COMPASSIONATE GOVERNANCE AND ATTAINING FLOURISHING IN DEMOCRACY

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We commonly believe that the best political system invented so far is democracy. There is a lot of evidence in favor of this assumption and political theory has struggled to come up with political systems that are better suited to ensuring the individual's autonomy while organizing collective decision-making. While the conception of democracy seems to be rationally coherent, the political system must be able to address forces outside that of reason. Notably, Hans Morgenthau described politics as the art of managing the inherent human drive of the *animus dominandi* (the will to dominate or subjugate others) — a drive that, unlike rational greed, inherently seeks to dominate others by diminishing them. This destructive force evades reason and requires, in Morgenthau's view, specific attention. He argues that if politics is inherently evil, as it requires the *animus dominandi* for its functioning in political representation, then political science and statecraft is the art of the smallest evil for the greatest good (Morgenthau, 1945). By extension, there is a parallel between Morgenthau's argument and Reinhold Niebuhr's plaidoyer on the limits of reason to design a compassionate system of governance against the immoral impulses of society (Niebuhr, 1932/2013). While Morgenthau highlights the inherent drive for domination in politics, I propose that

such tendencies can be mitigated through a framework of compassionate governance. This approach integrates moral and emotive (emotional and moving) imperatives into normative structures in the hope of ensuring that democratic systems not only represent the majority but actively work towards the flourishing of all. If reason cannot be the sole determinant of good governance, as both Morgenthau and Niebuhr argue, then how can we guarantee that individual moral impetus — rather than the individual's desire to dominate others — becomes relevant in democratic governance? This question lies at the core of compassionate governance.

This essay argues that true flourishing, as envisioned by Aristotle's *eudaimonia*, can only be achieved through compassionate governance — a system where the emotional and moral imperatives of agape[1] and compassion recalibrate democratic representation to prioritize the well-being of the least enfranchised members of society. The overall argument of this contribution is that in order to foster individual and collective flourishing, a governance system of democratic justice based on reason might not suffice. Instead, the emotive aspects of *agape* and compassion might serve as non-materialist and non-rationalist foundations to recalibrate representation in the sense of a structural normative solution rather than a political discursive one. From this perspective, democratic representation would not be based on identity but on compassion for the destitute and disenfranchised. I will first discuss flourishing as conceptualized by Aristotle for political governance (section 1). Next, I will use Niebuhr's thoughts on collective immoral impulses in democratic governance to illuminate the limits that democracy can impose on fostering flourishing for all its citizens, including the poor and disenfranchised (section 2). Finally, I will propose a model of governance that puts *agape* and compassion — rather than identity — at the center of democratic representation.

1   Agape in this philosophical framework transcends individual emotions and attachments, embodying a moral and ethical commitment to the flourishing of all members of the community. It is a guiding principle that motivates individuals and leaders to act with compassion and empathy, prioritizing the needs and dignity of the least enfranchised members of society.

In his introduction to *Politics*, Aristotle explains that his work on politics should be seen as an extension of his treatment of ethics. In this line of reasoning, Aristotle expands on his ideas about virtues as an individual and collective manifestation in which:

> *[...] if the end is the same for an individual and for a city-state, that of the city-state seems at any rate greater and more complete to attain and preserve. For although it is worthy to attain it for only an individual, it is nobler and more divine to do so for a nation or city-state. (Nicomachean Ethics, I.2.1094b7–10)*

In other words, if ethics — and particularly virtue ethics as conceptualized by the Socratic school — is the art of flourishing and attaining happiness as an individual, politics should be viewed as the art of collective flourishing and the ability of the statesman to attain individual and collective flourishing (or *eudaimonia*, see below) within the right political system.

In his *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Historia Animalium*, Aristotle reiterates his classification of human beings as political animals (amongst the bees, wasps, ants, and cranes), partly gregarious, partly solitary. It is, therefore, impossible for humans to thrive without solitary contemplation (the solitary aspect of human nature); but neither are they capable of flourishing outside of a community in which they can exercise social virtue. In fact, Aristotle argues, the basic purpose of communities is to promote human flourishing, and he defines the highest human good as *eudaimonia*, which is often translated as "happiness" or "flourishing." However, *eudaimonia* does not consist of a state of mind or a feeling of pleasure or contentment. Instead, it is an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue. Amongst the virtues, Aristotle identified *phronesis* or "wisdom" as the virtue that moderates all other virtues and is responsible for knowing which virtue should apply and to what extent in any given situation. Therefore, according to Aristotle, *eudaimonia* consists of the

effective combination of *phronesis* and reason, and human virtue; and excellence in character is that combination of traits or qualities that enables humans to flourish (Mulgan, 1974).

Humans are incapable of flourishing in isolation. They need a community to thrive — a community that they aim to influence to suit their needs: the *polis*. In his *Politics*, Aristotle argues that the goal of the state should be to promote the good life for its citizens, which consists of virtuous activity in accordance with reason. This involves creating laws and institutions that encourage and support virtuous behavior and discourage vice. Aristotle's concept of *eudaimonia*, or flourishing, necessitates a community that promotes virtue. In modern terms, this can be interpreted as a call for governance systems that not only uphold justice and reason but also embed compassion and *agape* in their foundational structural governance principles. Compassionate governance, therefore, becomes essential to achieving the collective flourishing Aristotle envisioned. Aristotle does not go as far as many contemporary political scientists tend to in declaring democracy the superior political system. In Book II of *Politics*, Aristotle discusses the Spartan, the Cretan, and the Carthaginian constitutions. Aristotle views democracy as a deviant constitution, inherently unjust if it assumes property is the qualifying criterion for participation in the *polis*. He does, however, admit that it is the least deviant and unjust system, and that the pooling of wisdom from the crowd leads to a more moral functioning of the political system. And when property is no longer the criterion for participation in the polis, democracy constitutes the only system that is conducive to structural implementation of representational justice based on compassion. Ultimately, according to Aristotle, the role of the state and the statesman is to ensure that the individual can exercise their virtues to attain *eudaimonia* (Miller, 2022). The actual practice of democratic governance, however, has its limitations.

II. Dilemmas Within Political Systems that Must be Overcome

It might be up to the state to ensure flourishing and the well-being of the citizen. The question, however, remains whether governance through the state and by statesmen is indeed the right way to ensure *eudaimonia*.

As Aristotle theorized, there are corrupted forms of each of the governance models: royalty can lead to tyranny under the wrong statesman; aristocracy can lead to oligarchy when the focus moves from the common good of the state to just a part of it; and constitutional democracy can lead to the dictatorship of the many. Morgenthau's depiction of politics as inherently driven by the will to dominate remains problematic in an Aristotelian politics of flourishing. It can be countered by integrating Niebuhr's insights into the moral failures of democratic societies. Arguing in favor of reason as the grounding principle of democratic governance disregards moral, amoral, and immoral individual emotive drives relevant in democratic practice.

When the American Protestant political theologian Niebuhr published his book *Moral Man and Immoral Society* in 1932, it was a response to the injustices he had witnessed in a society proclaiming itself to be democratic and just. This purported justice and morality, supposedly inherent to democracy, was somehow missing. While individuals may act morally, it did not translate to the societal level. Within democratic collective governance, Niebuhr identified a complacency on the part of the majority and those in power to do the right thing for the well-being of those who are disenfranchised. Embedded in and defined by the socio-political system, the sum of certain individuals' actions and decisions will lead to immoral consequences for the destitute and the disenfranchised. Niebuhr saw something in the system of democratic governance that corrupts the translation of the individual moral impetus from the micro level to the macro level. On the collective level, a certain egoism, pride, and hypocrisy unfolds that is not present on the individual level. This might be due to the need to represent collective interests, which is not present on the individual, empathic level. To represent the interests of the group that elected the politician becomes an ethical obligation of the elected individual. This representational political duty, however, causes effects that lead to immoral societies composed of moral people. Aspects of this stem from insecurity and anxious defensiveness of humans in their finiteness, the locale of "original sin" in Niebuhr's perspective. Inspiring the moral sentiments of social classes in a social struggle, according to Niebuhr, relies on

dogmas, symbols, and emotionally potent oversimplifications. These lead to a struggle between the dominant ruling class and the subjugated classes. He argues:

> *No class of industrial workers will ever win freedom from the dominant classes if they give themselves completely to the "experimental techniques" of the modern educators. They will have to believe rather more firmly in the justice and in the probable triumph of their cause, than any impartial science would give them the right to believe, if they are to have enough energy to contest the power of the strong. They may be very scientific in projecting their social goal and in choosing the most effective instruments for its attainment, but a motive force will be required to nerve them for their task which is not easily derived from the cool objectivity of science. Modern educators are, like rationalists of all the ages, too enamored of the function of reason in life. The world of history, particularly in man's collective behavior, will never be conquered by reason, unless reason uses tools, and is itself driven by forces which are not rational.*
> *(Niebuhr, 2013, pp. xv–xvi)*

It is hard to dispute this fundamental critique of the tools of reason in political science in the context of the class struggle between the dominant classes and the subjugated ones in a democracy. The motive — or better emotive (emotional and moving) — force that drives class behavior is derived from symbols, metaphors, and metaphysical principles surrounding the eternal contest of forces. And while the ruling class will argue for peace in favor of perpetuating the status quo (the purported right of all citizens), the struggling class (in Niebuhr's case, industrial workers), who demand justice and a change of system, do not have the system of governance, the executive, legislature, and judiciary on their side. They are left but with one possibility to attain justice, and Niebuhr therefore concludes that this last resort is the use of force to attain equity where peace will not give it to them. Niebuhr's critique of democratic systems points to their failure to translate individual morality into collective justice. Compassionate governance addresses this by embedding moral

imperatives into the very structure of governance, ensuring that policies and decisions are driven by a commitment to the well-being of all, especially the disenfranchised.

III. Compassionate Governance: Recalibrating Democratic Representation

Compassionate governance is a framework in which democratic representation is guided by the principles of *agape* and compassion. It structurally requires that those in power prioritize the needs and well-being of the most vulnerable, ensuring that governance is not merely a representation of majority interests but a commitment to the flourishing of all. There is a fundamental incongruence between Aristotle's theory of political governance by methods of reason and what this means in the practice of democratic governance from the perspective of Niebuhr. According to Niebuhr, democracy as a political system that, once established, fosters the establishment of interest groups or classes (some more powerful than others). As designed by democratic governance, it should be in the interest of each of these groups to be in the majority and thus in power. This by design, would consequently result in the suppression of the disenfranchised if they are not represented in the majority. A well-designed welfare state ensures that the disenfranchised never entirely fall through the cracks of general benevolence. However, the same system that ensures their survival also curtails political resistance other than by representation. Together with an economic system that aids those who already have wealth, the liberal economic state built on democracy makes socio-economic mobility and social justice very difficult. Any class struggle that aims to change this representation violates democratic principles, since the ideas and emotive arguments designed to motivate the suppressed are by necessity intolerant of those in power.

There are, it seems, fundamental limitations to designing a rational system of just democratic governance that truly ensures *eudaimonia* for all citizens. What remains overlooked is Aristotle's initial inspiration for a fair political system is that of the promotion of the right virtues. In order to create sufficient conditions for *eudaimonia*, i.e., the practice of virtues

and the attainment of flourishing and the well-being of all citizens, it requires a moral aptitude beyond mere abidance by the law. Hence, devising a rational and logical system is not sufficient. This is where compassion and *agape* enter the system of governance. Governance in service of those who are not in power necessitates additional emotive drives that exceed representation of political will. To ensure that the governance system aids collective and individual flourishing, the socio-economic context, the context of individual capability, and the lack thereof must be part of political decision-making.

Specifically, compassionate governance necessitates not only that the rational and logical system of democratic governance is well designed, but also that its constituent members, individual citizens, and the *polis* as a whole exhibit virtuous characters in service of what is morally right and just. Since flourishing is an individual and collective state of being, neither the individual nor the collective can experience *eudaimonia* without the other. And those least enfranchised (the destitute and disenfranchised) are the mirror of how well the collective is doing to attain its ends as a moral political community. Beyond representation, this requires that the overall polis have compassion for the weak and the politically "incapable." Conditions of political participation would be the ability to resonate with the suffering of others and to exhibit *agape* for the disenfranchised, rather than alignment of interests of those in power on behalf of the representation of majority interests. Critics may argue that compassionate governance is paternalistic. However, this framework does not imply that the disenfranchised are incapable of helping themselves. Rather, it acknowledges systemic inequities and aims to provide the support necessary for all individuals to achieve their full potential. By ensuring that the least enfranchised are not left behind, compassionate governance fosters a more just and equitable society.

To counterbalance the inherent amoral impetus described by Morgenthau and the moral failings Niebuhr identifies, compassionate governance integrates structural and normative methods that prioritize empathy and support for the disenfranchised. This ensures a more integrative approach to governance that promotes both individual and collective flourishing. Such an approach would follow the following logic: Those

who are already in power have no inherent right to remain in power. They must derive their representational function from their ability to support the disenfranchised. In addition, those who are disenfranchised and lack the conditions for flourishing would be granted legal rights to demand what they need to attain *eudaimonia*. The difference from the current democratic welfare state, where the collective will is expressed though voting and organized protest, is that only through individual entitlements can the disenfranchised demand the fulfillment of the preconditions of *eudaimonia* within a normative framework of economic, social, and cultural rights, such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). A governance of compassion would dictate that a democratic decision is not one of a representation of the will of the many but rather a commitment of the many to help those who are less able to help themselves. As such, for example, lottocratic representation would be equally suitable as long as political responsibility lies in an assessment of how well government serves the most vulnerable and not the most powerful. In such a compassionate governance structure, the principle of distributive justice in the service of compassion would be the ruling principle that moderates all other principles of governance. It would also translate into an economy of compassion that is not based on reducing costs under the dictate of efficiency for the benefit of profit, but rather on including the externalities (such as environmental and social impact) that are usually not considered as part of the cost of production. Such gains in efficiency under the condition of beneficence could contribute to reducing the difference between what those at the very bottom of the income chain presently have and what they would need to attain flourishing.

In conclusion, compassionate governance provides a necessary re-calibration of democratic systems to fulfill the vision of *eudaimonia* articulated by Aristotle and address the moral deficiencies highlighted by Niebuhr. By embedding compassion and moral imperatives into the fabric of governance, we can create a system that ensures the flourishing of all members of society — a system that it not guided solely by reason but by the inherent emotive qualities of compassionate citizenry.

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