

‘No man is devoid of a heart sensitive to the sufferings to the others. Such a sensitive heart was possessed by Former Kings and this manifested itself in compassionate government.

With such sensitive heart behind compassionate government, it was as easy to rule the Empire as rolling it on your palm.’ (Mencius)

Compassion has been proclaimed one of the central virtues in the Christian, and European respectively, culture. It has obviously happened for a reason. Defining ‘compassion’ as a human ability to emotionally respond to the suffering or anguish of those surrounding the individual might well give the explanation. Compassionate attitude has always been considered proper, correct, and moral, in the first place. It seems that the humanity as a whole has developed a somewhat natural support for the underdog. Popular culture does not refrain from this notion at any rate: it is this very underdog the protagonist who receives their deserved attention and understanding from the audience watching almost every film or theatrical performance. The famous ‘Star Wars’ franchise was something that grew from the plot quite straightforward and direct in terms of its discourse. A young man living a life of a farm boy sets out on an adventure to become the hero saving the day by destroying an evil space station which is capable of exploding planets across the galaxy. A tempting source of compassion this story is! The chances are, however, that it will not concern particular people who are indifferent enough. In addition to this, does compassion anyhow relate to the relationship between a subject and object of power or influence? Is it possible that governance as a process of control possesses a compassionate nature? The vulgar display of corruption and uncontrolled authority which is to be seen in the modern world is something to provide a negative answer. Thus, the central concept evaluated in this essay being compassion, I would have to question the idea of ‘compassionate government’ as addressed by Mencius. My critique will be dedicated to two general ideas: compassion as a human habit and, consequently, compassion as an instrument of governance.

Compassion as ‘sensitivity to the sufferings of the others’. I have already stated that compassion is deemed a perennial virtue in the Christian tradition. Not surprisingly, even those

philosophers who chose to distance themselves from the interpretations akin to Christianity had not only a similar understanding of this concept, but a likely view of its essence and place in the relationships established by human beings. One of the central figures in the philosophy of irrationalism, Arthur Schopenhauer considered suffering as a perpetual state of an individual which is to be overcome. This German thinker's position was that compassion, alongside acceptance of anguish in general, was the solution to the monstrous condition of everlasting strive to withstand the pressures of the outside world. This idea does not require a specific exemplification because there probably is no culture that does not have a saying related to the topic of supporting one's nearest and fighting certain complications together. 'Compassion is prior to friendship' is a notion which could be derived from Schopenhauer's philosophy.

A somewhat different outlook was suggested by the famous 'apprentice' of the aforementioned philosopher who is Friedrich Nietzsche. The latter thought of friendship as a matter of great importance uniting the likeminded individuals but his insight in what its essence is was not based on the idea of anguish and mutual fight against it. Nietzsche gave value to the relationships centering around shared happiness, positive emotions which could be related to. Apparently, various thinkers have indeed interpreted friendship somewhat differently but this 'sensitivity' which was proposed by Mencius. Should one alter his quote by changing the word 'sufferings' to 'emotions' would not, surprisingly enough, change the meaning to an extreme extent. However, is it really true that compassion is akin to every man?

Thus I would like to resort to the existentialist concept suggested by Martin Heidegger which is 'thrownness'. What this word defines is a state in which a being realises its existence as impeded by challenges imposed on it from the environment. According to Heidegger's ontology, every being aware of its own existence is bound to experience 'thrownness' as a natural state. It is impossible to imagine someone who does not struggle with problems of some sort because there are always issues we have to take care of, however basic or complicated they could be. From my perspective, 'thrownness' is what acts as the very first counterargument to Mencius's mentioning of 'sensitivity'. As long as 'thrownness' exists (and it probably is a constant state), there has to be a relative deficiency in the support a human being might receive from the outside. Thus, the following statement arises: 'Should thrownness not elapse, then there is no compassion to surmount it'. This compassion has to be few in matters both quantitative and qualitative: neither

there will never be the exact number of human beings, albeit strange it does actually sound, the compassion of whom might compensate for the feeling of being thrown into the world, nor there will always be the exact emotional response from the individual's surrounding to the former's suffering. A perfect example depicting this could be the guitar – an instrument literally manifesting the human soul. The guitar neck can be a perfection with the appropriate choice of wood providing the tonal response sought by the musician; the body could well resonate properly with a proper installation; the hardware could be made of finest metal confections; the open strings could be fine-tuned to reach the exact pitch one needs. Despite the seemingly ideal combination, when chords or certain notes up the neck are played, the chances of microtonal fluctuations are high. The limit is impossible to reach, so it happens with struggling against thrownness.

What has been considered above is mostly an intimal subject of individual relationships. Nonetheless, it could easily be applied to governance as a relationship between the authority and the object of its influence. Furthermore, it is this aspect of everyday life that, in my opinion, is to be secluded from the emotional and personal to the utmost extent. Those in power might well respond to what is asked from whom they control. The category of compassion as a virtue is not present here, though. Government as an institution is actually devoid of 'heart sensitivity', as proposed by Mencius, otherwise there would not have been so many people experiencing Heidegger's 'thrownness' in the most physical way possible. Social challenges have always been present and although the way they are looked at has evolved through the course of history, they are still the living proof that the emotional response to the suffering of the individual could be enough.

Compassion as an instrument of power. The first political scientist in a way a modern person would interpret a person as such was Niccolo Machiavelli, a famous Italian philosopher of later medieval times. It would not be an overstatement to say that he revolutionised the understanding of politics by employing a different outlook of how it works. The central idea of Machiavelli's political philosophy is an interpretation of what a real political force is. It is the dominative autocrat that has seized power by all means available, should it be conspiracy, deception, treachery or any other thing unrelated to the category of virtue. Paradoxically, Machiavelli's autocrat is to be guided by *virtu* which equals resolution, decisiveness and determination.

Friendship is completely misplaced in this line, so is compassion. The road to power has nothing to do with it and this has been well displayed at almost every revolution occurring in the recent millennium. Overthrowing governments, as well as both revolutionary forces – the vanguard and the conspirators, has never known mercy. The French Revolution began as the aggressive and rapid establishment of new liberal values, nonetheless resulting first in executions among the ones who were responsible for its very scenario, then in the restoration of absolutism with Napoleon as the most preferable candidate. Compassion was not something those in command would resort to as an instrument of political manipulation since they had been guided by ambition in the first place. Citing Nietzsche yet again, situations as such have been a figurative depiction of ‘will to power’ – will of realising political leaders’ own ambition.

There is room for dichotomy, though. Franklin Delano Roosevelt is amongst the most astounding figures in the history of the 20th century. Surely this American president was not engaged in any radical and bloody political games which did actually take place at the time of his presidency: the Spanish Civil War is a vivid example. Roosevelt is remembered as a politician who was capable of rejuvenating the US economy after the detrimental Depression, developing a number of social protection policies, and, most importantly, setting the framework for his country to become one of the superpowers in the near future. One could suggest that it was somewhat of both virtue and *virtu* which Roosevelt was guided by. ‘He must have been compassionate to the citizens of his state, attentive to the needs of theirs!’ one might loudly proclaim. The reality has to be different, though. Compassion could not be Roosevelt’s motivation. One has to be mindful of his rather long previous political career. Reaching the top was a task complicated enough to require Roosevelt to be sensible, rational, decisive, even manipulative at certain times. From my point of view, it was this rationality as stated by Machiavelli that made a difference. Roosevelt’s policies could well correspond with values of comfort, justice, liberty, but the former were to fulfil the very basic and obvious objective in the first place which was gaining and retaining power.

What could also be recalled at this point is the concept of Ur-Fascism, suggested by an Italian writer and semiotician Umberto Eco. According to him, every ultra-right regime or ideology reminiscent of fascism could be built of a few certain components, one being more or less dominant in every particular case, e.g. the xenophobic aspect of Mosley’s proposals was way less evident than in Mussolini’s nationalistic stratagem. What is peculiar is not the post-

modernistic (mosaic, compoundable) nature of fascism, but the one fact outlined by Eco: the source of every fascist regime was the socio-political power which could be manipulated due to its frustration. The 'frustrated class' was always the most impetuous driver of a conservative revolution, and it was their resentment which was addressed by fascist leaders. The masses were willingly accepting the promises of future dictators whose populism did appear as a sound gesture of compassion. 'The hardships of yours were a by-product of the late inefficient governance which was based on false liberal ideals and fooled you as a result. We suffered long enough and now we unite to fight the mutual enemy (whatever it may be) and regain what has been lost!' echoes the fascist propaganda. Such motto did sound encouraging and indeed promising for numerous members of the working class deprived of work and means to survive in post-WWI Italy, post-Depression Germany or Romania. It had to be the emotional response and compassion they felt coming from the propagandists that made them willingly submit to the creation of authoritarian and totalitarian monstrosities of the 1930-s.

Populism has never been anything but a false promise. Therefore, 'compassionate government', in Mencius's words, was a delusion skilfully implemented by the fascist authorities. The masses were exploited respectively and it could be easily explained by their nature. According to one of the first people to investigate the psychology of masses, a French scientist Gustave Le Bon suggested three primary aspects of interaction within the mass as an entity which go as following: anonymity, influence, suggestibility. I would suggest that the image of compassion, which, as it was mentioned before, could well seem a tempting offer to the 'frustrated class', could basically undergo each of the three. Anonymity could well imply that compassion is shared by the mass as a unanimous feeling of responsiveness; even though the image of an enemy or a leader, as Eco would put it, are apparently stronger 'merging' factors, this sense has to be utilised as well. Influence would be the emotional interaction within the mass, whereas suggestibility enables numerous perceptions of what that compassion is, yet still restricted by the very clear populist statements employed from above.

To summarise this segment, I would like to draw a parallel between the 'compassionate government' and a concept of 'city of ends' which belongs to a French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. Mencius deems 'compassionate government' the most effective form of ruling and explains this by the responsiveness and 'sensitive heart' of those in the head of the Empire. The

approach is obviously paternal but it still focuses on the notion of virtue, justice being the result of certain caress towards the citizens. Sartre's 'city of ends' has nothing to do with imperial governance and is instead based on a utopian notion of a mutual attempt of realising every citizen's freedom which cannot be constrained naturally. It is a republic of joined forces in pursuit of reaching every citizen's authenticity which does sound alike when compared to the 'greater good' of the Empire based on compassion. The needs of everyone are to be met in every utopia however organised it could be. I have a simple question in this regard: is governance really about this? Institutionally, the regulations could differ but governance is generally based on power. It could be the power of coercive or rewarding nature, the power of complete responsibility of one's actions, as Sartre saw freedom. Nonetheless, power implies the existence of some authority. It is this authority that does not know compassion of any sort but a basic order of subject one possessing power and subject two being controlled from the outside.

Compassion as a metanarrative. This final paragraph is going to be short. Speculating on the concepts of Mencius and Sartre, I have made a peculiar observation. The age of post-modernity we live in is about the negation of metanarratives. It is French poststructuralist philosopher's Jean-François Lyotard's concept regarding ideas of progress, virtue, order that have outlived themselves by a certain point in present. No matter how hard one might go on compassion, what does seem true is the fact that it surprisingly is not a metanarrative. Although it might be proclaimed as a guiding virtue and no one would seem to care much about the bold statement, it is impossible to say that this quality and ability is extinct. We, human beings, remain compassionate, whether it is the result of a centurial mindset or the egoism of the gene, as suggested by Richard Dawkins, which tries to preserve itself by all means, including but not limited to protecting or otherwise supporting the nearest of ours. Power, however, is an institution of control and, in its essence, a pursuit of influence over something or someone. Is there really room for compassion? I would doubt it.

Thus, I would like to come to a conclusion of this essay. From my point of view, a 'heart sensitive to the suffering of the others' belonging to every human being is a rather tall order because it is impossible to imagine compassion simultaneously expressed by the humanity as a whole. Speaking of matters political, paternal approach to power as manifested through compassion towards citizens does also sound too idealistic and far from reality. An image of

compassion could surely be utilised to gain support but it is not compassion itself that acts as an instrument of power. Political influence is always built for the sake of some ambition leading the one who seeks authority. The chase after power and a long-lasting strive to withhold it are not connected to compassion and cannot be based upon it. The authority is by no means obliged to feel compassion and could be simply indifferent to the anguish of a man whom it controls.