

The Neurophysiology of Compassion

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I have previously discussed the interplay of the emotional centres of fear (incorporating anxiety and anger) and gratification (1). Fear and gratification appear to be localized to the amygdala and nucleus accumbens respectively. Following on from this it has been suggested that the concept of compassion also represents a primary human emotion with a similar centre of neuro-anatomical representation. In this regard, the anterior cingular gyrus has been proposed as the neuro-anatomical centre of compassion.

From an evolutionary point of view the concept of compassion would not, at face value, incorporate survival-promoting qualities. In fact at a competing level of existence, exercising compassion would seem to be counter productive. Compassionate behaviour of organisms competing for limited resources would counter the dynamic of natural selection arising out of a process of the survival of the fittest. At a higher level of co-operation within a given species, mutual support becomes a necessary dynamic for sustained unification and resilience of the group. This heightened level of co-operation however should not be confused with true compassion. **Compassion is the selfless provision of assistance and support devoid of the need or expectation of personal reward.** One could say therefore that compassion exists as a higher mode of behaviour in that it does not appease the direct survival needs of the contributor.

In its purest form, compassion is devoid of emotion. It may however become associated with such emotions as fear and anxiety at the initiation of the act, with personal gratification at the successful completion of the act or with a sense of loss should the action be unsuccessful. Emotional identification may also occur in sympathy with the suffering individual. In this regard it has been shown that similar neuronal centres in an individual may be triggered by the actions manifested or experienced by another. However compassion *per se* is emotionless. I propose therefore that compassion represents a state of integration rather than an emotion supported by a specific neuro-anatomical centre. The integrational state as reflected in the Alpha archetype of the Triangles Model represents the most highly integrated of the three archetypes (2). In this archetype, the subjective world view incorporates entities and associations of the extended environment beyond the narrow zone of personal needs. The connection that the Alpha type has with environmental entities is more profound than merely being non-judgmental. The Alpha type projects to a space in which the personal circumstances of the entities are personally experienced – the Alpha becomes the entity.

In this way I conclude that the concept of compassion reflects a state of integration rather than yet another human emotion. In this way compassion can be regarded as the highest form of evolution in that it represents a process which is driven by the qualities of an all inclusive integration rather than by personal needs alone.

References

1. A Proposed Heuristic Model of Consciousness and Emotion
2. Accessing the Chemistry of Wellness and Performance