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Second Topic

“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 has manifested itself in compassionate government. With such a sensitive heart behind compassionate government, it was easy to rule the Empire as rolling it on your palm.”

Empathy as an innate human attribute

Mencius boldly postulates the existence of a universal intrinsic (“*No man is devoid...*”) sense of empathy, poetically stated as a “*heart sensitive to the sufferings to the others*”. The implied category of subjects possessing this intrinsic quality is certainly all humankind, since the formulation “*No man...*” is merely an archaic formulation of ‘no human’ or ‘no individual’ (a linguistic legacy of a more patriarchal time). He further elaborates that such innate sensitivity to the suffering of others was possessed by “*...Former Kings...*”, which supposedly resulted in “*...compassionate government.*” Mencius thus concludes, based on these premises, that it was as easy “*as rolling it on your palm*” to rule the Empire (the long-lasting conglomeration of states which we would call the predecessor of China).

The **staggering assumptions** underlying this postulate are vital in its examination. Mencius must have assumed these premises for his proposition to be coherent:

- a) Suffering is clearly definable as an emotion or a phenomenon of a defined unambiguous group of conscious subjects.
- b) As such, humans are able to understand and perceive the suffering of others regardless of their potentially distinct group identity (ergo the *Former Kings* were not only sensitive to the suffering of their nobility, but also the poor, the women or the slaves).
- c) These benevolent rulers are able to translate their sensibility towards the suffering of others into prudent functional government which would minimize said suffering.

The **enormous implications** are yet even more vital in the examination of Mencius’ proposition. Because if universal intrinsic sense of empathy exists, the implication of which is

universally compassionate treatment amongst humans as well as benevolent “*compassionate government*”, two issues seem to exorbitantly problematic and incoherent with the statement:

- a) There would be no need for the field of **Ethics**, if suffering would be so easily quantifiable and all had an innate sense of how to act when confronted by various ethical dilemmas.
- b) There would be no need for **Political Philosophy** either, as the ideal compassionate government would always be the necessary outcome of innate sensibility to suffering, which, as Mencius concludes, has only resulted in benevolent, sensible and compassionate government.

My inquiry will retain an equivalent **structure** for the sake of clarity and simplicity; it will examine the three major points of:

1. The **nature of suffering**, human perception of it and the problematic relative scope of those who are in the scope of moral consideration and those who are not.
2. The **coherency** of Mencius’ proposition with **Ethics** as such.
3. The **mechanisms, principles and history** of government and human civilization as such, and whether Mencius’ hypothesis holds ground even with extensive philosophic and historical hindsight.

As for the final point of clarification, Mencius appears to assume a Consequentialist paradigm, that is to say that his definition of good (*moral, prudent or right*) actions are simply those that minimize the overall suffering. Of course, he was likely not acquainted with precisely this exact, arguably stemming from the “western tradition of philosophy”, classification of morality; however, it seems like a reasonable and accurate approximation, useful in grasping the underlying context of suffering for this examination.

1. Nature of suffering

The very **definition of suffering** seems to be problematic from the outset. We can be certain (from a linguistic standpoint) that it implies a strong, unpleasant, hurtful, negative emotion or state of a conscious subject. However, we cannot be certain of who are the implied conscious subjects; two broadly accepted categories of subjects considered as worthy of moral consideration come to mind, either it is the case that **all human beings** are subjects, or, even more radically, it is the case that **all living beings capable of suffering** are included in the scope of the proposed moral consideration. Neither of those definitions can practically be coherent with Mencius’ proposition.

Even with the first, less radical, definition of suffering, human beings, as imperfect entities of flesh and bone, are not capable of perfect understanding and empathy towards others. We are all imprisoned in our **personal subjectivity**, our own personal phenomenology, the lens through which we perceive the world. We are, in a way, an unquantifiable speck of consciousness on the inside, and, at the same time, when we glance into the mirror, we are a quasi-randomly evolutionarily assembled heap of organic cells. This immense contrast, usually first perceived in early childhood, in a period termed the Mirror Phase (as described by Jacques Lacan), reflects the huge discrepancy

between one's personal subjectivity, and their outside appearance. Thus we can only truly understand our own personal subjectivity, the experiences, phenomena and objects we have perceived through the imperfect instrument of our body; as Edmund Husserl would put it: we are only familiar with the Noema of our individual phenomenology. Thus, we can never truly understand or even begin to quantify the subjectivity of other humans with a reasonable degree of accuracy. Moreover, because of modern psychology and cognitive science, we know that there is great variability in how both "nature" and "nurture" affect one's perceptual tendencies. That is to say that, firstly, there is immense variability in genetic pool of humans, which can strongly shape ones tendencies, faculties and responsiveness to various environmental stimuli; and secondly, that social praxis is strongly deterministic of one's character traits. Ergo humans differ widely in very basic traits such as agreeableness, propensity to feel satisfied or dissatisfied, responsiveness to pain and so on. Therefore, even if one assumed that the same "basic form" of consciousness of all other humans is the same as she experiences, the more nuanced differences in character would still render her unable to truly understand the experiences of other humans; it would, at best, be left to the arbitrary criterion of who is more cognitively similar – whom she can relate to most. As such, it seems unthinkable that each human would be able to truly understand, perceive and quantify the suffering of another.

Digressing slightly, to question the even more **fundamental assumption** of Mencius' claim, even if it were the case that human beings *could* grasp the subjectivity of other humans, would it be the case that they would *care*? Evolutionarily, such a mechanism seems contradictory to the only primary goal of procreation. The only true matter of concern for an evolving organism is their own personal interest; otherwise, the mechanism of "survival of the fittest" would not function and life as such would not have evolved. Therefore, as long as the world evolving humans inhabited was not completely free of conflict with other humans, the trait of empathy without contingency does not make sense. It would die out, because it makes the individual excessively vulnerable, since there often was evolutionary gain in exploiting a different being, as well as there is evolutionary gain in developing friendly relations *contingent* on trust and cooperation. As it is obvious that humans did not (and still do not) inhabit a world free of conflict, it cannot be the case that such a trait would be viable in humans.

Even if we accept the premise that humans are capable of **intersubjectivity** to a reasonable extent. That is to say we accept that people are social beings, and as such, they are necessarily able to communicate and achieve some degree of understanding of one another. In this paradigm, with humans as **fundamentally social** beings, the proposition remains extremely problematic. The social nature of humans itself implies the creation of various groups, identities and hierarchies in the social fabric. The engendering of those classifications seems unavoidable in the development of human societies, as there is inherent variability in individuals, as well as there is a necessity to fulfill differing roles in each society. Moreover, humans never emerged as one cooperative planetary civilization, rather, as thousands of tribes scattered throughout the earth, differing linguistically, culturally and by conditions of livelihood. Therefore, we see that there are great differences with relation to identity both within individual societies, and amongst individual societies. It is impossible

to escape the biases which increase the likelihood of identification with those that the individual considers the “in-group” rather than those of the “out-group”. Such identification is not binary, but exists on a spectrum ranging from very closely identifiable (simply said, a friend) to unidentifiable with (practically, an enemy). We can observe that the group identity dynamics undeniably influence whose suffering one considers *worthy*. We can proclaim with utter confidence that the *compassionate Former Kings* did not consider the suffering of the slaves of his Empire *worthy*, as well as he did not consider the suffering of the nomadic tribes he had to defeat and slaughter as *worthy* (because there was a necessary trade-off in aggregate suffering, based on the rivalry of different civilizations stemming from scarcity of resources), as well as they did consider the suffering of women equivalently *worthy* as that of men. Consequently, we see that intrinsic universal empathy is evolutionarily unthinkable in the context of the development of human civilization. Even under the assumption of intersubjectivity, as well as precisely because of it, group identity dynamics prevent universal empathy to be a viable trait of human nature.

Secondly, the postulate is even more clearly **incoherent** with the **second definition** of suffering. If we regard the criterion for suffering to be *worthy* the mere ability to experience suffering, we should, in all likelihood, include other perceptive beings into our moral consideration of suffering, that is to say, we should include all animals complex enough to suffer. Peter Singer pointed out the unjustifiability of considering only humans as worthy of moral consideration, as the criterion might very well seem extremely arbitrary. He argued that the ability to feel suffering should be the only criterion for moral consideration. With insights from modern biology, it seems highly likely that this is the case, that the human race is imposing immense pain on millions of other conscious beings. If human nature, or as Mencius puts it, *a sensitive heart*, would entail understanding and empathizing with any sort of suffering of “...the *others*.”, it should also be the case that humans are at least somewhat able to grasp and consider the suffering of all conscious beings in an innate manner. That, however, is absolutely not the case, as this idea did not emerge as any sort of natural instinct, rather, as a result of complex pondering of moral consideration and the nature of suffering from both a philosophical and biological standpoints. Thus, it cannot conceivably be the case that human beings have an innate sensitivity to suffering as such, since Mencius himself did not even think of all the categories of suffering he did not include.

2. Ethical view

The proposition must also be evaluated in the context of **long-lasting complex discussion** of different approaches to morality. It must be reiterated, that Mencius boldly universally includes all humans as possessing the quality of a “*heart sensitive to the sufferings to the others*”. The necessary implication is that humans **a) care about** and **b) are able to quantify** the suffering of others. As already argued in Part 1, these do not necessarily seem to be the case under close inspection; however, Mencius’ proposition contradicts the very existence of regulatory institutions, or the importance of **Ethics** in itself.

If the **benevolent and righteous treatment** of other human beings is innate, then there is no need to develop systems of behavioral rules, or even criminal law as such, since people will strive to minimize the suffering of others in any case, and bureaucratic laws would only inhibit their personal benevolence. Regulatory institutions are simply any constructs that aim to shape human behavior, be it the Christian Ten Commandments, be it social conventions and taboos, be it the institution of the police as the authority enforcing criminal law. The very existence of these institutions implies that human nature is not a perfect regulator of human behavior. Sigmund Freud discusses the social kinds of institutions regulating human behavior in his discussion of civilization, for example, the simple convention of covering one's mouth when sneezing. It is not an innate instinct, a wild bear or a solitary human, would never bother to cover their mouth, however, human civilization developed to consider it "undesirable behavior", in its own interest of self-preservation (as freely sneezing spreads infectious diseases). Society imposes such rules on individuals through social pressure and various cues, with the ultimate threat of some sort of ostracism. Herbert Marcuse describes the functioning and roots of various such institutions in depth in his work *Eros and Civilization* and how they aim to practically coerce the vile human nature to behave in accordance with long-term benefit of society. These are conventions that arise as societal constructs, and can only change ever so slightly with any change in conditions; undeniably then, they must be only human-made institutions created to further the prosperity of societies. As such, it cannot be the case that people would always behave correctly, maximizing the aggregate good, were it not for these regulatory institutions. Since they had to be created by human ingenuity, not through instinct, the innate sense to act morally does not exist.

Moreover, as already hinted, the stance requires a very **dogmatic view of morality**, namely a simple Consequentialist approach (one could even get the impression that Mencius is concerned with yet narrower Utilitarianism, but he does not specify his approach that clearly), which completely disregards Deontology or Virtue Ethics as viable alternatives; approaches to Ethics which, moreover, can be said to more closely resemble human preferences and behavior in what we consider moral behavior. (E.g. the fact that most people deem it unconceivable to rip apart a person to take their organs and utilize them for "greater utility", since intuitive morality often seems to follow rules of principle as well as consequences as criteria for decisions.) The fact that the postulate would be absolutely inconsistent with two major fields of Ethics makes it dubious at best; as it presupposes that aggregate suffering is the only metric to evaluate the morality of actions on. Moreover, quite interestingly, the statement is refuted by the very existence of the field of Ethics, as well as the possibility of creation of other approaches to Ethics, as if it were the case that the proper treatment of others is an intrinsic attribute, every human could make the "moral decision", thus there would never be a need to contemplate moral dilemmas, or approaches to morality with metrics different that aggregate suffering. Paradoxically, the discussion of Ethics itself would have to be considered immoral, as the pondering of other approaches would only serve to convolute the righteous innate ability of each individual to fully empathize and choose correct actions. Furthermore, there would be a necessary opportunity cost to each discussion concerning Ethics, as the people involved could be maximizing the good (or minimizing suffering) doing something else, which would always be the prudent choice in the Consequentialist paradigm; as well as the already

mentioned vanity of any rational approach to morality in the case that it is innate. Considering all this, we see that Mencius' proposition is unequivocally incoherent with the logic and development of philosophy, namely the exact field of Ethics.

3. Political philosophy

As a last point of contention concerning Mencius' declaration, the implications for **Political Philosophy** must be considered. In the latter part of the quote, he concludes that the proposed reality results in compassionate government and an ease of ruling. The obvious problem is the fact that this contradicts another field of Philosophy once again, namely Political Philosophy; however, it is also incorrect on the conceptual level of power dynamics.

The implication that a perfect compassionate benevolent form of government would **naturally arise** from the state of nature seems, with the modern hindsight on history, a priori inconsistent with reality. Even if we partially disregard the problems with innate empathy analyzed in Parts 1 and 2, it is simply incoherent with the attempts to establish a non-exploitative egalitarian form of government which happened, with ever so slight improvements, as conditions allowed it, throughout human history. Societal institutions such as slavery, the whole of the feudalistic system, or the simple matter of acceptability of torture, are a testament to the fact that the interest of societies (most importantly, the interest of the ruling class of individual societies) does not lie in the benevolent will to maximize the aggregate well-being; it lies in the maximization of their personal well-being, as they are, and always were, mere limited human beings, subject to emotion, existential dread and the will to power. This *might* and *might not* entail caring about the majority of people in a society. The issue depends on the societal structure and power dynamics. Regardless, the essential fact is that it is not a *necessary* attribute of those ruling elites, thus it cannot be their innate property. This is evidenced by the numerous failings of societies to regard vast amounts of their population as worthy of moral consideration, or even by the continuing inability of humankind to consider all suffering as worthy, as elaborated on in the latter section of Part 2. We need not look far for examples, they include, for instance, the phenomenon of genocide, very much present in human history for thousands of year (from Julius Caesar's annihilation of Gallic tribes to Rwanda), as well as war or slavery (from Ancient Egypt, to Post-Renaissance United States of America). The necessary context for Mencius' postulate to be correct therefore does not seem to exist.

The consideration of **societies failing** to strive for general well-being and universal rights of the individuals who pertain to them, is a manifestation of the incoherency of Mencius's declaration. As already hinted upon, if it were the case that benevolent governments are a simple and natural outcome of chaos and the state of nature, they would have developed independently. More importantly, there would be no need to discuss any issues pertaining to Political Philosophy, as the correct and good-maximizing governments would spontaneously rise up. Thinkers from Plato to John Locke tried to suggest various forms of benevolent tyrannies and efficient, good-maximizing

ruling leviathans, however, all such forms of government seemed to fail the test of history. This crude fact can only be coherently explained with the analysis in the previous paragraph about personal interest of the ruling elite, as well as the analysis in Part 1 concerning human nature itself. Democracy evolved as the only system able to guarantee human rights and a reasonable extent of well-being precisely because it operates with the imperfections and potentially subversive nature of humans the most. Democracy thrives through having numerous institutions, which consist of necessarily imperfect humans, controlling each other. This fact is manifested, for instance, in the tripartite division of power, as proposed by Montesquieu. Once again therefore, Mencius' proposition fails to engage coherently with the societal and philosophic reality of civilization.

Synthesizing and concluding, the bold proclamation uttered a in the distant past by the philosopher Mencius could have potentially had some viability for an optimistically minded person. However, his hypothesis simply cannot stand the test of examination with insights from all facets of modern science. The postulate fails, on several layers, to even be consistent with an immense amount of philosophical material, in the field of Ethics as well as in the field of Political Philosophy. The inability to even consider the out-groups of the society the quote originates from is only a further testament to its inability to reflect the human condition truthfully, such as the consideration of other categories of humans, or even other categories of beings capable of experiencing suffering. Consequently, Mencius' noetic mistake should be taken note of and learned from. Although his proposition is utterly wrong, we must consider it so as not to become victim to similar fallacies; to not forget the mistakes and atrocities of human history.