

Condensed IS HUMBLE COMPASSION (AGÁPĒ-LOVE) OUR BEST CLUE TO A DEEPER REALITY BEHIND THE UNIVERSE?

My Personal Journey Through Consciousness, Suffering, Science, Philosophy, and Faith
Sid Galloway, BS, M.Div. — sidgalloway.com

MYSTERY AND UNCERTAINTY

The older I become, the less certain I am about many things I once thought I understood. Yet some things now seem clearer than ever.

Looking back across seven decades of life, study, work, relationships, joys, failures, and losses, I have become increasingly convinced that **compassionate humility is not merely a virtue—it is a necessity.**

The deeper we investigate reality, the stranger and more mysterious it becomes.

Science has discovered extraordinary things about *how* the universe works, yet fundamental questions remain unresolved. Ultimately, what are matter, time, gravity, consciousness, and the mathematical laws of nature? Why is there something rather than nothing? Why is the universe intelligible to conscious minds? Why does terrible suffering exist? And why does self-sacrificial compassion exist?

These are not merely academic questions.

During more than forty years working with people as a counselor, mediator, and communication coach, I discovered that such questions often lie quietly beneath our everyday concerns. They influence our sense of identity, purpose, morality, relationships, suffering, and hope.

My own search has included psychology, biology, philosophy, science, theology, animal care and rescue, and personal experience.

I have not found certainty. I have found **clues**.

BEGINNING WITH WHAT WE ACTUALLY KNOW

As Descartes famously observed, *“I think, therefore I am.”*

Whatever else I may doubt, I directly experience my own conscious existence.

I experience pleasure and pain, thought and emotion, joy and grief, wonder and compassion. Everything I believe about an external world—including the existence of other minds—is known indirectly as an inference through perception and reasoning.

This realization fascinated me from childhood.

How do I know other minds exist? What exactly is consciousness? Why should physical processes produce a subjective person who actually *experiences* existence?

Modern neuroscience can correlate brain activity with conscious states in astonishing detail. Yet the existence of subjective experience itself remains one of the deepest problems in science and philosophy.

Materialists, idealists, panpsychists, naturalists, theists, pantheists, panentheists, agnostics, and others propose competing explanations.

None has solved the mystery completely. That should produce **humility rather than dogmatism**.

But among all my conscious experiences, two have especially demanded explanation:

Suffering.

And its extraordinary opposite:

Self-sacrificial compassionate love.

SUFFERING: SOMETHING SEEMS TERRIBLY WRONG

Throughout my life I have witnessed suffering in forms difficult to describe.

Through counseling, pastoral work, friendships, family, and simply living in this world, I have encountered disease, grief, trauma, neglect, abuse, fear, PTSD, cruelty, and death.

I have also witnessed tremendous animal suffering.

I worked with animals professionally as a zoo caregiver and para-veterinary assistant and later spent decades as a volunteer wildlife rescuer and rehabilitator. I have held injured and dying animals in my arms and witnessed suffering produced both by human cruelty and by nature itself.

Suffering therefore presents an enormous challenge to any worldview. If ultimate reality is good, why is this world so often brutal?

If there is a loving Creator, why do children suffer? Why do animals suffer? Why does nature itself frequently seem indifferent to the pain of conscious creatures?

I distrust easy answers to these questions. Any worldview worthy of serious consideration must look directly at the worst suffering experienced by humans and animals rather than explaining it away.

Yet suffering produces another remarkable realization. We recognize that something is **wrong**.

Cruelty, torture, exploitation, and needless suffering do not merely hurt. Most of us recognize them as contrary to what reality *ought* to be.

And that leads to the other side of the mystery.

COMPASSION: SOMETHING SEEMS BEAUTIFULLY RIGHT

Throughout the same lifetime in which I have witnessed terrible suffering, I have repeatedly witnessed something else.

Compassion.

Parents sacrifice for children. Caregivers devote themselves to vulnerable people. Rescuers risk their own safety to save strangers.

Wildlife rehabilitators spend enormous amounts of time and money rescuing animals they eventually release and may never see again.

I have even witnessed animals helping other animals—a bear rescuing a drowning bird and a young opossum helping his brother escape from wire mesh.

And human beings sometimes forgive when revenge would be easier.

These actions fascinate me because genuine compassion can require inconvenience, suffering, loss, and sometimes even death.

Against the dark background of suffering, self-sacrificial love appears almost like a bright star in a night sky.

Across cultures and centuries, people have admired people such as the Buddha, Francis of Assisi, Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and countless unnamed individuals who sacrificed themselves for others.

We admire courage that protects the vulnerable. We admire generosity more than selfishness. We admire forgiveness more than revenge. We admire compassionate service more than domination. Why?

COMPETING EXPLANATIONS

Evolutionary processes can certainly explain important forms of cooperation, social bonding, reciprocal altruism, kin protection, and group behavior. But the larger philosophical question remains.

Why should conscious creatures living within a universe apparently driven by physical forces and biological survival experience self-sacrificial compassion as something **profoundly good**?

Why should we sometimes admire a person precisely because that person willingly gives up reproductive advantage, wealth, security, status, or even life for a stranger—or for another species? And why are we conscious of any of this in the first place?

Different worldviews offer different answers.

Scientific materialism, idealism, panpsychism, pantheism, panentheism, simulation hypotheses, and various forms of theism all attempt to explain some combination of consciousness, rationality, morality, suffering, and existence.

Each offers insights. Each also faces difficulties.

Therefore, I no longer ask which worldview can eliminate every mystery.

Instead I ask:

Which explanation makes the best overall sense of what we actually experience?

This is **abductive reasoning—Inference to the Best Explanation (IBE)**.

We use it constantly.

We examine competing explanations and ask which best accounts for the evidence. The conclusion is not mathematical certainty. It is a provisional judgment about probability.

For me, one of the most important pieces of evidence is consciousness itself. Perhaps consciousness is not merely a late accidental by-product of mindless matter. Perhaps consciousness is somehow fundamental to reality.

But even that leaves a greater question:

If some form of consciousness lies behind reality, what kind of consciousness is it?

That question continually brings me back to compassion.

JESUS AND THE “HOW MUCH MORE” INFERENCE

This is where the story and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth became increasingly significant to me. I am not referring to or defending denominations, institutional religion, doctrinal disputes, or culture wars.

I mean something much simpler.

Love your neighbor.

Serve rather than dominate.

Protect the vulnerable.

Forgive.

Love even your enemy.

One statement of Jesus in particular captures the reasoning that has shaped my own thinking:

“If you, then, though you are **evil**, know how to give **good** gifts to your children, **how much more** will your Father *[the Source of goodness/love]* in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you.”

— Matthew 7:11–12

The reasoning is fascinating. Jesus does not deny human selfishness or cruelty. He acknowledges it directly.

Yet even deeply imperfect human beings possess an extraordinary capacity for compassion. Parents love children. Strangers rescue strangers. People sacrifice themselves for others.

Jesus then makes an inference:

If imperfect human beings are capable of genuine compassionate love, “how much more” might the ultimate Source from which conscious beings arise possess that quality?

That is not a mathematical proof of God.

It is an **inference from something we directly experience toward a possible foundational characteristic of ultimate reality.**

And Jesus immediately connects that vertical inference with a horizontal ethical responsibility:

Because compassionate love reflects the character of the Source, *“do to others what you would have them do to you.” — THE GOLDEN RULE*

The nature of ultimate reality and the way we ought to live become connected.

JESUS AS A LIVING PICTURE OF THE HYPOTHESIS

What fascinates me about Jesus is not merely that he taught compassionate love. Many teachers have done that.

It is the degree to which the historical story of Jesus portrays him attempting to **embody** it. He moved toward society’s rejected people. He defended the vulnerable. He confronted exploitative power. He taught service rather than domination. He commanded love of enemies.

And according to the Gospel narratives, while being crucified he responded:

“Father, **forgive them**, for they do not know what they are doing.”

Whether someone approaches Jesus as divine, prophetic, philosophical, or simply historical, the image is extraordinary.

A human being is threatened. Our ordinary biological impulse is self-preservation: to run away or fight back.

Now picture instead the traditional image of Jesus on the cross. His arms are open. Rather than retaliating, he forgives.

That image has gradually become for me a profound metaphor for the possibility that **self-giving love may reveal something about the deepest nature of reality itself.**

Perhaps ultimate reality does not look like domination. Perhaps it looks like open arms.

SUFFERING, FREEDOM, AND LOVE

Of course, the terrible problem remains: If ultimate reality is grounded in love, why is the world filled with suffering? I do not believe anyone possesses a complete answer.

One possibility found within ancient Jewish and Christian thought is that genuine love requires genuine freedom. Love coerced by absolute control would no longer be love.

If conscious beings possess meaningful freedom, then reality necessarily contains the possibility of rejecting compassionate love in favor of selfishness, domination, and violence.

The biblical story portrays creation in precisely this way: not as a world whose suffering reflects the Creator's ideal character, but as a creation that has somehow become alienated from that ideal.

The biblical literature's opening imagery in Genesis presents humans and animals living peacefully in a Garden - Eden -, with humans functioning as servant-protectors of creation. Later prophetic imagery looks toward a future restoration—a world in which violence between humans and animals finally ceases (Isaiah 11; Romans 8).

Whether one interprets these texts literally, symbolically, or somewhere between, their ethical trajectory is striking:

creation → freedom → alienation and suffering → compassionate restoration.

I cannot demonstrate mathematically or scientifically that this framework is true. Neither can anyone demonstrate that it is false.

Also, I do not think the existence of suffering automatically disproves the possibility that love lies behind reality.

The tension between suffering and compassion remains part of the evidence that every worldview must attempt to explain.

HUMILITY

This brings me back to where I began. I cannot prove my hope with certainty.

Science progresses through provisional models. Philosophy and theology advance through argument, counterargument, and attempts to reason about questions extending beyond direct experimental observation.

In all these fields, human beings reason from incomplete evidence.
That is why **humility is essential**.

Humility allows us to hold convictions without pretending they are certainties. It permits scientists, philosophers, believers, skeptics, and seekers to disagree while continuing to learn from one another.

After nearly seventy years of asking these questions, today I possess fewer absolute certainties than I once did. Yet several things seem remarkably clear because I experience them directly:

Consciousness is real.

Suffering is real.

Compassion is real.

And of those three, compassion is the most hopeful.

MY IBE — INFERENCE TO THE BEST EXPLANATION — AND MY HOPE

I have spent much of my life looking directly at suffering—in counseling rooms, relationships, hospitals, animal care, wildlife rescue, and the larger human world.

Yet suffering is not all I have seen. Again and again I have witnessed conscious beings choose compassion over selfishness, service over domination, forgiveness over revenge, and sometimes the welfare of another over their own welfare.

Those moments are clues. They do not eliminate mystery. They do not prove a theological system. And they certainly do not justify religious arrogance.

For me, they point toward **evidential hope**.

If **consciousness** is more fundamental to reality than we presently understand, and if self-sacrificial **compassion** represents one of the highest expressions of conscious existence, then perhaps compassion tells us something about the **Source** from which consciousness and reality ultimately arise.

Perhaps the deepest foundation of reality is not merely power. Perhaps it is relational. Perhaps it is personal.

Perhaps the strange light of compassionate love shining through this terribly wounded world is our best clue to what—or **Who**—lies behind it.

I cannot know that with certainty. This is where evidential faith and hope come into play.

After a lifetime of searching, this remains for me the **Inference to the Best Explanation** most worthy of continued exploration—and of trying my best to live.

Humble, courageous, self-sacrificial agápē-love for all sentient beings (human & animal).

Sid Galloway BS, M.Div. — sidgalloway.com