building to persevere with a good deed (doing more than giving 5 euros) and (3) studying what compassion can mean in my life.

In (1), I set a goal to slow down, slow down, and observe and really look at the small things around me rather than merely look at them. In this way I ascertain for myself which possible obstacles are hampering me in my often hectic activities. With (2) my aim is to learn perseverance with the good deed and to go to the end, especially inviting Besnik, accompanying him, paying for him and saying goodbye. With (3) I aim to test the theories on compassion of de Wit and Moyaert against practice. In this way I can form my own opinion around the theme based on a practical experience.

I repeat the goals mentioned above. With respect to (1), I will take my time when doing the good deed. Usually shopping is done in a jittery manner according to a pre-imposed time limit and with a pre-written bill in hand. I will do that differently this time and give myself and Besnik ample time to make our choice. Character development I achieve by being present in the moment and not giving up when things don't go as I planned. In relation to the third point, I will later take notes based on the practical intervention and compare them with some theoretical reflections to form myself an opinion around the theme of compassion.

If I achieve any result or progress with respect to these goals, I will consider the mission accomplished. Besnik's gratitude, if we assume that he is not morally accountable, I will not factor into the review.

**Results**

On a sunny Thursday afternoon, I make my way to the Albert Heijn in my neighborhood. As always on Thursdays, there is a tall, smiling man of Roma origin standing in front of the doors with the Homeless newspaper. Besnik’s origins lie in an area in distant Anatolia. On weekdays Besnik takes the bus from Woodville in Belgium to Bordertown in The Netherlands to sell the newspaper. He obtains these from Traverse, a homeless organization operating nearby. I speak to him and we talk for a few minutes, as usual, about family, being sick and the problems that come with it. I decide to do the good deed and ask him to accompany me inside. Besnik doesn't understand me well at first and says "Me? Come WITH you?". "Yes", I say, "you take what you want and I pay". He doesn't let me say this twice, grabs a cart and follows me at a distance. "You shop, I pay" I tell him in a made-up, almost childish way. Besnik smiles and looks around. He loads up some groceries and (distantly) looks to me for approval all the time while I do my own shopping. I finish first and wait for him at the checkout. After my 'approval' to his question "Is OK?", looking over the cart, I checkout for both of us. Besnik suddenly wants to go grab some more things but I refuse because I have already paid. We go back outside. Besnik quickly puts everything away in his bag, and says hello to me, a little quickly because there are 'customers' coming into the store again and he has to be ready with his newspaper. "Have a nice day" is his last comment. I head back home with my shopping.

I have set myself three clear goals beforehand: to be more in the here and now, to sharpen my perseverance, and to explore what an act of compassion can mean in practice. First, I feel that during the act I was in a kind of timeless now, with everything happening at Besnik's quiet pace. Because of the basic nature of the goods he was buying (discounted pork, cooking cream, cheap dishwashing sponges,...), I also realized the luxury of the products that were in my cart. No excitement actually arose from the shopping itself. The checkout process was a little more uncomfortable and so was the way Besnik said goodbye rather abruptly. Feelings of ingratitude and resentment surfaced. Yet I managed to stay from the here and now and consider these emotions without getting caught up in them. Secondly, I got the chance to work on my perseverance. Despite some difficult moments I persevered and remained calm when Besnik kept looking to me for approval, the awkward situation at checkout and the abrupt termination of contact. Third, I was in a position to further reflect on my interpretation of compassion and what it means to be part, even if only briefly, of a symbolic practice that institutes this virtue. I certainly agree with Moyaert that compassion takes place in the personal encounter, and that it can be a symbolic practice of Christianity: a symbolic but not residual use, namely in relation to various phenomena of the human condition of existence (in this case Besnik's hunger and thirst).

The principle of mindfully dealing with the sometimes difficult situation allows for a greater presence in the here and now. Because of this I have learned not to let emotions take over, which also strengthens my perseverance: I am less easily thrown off balance by unforeseen events. I am also more convinced that not everyone is morally approachable, and despite the fact that we are all partly outside the community, there are people (created in the image of God) who we should honor simply because they are human, not because they comply with certain conventions, laws or rules.

In the future, I will be able to help people from a symbolic practice (religiously inspired but as an extension of the human) in a personal contact with things they need and that honor and center them as human beings. In doing so, it is important not to assume that people are morally accountable at all times so that certain expectations from this preconceived morality are often not met or are not achievable. This contact must take place in the here and now, without emotions taking over. They can be given a place in a mindful, contemplative framework.

**Discussion**

Two weeks after the good deed, I run into Besnik at the entrance to the supermarket. He stops me and speaks the words "How are you in here" while pointing to his crotch. A few weeks before, I had told him that I needed surgery on the groin because of blood clots. I told him I was doing better and thanked him for his question. Then he took my hands and said "We prayed for you...for here" as he released his hands and pointed again to his crotch.

This small gesture by Besnik meant a world of difference to the interpretation of one of the goals of the little study. I was still mindful and convinced that I had developed perseverance and courage, but of that expected reciprocity and that moral unapproachability I was suddenly not so sure. Besnik, from the idea of an expectation of reciprocity, had acted ungratefully in my eyes by separating himself from me immediately after payment and continuing with his begging and selling practice. But the fact that Besnik had prayed for me with his family showed that, on the contrary, there was great reciprocity here in the form of another good act of compassion ("pray for the living and the dead"). Did this then also mean that my good deed had therefore been insignificant, because not in line with Moyaert's view of moral unaccountability in works of compassion?

From (a) it is clear, above all, that we are only human, and that anyone can make an error of judgment in the here and now. Therefore, it is important to be both in the here and now, where things happen and emotions can overwhelm us, and to keep seeing the broader picture. The gratitude that Besnik exhibited was of an unseen level, one that was difficult to predict beforehand, in the here and now. While I was convinced of Besnik's moral unrepentance given his situation, it turned out that the man was just working his way so that no "customers" were to be missed. But my good deed was indeed recorded and this in a way that could not be estimated in advance. Even if Besnik had not been grateful, my act would have been one of compassion.

With De Wit (2009) I see compassion not as charity but service with respect to the honor of the other (dignity) whereby I can confirm Besnik's exceptional place in the universe. It thus institutes a critique of the liberal intellectualism with which a simple religious practice is ridiculed nowadays, by expressing in this way admiration for Besnik and how he stands in life. Compassion, according to De Wit, is the recognition and practice of the fact that, as singular human beings, we are always outside of society and that no human being is completely coincident with the community. Therefore, ontologically, Besnik is not an exception: he exists, and like me, he exists as a human being outside the community (Burggraeve 2015). For me, it is about coming face to face with moral hopelessness, with people who are no longer morally addressable, but in whom one can discover the holiness of the person, created in the likeness of God (In His image He created them, Genesis 1). Through Besnik's prayer, he himself instantiated an act of compassion, and reciprocity was the result, despite Moyaert's interpretation of compassion as an important part of dealing with persons who are (partially) morally unaccountable.

**Ethnographic lessons**

With this small ethnographic study, we can see that the practice of compassion takes place both on a physical level (quenching the thirsty, feeding the hungry) and on a mental level (praying for the living and the dead). On both levels, there is a discussion of whether or not to be morally approachable, and the mindful and persistent step of doing a good deed is a good attitude that is important in daily life. When this good attitude/practice can be transformed into pedagogical action, there can be a transfer from teacher to students, from trainer to social workers, from mayor to citizens and so on.

Besnik's story shows that the moral accountability of individuals who, at first glance, appear to be outside of society, should not be an obstacle to acting well and doing good deeds. After all, are we not all partially outside of society and are we not all existentially alone? This second insight, too, can be transferred to others provided a meaningful pedagogical act is carried out. Examples of possible good deeds are legion: from helping the underprivileged to listening to the story of a 'troublesome' drug user.

In conclusion, Besnik shows that we are all just human beings, made in a Christian reading in the image of God, who can engage in good deeds by praying together for and with each other, that no one is exclusively outside of society, but that in a mindful environment we are all in the same boat of the neoliberal system. If we want to change this system, we will have to start with the small things carried by big alternative values. Besnik shows that glimmer of hope.

**References**

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**Appendix**

A. List of products purchased

Pork roast, 35% off 2.35

Sponges AH brand 0.99

2 jars fresh cream 1.68

Packet of coffee pads 2.39

Bread Zaans white 0.89

*Total: 8.3 euros*

*Unfortunately Besnik didn't want to take a picture.*