

# Crimes of Compassion

## What to Do when Doing Good is Condemned

By

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Most of us know Charlie Chaplin as Hollywood's most beloved and famous silent film star, but the motion picture that caused his career and popularity to take a downturn was a film with sound, *The Great Dictator*, released in 1940. Troubled by the global rise of militarism and nationalism, Chaplin wanted to make a movie poking fun of Adolph Hitler by turning him into a joke. But making such a comedy in the midst of a World War was discouraged and risky. Nevertheless, the Hitler look-a-like moved forward with the project, later explaining, "I was determined to go ahead, for Hitler must be laughed at."<sup>1</sup>

*The Great Dictator* was an unprecedented box office hit and went on to receive five Academy Award nominations, including for Best Picture and Best Actor. U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill both loved the film, but it also led audiences to take a different view of Chaplin who, for the first time, used the medium and his fame to express his own political opinions, which were made clear in his personal and very serious speech at the movie's end. I'm going to present it here in its entirety:

I'm sorry, but I don't want to be an emperor. That's not my business. I don't want to rule or conquer anyone. I should like to help everyone - if possible - Jew, Gentile - black man - white. We all want to help one another. Human beings are like that. We want to live by each other's happiness - not by each other's misery. We don't want to hate and despise one another. In this world there is room for everyone. And the good earth is rich and can provide for everyone. The way of life can be free and beautiful, but we have lost the way.

Greed has poisoned men's souls, has barricaded the world with hate, has goose-stepped us into misery and bloodshed. We have developed speed, but we have shut ourselves in. Machinery that gives abundance has left us in want. Our knowledge has made us cynical. Our cleverness, hard and unkind. We think too much and feel too little. More than machinery we need humanity. More than cleverness we need kindness and gentleness. Without these qualities, life will be violent and all will be lost...

The aeroplane and the radio have brought us closer together. The very nature of these inventions cries out for the goodness in men - cries out for universal brotherhood - for the unity of us all. Even now my voice is reaching millions throughout the world - millions of despairing men, women, and little children - victims of a system that makes men torture and imprison innocent people.

To those who can hear me, I say - do not despair. The misery that is now upon us is but the passing of greed - the bitterness of men who fear the way of human progress. The hate of men will pass, and dictators die, and the power they took from the people will return to the people. And so long as men die, liberty will never perish...

Soldiers! don't give yourselves to brutes - men who despise you - enslave you - who regiment your lives - tell you what to do - what to think and what to feel! Who drill you - diet you - treat you like cattle, use you as cannon fodder. Don't give yourselves to these unnatural men - machine men with machine minds and machine hearts! You are not machines! You are not cattle! You are men! You have the love of humanity in your hearts! You don't hate! Only the unloved hate - the unloved and the unnatural! Soldiers! Don't fight for slavery! Fight for liberty!

## Crimes of Compassion

In the 17th Chapter of St Luke, it is written: "the Kingdom of God is within man" - not one man nor a group of men, but in all men! In you! You, the people have the power - the power to create machines. The power to create happiness! You, the people, have the power to make this life free and beautiful, to make this life a wonderful adventure.

Then - in the name of democracy - let us use that power - let us all unite. Let us fight for a new world - a decent world that will give men a chance to work - that will give youth a future and old age a security. By the promise of these things, brutes have risen to power. But they lie! They do not fulfil that promise. They never will!

Dictators free themselves but they enslave the people! Now let us fight to fulfill that promise! Let us fight to free the world - to do away with national barriers - to do away with greed, with hate and intolerance. Let us fight for a world of reason, a world where science and progress will lead to all men's happiness. Soldiers! in the name of democracy, let us all unite!

With these words *The Great Dictator* showed the world that its impish, innocent, comedic, entertaining little tramp had grown up and become a man with ideas and values of his own. Despite its box office success, Chaplin may have been better off had he simply remained silent. He was known for his silence, appreciated for his silence, loved for his silence, but everything began to change once he began to speak aloud. Although McCarthyism hadn't quite yet arisen, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover was troubled by Chaplain's political positions and used the FBI to take advantage of some of the star's personal problems to publicly smear his reputation, including indicting him with crimes in a case with so little evidence it was thrown out of court.

Despite the damage to his reputation, Chaplain went on to make other films that also expressed his political views, including his opposition to Capitalism and the proliferation of nuclear weapons, which he called "the most horrible invention of mankind."<sup>2</sup> These sentiments were made clear in his 1947 film, *Monsieur Verdoux*, which drew boos at its premiere and was later boycotted.

By then, McCarthyism was in full force and Chaplain was accused of being a communist, which he denied, although he did support groups promoting Soviet and American friendships. Though he was never brought up before the House Un-American Activities Committee, the FBI considered him "a threat to national security" and wanted him deported from the U.S., given that he was officially a British citizen. The government's attempt to do so failed, but in 1950, after Chaplain and his family were on a trip to Europe, his reentry permit was denied, his films were shunned, he became a pariah in the U.S., and would not return again for over twenty years, with much trepidation, after he was invited to receive a special Academy Award. He was, for a long time, nearly erased from American culture and exiled from its society because he tried inspiring us to be our best by loving all of humanity, having an economy that works for everyone, and ending the threat of nuclear holocaust. What a devil.

There have been and are many Charlie Chaplains in the world. Since I've spoken so long about his saga, however, let's use him as a placeholder for all those who have been similarly

persecuted, exiled, and maligned for opposing authoritarianism and cruelty in the name of tolerance and compassion for all people everywhere. The dominant religion in our culture, Christianity, is supposed to be based on the idea that God is love and that we must, as Jesus said, "Love one another." Yet how much opposition there is toward those who truly promote such love—by which I mean promoting human welfare and individual flourishing and freedom—opposition toward those who, like Chaplain, call upon us to "fight to free the world - to do away with national barriers - to do away with greed, with hate and intolerance." You know, those the authorities call "threats to our national security," like Jesus, who was himself executed by the Roman authorities for his subversive teachings about universal love and nonviolence.

Too many are ready to demonize and belittle those who call for genuine love and compassion. They give us derogatory names like "bleeding hearts," "lefties," "tree huggers," even "queer," for choosing to love whomever we want, rather than only those society has approved us to love. Sometimes, they even accuse and try us for crimes, calling us "traitors" and "sympathizers" simply for, again, doing as Jesus instructed, "loving our enemies," calling us slurs like "Indian lover," "n-lover," "race traitor." How can we become a just and compassionate society when we are taught that love and sympathy are betrayals, perversions, and crimes?

How, when we are so ready to forcibly remove those protesting violence against others from their own campuses, or worse, to turn dogs and firehoses and guns against them, can we call ours a Christian nation, or any kind of moral and loving nation at all? Today, even as we witness the unmitigated and indiscriminate killing and torment of thousands of innocent civilians in Gaza, we resort to the name calling, demonization, and criminalization of those who refuse to turn such horror into a silent picture. "Antisemitic!" "Terrorists!" "Pro-Hamas!" Or even the mildest accusation, "Pro-Palestinian!" Some individuals among these thousands of passionate demonstrators may say things that make us cringe and that all of us should rightly disagree with, but, as a whole, they are pro-human and truly pro-life, and that is their true crime. I'm not referring to the narrowly focused definition of pro-life held by those on the far right who like to disguise and compensate for their disdain of life by dressing up as champions of unborn people, while ignoring and even justifying violence and injustice against the living. I'm referring to those who are willing to risk their own lives and livelihoods begging for the lives and wellbeing of others, even those whom the status quo forbids us to love, those they swear are our enemies. God forbid any of us should dare, again, as Jesus instructed, to actually "love our enemies."

I don't mean to myself demonize those who demonstrate such hypocrisy. It is not intentional on their part. They feel certain their opinions are right and those who oppose them must be wrong. And they equate the notions of being right with being righteous, and wrong with being unrighteous. And the righteous are always justified in doing whatever they must, however they can, to stamp out evil, so they believe.

Everybody wants to be right. From an evolutionary perspective this is probably because, like most animals, we are wired to avoid risks. Being wrong can get us killed. So, the probability of staying alive goes up if we repeat behaviors that haven't gotten us killed so far. All creatures are, thus, creatures of habit. It is their habits, their instinctive and repetitive behaviors, that largely define a species. These habits are biologically reinforced, at least in many creatures, including humans, with dopamine, a neurotransmitter that causes us to feel good. As a 2015 National Institute of Health article explains, "Dopamine (DA) plays a vital role in reward and movement regulation in the brain." Dopamine drives us to move in a certain direction. It's analogous to the reins on a horse drawn carriage, unconsciously guiding a species in the safest direction, which is based on the probability that repeating behaviors that haven't yet gotten us killed are the safest bet.

From the standpoint of inductive reasoning—based on probabilities—this is a pretty good strategy, until it isn't. In the long run, however, repetition may be the very thing that gets an organism killed. Where I place a mousetrap, for example, is predicated upon a mouse's predictable behavior. Today our entire planet is in peril because of our species' repetitive behavior. We've known for more than a century about the greenhouse gas effect, but too many of us, particularly conservatives, are hyper-resistant to changing our ways. They actually fear changing themselves more than the disastrous planetary changes happening right before their eyes. This is so because changing our ways doesn't feel good. It feels dangerous. Even if reason and evidence tell us we're wrong, that our habits have become the real danger, the reins guiding us keep pulling us in the same old direction. We are compelled to keep repeating ourselves no matter what, the entire time feeling that we are absolutely right and righteous.

Our species, dumb as it often continues to behave, is also highly intelligent. We have thoughts as well as instincts. We can reflect rather than reflex. We can take hold of the reins for ourselves and consider the best course of action, rather than being driven by irrational fears and habitual behaviors. As the NIH article further explains, "In the reward pathway, the production of DA [dopamine] takes place in the ventral tegmental area (VTA), in nerve cell bodies. From there, it is released into the nucleus accumbens and prefrontal cortex." In laymen's terms, this pleasant neurotransmitter begins in the same area of the brain that is responsible for pleasure, reward, and addiction; and that it is directed to the larger part of our human brain, the prefrontal cortex. In short, feeling right goes straight to our heads. When it does, we can easily become addicted, not only to particular behaviors, but to our own thoughts, beliefs, and ideas.

This is true of us all, but particularly so of conservatives who take pride in their stubborn unwillingness to change their ways, which is why they are conservative. They are proud of clinging to the ways of the past because, again, believing we are right feels really good. Another way to look at it is that evolution has improved our chances of survival by getting

us hooked on repetition. As biologist Rupert Sheldrake once said, “Things are the way they are because they were the way they were.”<sup>3</sup> We are addicted to repetitive behaviors and, as a thinking species, to repetitive ideas. And, like any addict, we cling with ferocity to those behaviors and ideas that will give us our next dopamine rush. When this is the case, unconscious and instinctive forces are pulling our reins, even though we think we are in charge, doing what we determine and believing what we choose. And anyone who says otherwise, suggesting there are better ways and other truths, becomes a threat that must be eliminated. Like unconscious cells, our society collectively attacks the threat by attacking new or different ideas as if fending off a virus.

But I am not explaining all of this to make a case for greater tolerance, as important as tolerance is. The point of today’s sermon is not about being more openminded, but about how collectively threatened we feel by those reminding us of what we should already know, that we must be compassionate toward others, that, as Chaplain said, “We don’t want to hate and despise one another. In this world there is room for everyone. Jew, Gentile - black man - white,” along with Palestinian, Ukrainian, liberal, conservative, criminal, outcast, and anyone else we self-righteously determine is the “evil other.”

The point I’m making today is that throughout history human society has habitually demonized those calling for compassion. This has happened, again, because we fear going in new directions, even with our thoughts, and because of our own addictive neurochemistry that causes certainty and the self-righteousness that follows to feel great. Today, Charlie Chaplain is an example of all those who, like him, were maligned and persecuted for calling upon society to do the right thing.

But how do we know what the right thing is? Truth is, we don’t. Not for certain. Morality is a complicated and controversial subject. Yet this cannot mean it should be based upon our instincts and emotions, our neurochemistry, our whims, nor on our denial of the dignity of those who don’t look, act, or think as we do. We must learn about and consider the field of ethics and determine in advance of any situation what shall be our moral guide, wresting the reins from our ancient biology and giving it to our prefrontal cortex where our executive function and empathy are in charge. Moral behavior must be reflective, not reflexive; it must be broad, not narrow; it must be selfless, not selfish.

For me, as I have often said, morality ought to be rooted in human flourishing and individual unfolding. This is the humanistic ethic, first expressed by Immanuel Kant as “never treat others as a means to your own ends but as end within yourselves,” then revamped during the French revolution as “the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and articulated again in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by Erich Fromm, who said, “the principle that ‘good’ is what is good for [humanity] and ‘evil’ what is detrimental to [humanity], *the sole criterion of ethical value being [human] welfare*,”<sup>4</sup> and “that the unfolding and growth of every person [should be] the aim of all social and political activities.”<sup>5</sup> Charlie Chaplain put

it even more simply when reminding us, “You have the love of humanity in your hearts,” and that this is what ought to motivate our actions rather than, as he also said, “the bitterness of those who fear human progress.”

I’ve also mentioned the sayings of Jesus, whose ethic was also clearly humanistic— “love one another,” including our enemies. That’s a lot easier said than done, which is why a man whose good news proclaimed that we are all God’s children, including, especially, those who have been outcast and demonized, was soon worshipped as God’s only child. By claiming only one person has such distinction, or one religion, or one nation, or one political party, people gain the excuse to disdain and disregard the dignity and even the lives of all who are not among the elect religion, nation, or party, especially of those who dare to remind of what is truly righteous—compassion and care for all of humanity—and of what is truly real—the universal brotherhood and sisterhood of people everywhere, not the imaginary boarders and boundaries we draw and erect to keep us segregated and apart.

As the great Sufi poet Rumi once said,

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,  
There is a field. I’ll meet you there.  
When the soul lies down in that grass,  
The world is too full to talk about.  
Ideas, language, even the phrase *each other*  
Doesn’t make any sense.

I believe this field has a name. It’s called love and compassion for one another. Not only is it a place where we can meet, it is the only place we can meet.

<sup>1</sup> Chaplin, Charles (2003) [1964]. [\*My Autobiography\*](#). London: Penguin Classics. [ISBN 978-0141011479](#)., p. 387.

<sup>2</sup> Booting a Tramp: Charlie Chaplin, the FBI, and the Construction of the Subversive Image in Red Scare America, Author(s): JOHN SBARDELLATI and TONY SHAW, Pacific Historical Review, Vol. 72, No. 4 (November 2003), pp. 495-530.

<sup>3</sup> Sheldrake, Rupert, *The Presence of the Past*, Park Street Press, Rochester, Vermont, 1988, 1995, p.xvii.

<sup>4</sup> Fromm, Erich, *Man for Himself*, An Owl Book, Henry Holt & Co., New York, NY, 1947, p. 13.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229.