On Pity and Its Appropriateness

By: Stephen Leighton

(Forthcoming)

We have become suspicious of pity. Once taken to be a fitting response to the misery of others, we have become concerned that in pitying we look down upon others, and that in being pitied we are diminished. Our suspicions about offering pity are not born out of hard-heartedness or the lack of sympathy for others, but the suspicion that pity’s expression damages where it is meant to restore. So understood, our aspirations to discern the appropriate circumstances in which to feel pity have given way to doubts that pity is an appropriate passion to feel. Can pity be appropriate any longer?

I shall argue that conceptions of pity remain available to us in which pity is an appropriate passion to feel and to receive. The argument begins with our conflicting attitudes towards pity, then sets these against Nietzsche’s condemnation and Aristotle’s endorsement of it. Socrates’ refusal to appeal to the pity of his jurors proves a helpful locus for further reflection. Proceeding in this way introduces historical and exegetical considerations, but the primary aim is to use particular developments within philosophy to discern the boundaries of pity, to see its limitations, and to locate pity’s place upon our own cultural landscape. The argument will address conditions for feeling, expressing, and holding back pity, as well as those for petitioning, demanding, receiving, shunning and repudiating it. At times, it will help to relate pity to other emotions and their values. I end, for example, by differentiating pity from compassion, understanding both to be appropriate in their circumstances. So too analogies with friendship and love prove illuminating, as does a contrast with shame…