“Compassion” is a word we use frequently in everyday conversation, but it is rarely used with anything close to philosophical precision. Indeed, one could go so far as to say we have lost the meaning of the word. As we generally use it, “compassion” appears in similar contexts with words such as “empathy,” “sympathy,” and “love” and may even be equated with one or more of these. Roget’s Thesaurus lists “compassion” as having each of the following distinct connotations: “sensitivity,” “philanthropy,” “pity,” “mercy,” “forgivingness,” “consideration,” “leniency,” “unselfishness,” and “kindness.” Other lexicons include “concern” and “care” as synonyms. Although at times compassion may closely resemble any one of these, it is not identical to any of them. A precise understanding of the word, if ever we had one, has faded into obscurity.

When I say “we,” I include myself in two camps. One is the camp of philosophers; the other is that of North Americans, including everyone who is swayed by the cultural and linguistic influences that predominate here. I would not presume to suggest that the word is misused globally, but at least where I live, “compassion” is almost invariably used to mean “commiseration” (or else to mean nothing at all: The word is now used so loosely that a politician can describe his nakedly self-serving aggression as “compassionate conservatism” without being laughed out of office, and in fact without risk of being denied the highest political aspirations). I contend that it is a mistake to equate compassion with commiseration, and that one important difference between the two is that the former can serve as a foundation for ethical judgment, while the latter is not sufficiently sturdy to do so. This is admittedly an unorthodox usage of the word “compassion,” but its unorthodoxy is the very point of this book. My goal here is to flesh out what compassion really means (as opposed to how we conventionally speak of it) and to show its application in moral reasoning.
I shall risk a short defense of my unorthodoxy before moving on. Imagine a brand of utilitarianism that expressed no concern for promoting overall happiness and instead focused solely on minimizing overall suffering. (In utilitarian terms, the concern would be only with reducing disutility and never with maximizing utility.) This theory guarantees happiness to no one; in fact, no one’s happiness will even be a goal to strive for. The only goal is to alleviate suffering. Some may argue that a world without suffering is a happy world, and indeed such a world would surely be happier than this one, but a life without suffering is not yet a happy life. It is an apathetic life, neither miserable nor satisfied.

Given two versions of utilitarianism, one like I have just described and one that seeks not only to minimize suffering but also to actually promote our satisfaction (i.e., the traditional utilitarian method), the latter is arguably the stronger theory, for it promotes happy lives while the former only promotes apathetic ones. Analogously, commiseration concerns itself solely with the misery of the other, and as such the ethics of commiseration would ultimately prove to be insufficient. If compassion is understood to concern not only feelings of suffering but also of satisfaction, then the ethics of compassion will not fall short on this count. This is, as promised, only a brief defense of my unorthodox use of “compassion,” but more shall be said in its defense as the book progresses.

One of the first observations to make in examining the moral role of compassion is its prevalence in the ethics of some cultures and its lack of prominence in others. Buddhism takes compassion—or, more precisely, wise compassion—as its ethical cornerstone, and as I will argue later, compassion is vitally important to Confucian and Daoist ethics as well. On the other hand, when we examine the ethics of Kant, Bentham, Mill, Aristotle, and most of their philosophical successors, we see that compassion plays almost no role at all. Indeed, Kant and Aristotle would arguably describe compassion as an impediment to good moral reasoning.

The observation here is not a reductionistic comparison of East and West, whatever those might mean; the matter is more complex than that. Indeed, “love thy neighbor as thyself” is about as succinct a mandate for compassion as one could ask for, and Christianity heavily influenced all of the so-called
Western philosophers mentioned before, with the lone exception of Aristotle. What is interesting to observe is that, *despite* his Christianity, Kant allowed compassion to play no role at all in his ethics. Despite the Christian culture in which they found themselves, neither Bentham nor Mill addressed compassion in any serious way, preferring impartiality instead (which is in many ways compassion’s opposite). It is hardly original to point out the Old Testament’s emphasis on justice, both mortal and divine, as opposed to the New Testament’s emphasis on compassion. (I do not claim that compassion is absent from the Old Testament, nor that justice is absent from the New, but only that there is a difference in emphasis.) What is interesting is that, given the choice between justice and compassion, the most influential philosophers in so-called Western history preferred justice.

Aristotle, Kant, and the classical utilitarians have had the greatest influence on modern ethical theory, and those with less influence—though still luminary thinkers in the history of philosophy—have little more to add to the subject. David Hume and Adam Smith both wrote on sympathy, but sympathy is no more synonymous with compassion than pity is. Spinoza is in agreement with Kant regarding compassion’s uselessness. Nietzsche, like Aristotle, writes on pity, but only vitriolically, and where he does describe compassion, it is scarcely recognizable as such. If compassion has not received the attention of those who serve as the pillars of the European and Anglo-American philosophical traditions, one might well expect that those who stand in their shadows would also pay it little heed.

And so we find that, as expected, analytic philosophers today tend not to use the word “compassion” with philosophical precision, for only the tiniest fraction of them pay it any attention at all. And, some may argue, they ought not to pay it much mind, for at least insofar as we commonly think of it, compassion seems given to imprecision. It seems to pull people in different directions and thus to lack the sort of consistency that so many philosophers prefer. For example, one might ask what guidance compassion can give on an ethical problem such as abortion. If I am opposed to legalized abortion, I might explain my position in terms of my compassion for the unborn and also my compassion for the women bearing them, since I do not want these potential mothers to have to live with the guilt of having brought about the
death of an innocent fetus. This is likely to sound paternalistic to those who favor legalized abortion, but why should compassion not be paternalistic? Good fathers do have compassion for their children, after all.

On the other hand, if I am in favor of legalized abortion, I might also explain my position in terms of compassion for the unborn and for the women bearing them. Compassion for women faced with a difficult choice demands that I not seek to constrain their already limited options. Compassion for the unborn demands that I consider what it might be like to live as an unwanted child. The statistics concerning the incidence of psychological disorder and criminal recidivism among adopted children are well known; compassion will bid me to recognize the alternative of adoption as less than ideal. To my opponents, this too may well sound paternalistic, but again, what reason is there to believe that compassion is not paternalistic?

Compassion stands in no better stead with regard to many of the other perennial issues in ethics. For whom am I to show more compassion: the animals injected with experimental toxins or the human beings whose cancer goes into remission after the same toxins are administered as chemotherapy? The same question applies to two people applying to law school, one who gets in and one who does not, based in part on which boxes were checked under “race/ethnicity” on their applications. These cases are the easy ones. It is hard even to figure out what compassion means with regard to patients like Nancy Cruzan, Karen Ann Quinlan, or Terri Schiavo. Is it more compassionate to help them live or to help them die? Contemporary philosophers have written many pages on the issues of physician-assisted suicide, affirmative action, and the use of animals in medical research. If compassion cannot offer a definitive solution to problems like these, there seems to be little reason to take it seriously.

But all of this assumes that compassion is inherently vague. It might be noted that, at least in everyday conversation, “justice” is similarly vague, and that if we want to know whether extubating a patient in a persistent vegetative state is just or unjust, we need to have a more precise sense of what those words mean. Of course, the philosophers who have made the concept of justice their stock in trade are too many to list, and as a result we have any
number of theories of justice to fall back on in determining the justice or injustice of physician-assisted suicide, affirmative action, and all the rest. I contend that compassion is worthy of the same attention.

In common parlance, compassion is roughly understood to be an awareness of the suffering of another coupled with the desire for that suffering’s cessation. It is generally understood to be a commendable trait, Kant and Spinoza notwithstanding. But beyond this, the term “compassion” is largely lacking in philosophical precision. If it is a moral excellence, in what way does it excel? If it is nothing but sharing in suffering, does this not run against the basic utilitarian intuition that less suffering is better? (This is the thrust of both Spinoza’s and Kant’s objections.) We have an aphorism that suggests otherwise: “A sorrow shared is a sorrow halved; a joy shared is a joy doubled.” But does such an intuition do any philosophical work for us? That is, is our intuitive sense of compassion capable of providing ethical guidance? If so, what sort of guidance can it provide? What would an ethic of compassion be like?

The following chapters constitute an attempt to answer these questions. Their purpose is to provide a precise and robust philosophical account of compassion, one that does ethical work for us, and to describe how compassion can provide moral guidance—how, in short, the ethics of compassion might work. In pursuit of this goal, I necessarily diverge from Kant and Spinoza, Hume and Smith, Aristotle and Scheler and look elsewhere for a robust account of compassion. Specifically, I examine the role compassion plays in the Buddhist, Confucian, and Daoist traditions. By comparing and combining these diverse approaches to compassion and to the many traits associated with it, I seek to flesh out an account of compassion that is capable of providing useful moral guidance and to give a sense of what form this guidance will take.

Chapter 1 is an analysis of pity, love, sympathy, and other traits associated with compassion as they appear in the works of Scheler, Aristotle, Aquinas and Augustine, Hume, Rousseau, and Nietzsche. I also take up analyses of compassion offered by several contemporary philosophers, including Robert Solomon and Martha Nussbaum. In each case I argue that compassion is
not best thought of as the philosopher in question thinks of it, though in each case I seek to draw out some helpful insights on what compassion is and how it works.

In chapter 2, I examine compassion as developed by selected Buddhist thinkers, as well as the role of compassion in classical Confucianism and Lao-Zhuang Daoism. I argue that compassion is crucially important to all three of these traditions and that the compassion that appears in them is markedly different from everything that was explored in the first chapter. Though compassion receives little attention in contemporary literature on Confucianism and Daoism, I argue that these two traditions each convey a unique sense of compassion, distinct from each other and from the notions of compassion in Early Indian Buddhism and Zen Buddhism. Despite the differences between all of these views, I argue that each of them is grounded in a notion of relational existence that allows compassion to do real ethical work in those traditions.

In chapter 3, I draw upon the analyses of the first two chapters to describe a functional, philosophically precise account of compassion. This account runs against linguistic intuitions (at least in English), for the compassion I have in mind extends to sharing in happiness as well as sharing in suffering. I shall defend this interpretation more than once, but in these introductory pages, let me only point out that the “passion” of compassion finds its root in the Latin *patī* (“to suffer” or “to submit”), but this in turn finds its root in the Greek *paschein*, which is not “to suffer” but “to feel.” The unorthodoxy of my account goes further than this, but I shall argue that it is justified.

Chapter 3 also describes compassion’s application in moral theory, specifically compassionate virtue ethics, and shows how this theory would provide constructive moral guidance. In the fourth chapter, I address several potential problems with an ethic of compassion and offer solutions to those problems. Together, these two chapters are meant to serve as the theoretical basis for an ethic of compassion.

The fifth and final chapter shows how compassion can be applied to the problems of what contemporary ethicists call “applied ethics.” Specifically, I will describe how an ethic of compassion will approach the issues of capital punishment and physician-assisted suicide. This approach can be extended
to same-sex marriage, abortion, or any of the other traditional issues of “applied ethics,” but in the end an ethic of compassion will move beyond what is typically meant by that term. Because compassion always seeks to be applied, the traditional distinction between “theoretical” and “applied” ethics is rendered meaningless. Moreover, because relationships such as friendship and parenthood are matters of applied compassion, on this view the traditional boundaries of “applied ethics” are radically expanded.

The final goal is a model of ethical reasoning that makes sense of the common intuition that compassion is morally praiseworthy. This model will challenge some highly regarded theories in ethics and political philosophy (Rawlsian justice, for example) and will bear significant similarities with other theories (such as care ethics). The ethic of compassion I describe in the following chapters addresses the Rawlsian and Kantian concern for fairness, the utilitarian concern for satisfactory consequences, and the concern in care ethics for proper treatment of marginalized groups. I suggest that its capacity to do so makes it more than a viable tool for ethical decision making; one might well consider it to be a primary tool in this regard.