

***“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 [2a:6], A Bilingual Revised edition, Translated by D. C. Lau.

Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2003, p. 73

## **1. Introduction**

Various times when discussing ethics, the issue of an innate moral sense comes up for debate. Some argue that humans are born with the necessary sensibility to live a moral life; others argue that morality is granted onto us by a divine creator; some think that morality comes purely from culture; and some believe that it comes from a mixture of factors. I fall into this latter category.

The answer to the question of the existence of an innate moral sense will also affect one’s view of the morality which should guide government in how it performs its duties and which duties it should perform.

Having recognized this, I will, to the best of my abilities, try to address these issues while constructing a reasonable and compatible model for a well-guided morality, in order to cover the moral insufficiencies left by the deficiencies of the Innate Moral Sense that humans, in my view, possess.

## **2. Innate Moral Sensibility and its Deficiencies**

The model of morality to which I subscribe considers that an Innate Moral Sense, as that mentioned by Mencius in the form of a “compassionate heart”, exists. However, it also considers that it is insufficient to provide an individual with a well-guided morality due to its deficiencies (such as tribalism which results in xenophobia).

### **2.1 Innate Moral Sensibility derived from Evolution**

I strongly attest that all humans are born with an innate moral sense. Why? As the theory of Darwinian Evolution has made clear, humans have evolved as tribal creatures. This comes from the fact that we are physically inferior, in relation to lots of our fellow animals. As such, we developed intelligence and, from thereon, have always lived in groups of varying sizes in order to increase our

chances of survival. This let us reach the pedigree of evolutionary success which we occupy today, as the sole ruling species on Planet Earth. But what does this all mean? It means that group identity is hard-coded into our DNA. If it wasn't, survival would be made tremendously difficult for most.

## **2.2 The Deficiencies of our Moral Sensibility, Tribes, and Xenophobia**

But, if it is true that we are born with an inherent moral sense, how come humans have committed such atrocities on their fellow men? I believe the answer to this lies in one of the words that I've used so far: "tribes".

Tribes are, by definition, a limited subset of humans. Humans behave morally towards their own tribe but seem to have a hard time applying this morality to complete strangers, physically or ideologically different people which they do not consider part of the same group. This characteristic originally arose in order to shield ourselves from being taken advantage of by those who belong to other groups and thus have their pattern of behavior as an unknown variable.

In fact, quite often humans will fall into resentment of others based purely on an image of a person or type of person which has been fed to them purely based on what they've been told, and have not actually experienced.

Thought this instinct for tribalism has been useful in the past, now that we have nearly accomplished a nearly global society, it has become an obstacle towards peaceful interaction among humans which are perceived as being "different". We call this phenomenon "xenophobia", a fear of the other. This fear, as no longer being useful, has to be quelled somehow, and I believe that the "how" comes down to a rational approach to this issue, and the proliferation of its conclusions in our culture.

## **3. Rationality and Culture**

Having said this, I believe I have made it clear that I hold no intention of arguing that culture is not of great importance when it comes to a human's moral sensibility, despite recognizing an innate moral sense in ourselves. On the contrary, culture can be used to manipulate the moral sensibility which is innate in us all towards committing immoral actions, as it has been many times before. In other words, it can make humans commit seemingly immoral actions while still thinking of themselves as doing what is right.

In the example given by Mencius, he refers to a King. Let us not forget that kings, despite their power, also live constrained by society to an extent.

"If you live outside of society, you are either a lowlife or a God" - Aristotle

Despite this, I do understand, in context, why Mencius chose this example. It has to do, in part, with what he was defending in his larger thesis, but it is also an attempt to rhetorically ask the question: "If a man has such power that his actions against certain people have no consequences on himself, how will and why must he act morally?"

I believe that, with this question on the table, we are forced to face an apparent truth: Human morality must not and usually does not come solely from an inherent and emotional source but also from a rational one. And these two factors enter in conflict and result in ethical problems which I believe should be addressed.

When we get to this point in the building of a model for a moral view, the question of an objective and/or universal morality comes up. After all, even if we have an inherent moral sense which has been passed down to us via the process of evolution, complicated issues or changes in circumstances can make our basic moral intuition fail. This means that, via culture, we should work to establish a universal morality which takes the innate tribalism that affects our moral view, and expands it to include the entirety of humankind and, maybe, even beyond it into all conscious creatures.

As we stand now, we have reached the conclusion that there are two main factors in determining an individual's morality:

- 1- The inherent sense of morality which has been granted to us via the process of evolution.
- 2- The culture-dependant sense of morality which is granted to us during our upbringing.

When it comes to the topic proposed, I believe I have proved with sufficient argumentation the existence of an inherent moral sense, which I believe is a scientific truth. Nonetheless, I feel as if this essay would be incomplete without filling the gaping hole which the second factor, a moral culture, creates.

As an atheist, I do not believe in the existence of a God, and yet, I believe in the importance of establishing an objective basis for our morality. How can this be done? I would propose that Sam Harris in his book "The Moral Landscape" and in his debate with William Lane Craig gives us a valuable answer: "The Worst Possible Misery for Everyone".

## **4. The Worst Possible Misery for Everyone**

"The Worst Possible Misery for Everyone" is defined as a state in which the largest amount of conscious creatures suffer the most and for the longest time possible. Harris uses this thought experiment to reverse the traditional utilitarian view which tries to set as a goal a state of events which grants the most happiness possible for everyone.

### **4.1 As a Guide to Moral Action**

In my opinion, Harris constructs a much more agreeable and universal basis for morality than the more traditional utilitarian philosophers, namely Stuart Mill.

The Worst Possible Misery serves, in Harris' theory, as an "Inverse Polar Star" for everyone to guide themselves and their fellow humans or sentient creatures in general, away from it. This situation is, by definition, the worst possible state of events and something which we can be universally agreed as worth avoiding. We thus can use it as a universal and some would say objective moral basis without requiring the existence of an external creator and rule-maker. However, the work is still

down to the individuals to figure out whether or not a particular action leads us further away or closer to The Worst Possible Misery. I shall develop more on this particular issue in my conclusion.

## **4.2 Responding to Criticism**

Sam Harris' idea of The Worst Possible Misery for Everyone has been criticized, most notably by the aforementioned William Lane Crague, a theist and debater in his own right. Crague accused Harris of "redefining" the word "bad" for his own purposes and thus of being guilty of a trick of semantics.

I argue that, by definition, "The Worst Possible Misery for Everyone" is the only state of events which every human can rationally agree to consider "bad". Given this, it is valid to use it as bedrock for a universal and objective morality and as stage for everyone to argue, in relation to specific issues, what the best course of action may be.

## **5. Non-Imputability**

With a rational, universal, and objective basis for morality having been proposed, I believe we are ready to address the issue of Non-Imputability. In other words, how can an individual choose morally if he or she isn't liable for his or her actions?

### **5.1. Thought Experiment**

Let us now reframe the issue using Mencius' example and imagine someone who is not liable for their actions in a situation where the innate moral intuition humans possess starts to break down. Imagine one has to decide between these two options:

- 1- To torture an innocent person to save five innocents from facing the same fate.
- 2- Refusing to torture an innocent person and allow five other innocents to be tortured.

In this thought experiment, the individual's identity is completely secret and they will not be imputable for their actions under the law. From an inherent moral sense, one can only derive the action of saving the five innocents if they are part of what one would consider to be his or her tribe. However, since they are complete strangers, one's evolutionary sense of morality may not come into effect lest one has learnt to face the entirety of humanity, and possibly of all conscious creatures, as part of one's "tribe".

Given this, it is clear that a human's inherent moral sensibility may not be enough to make a moral decision. This is where rationality tells you that the torture of five innocents would lead the entirety of humanity closer to "The Worst Possible Misery". As such, you torture the one innocent, and save the other five from being tortured.

## **5.2. Conclusion Derived from the Experiment**

What has this experiment proven? It has proven that, even when there are no consequences to one's action, rationality will fill in the gap which isn't covered by moral intuition. Thus, a peasant can follow the same steps as a king towards a moral decision, even if the inherent moral sense which we are born with break down.

Having said all of this, I believe that I've constructed an acceptable model of morality surrounding the existence of an inherent moral sense.

## **6. Applying the Thesis to Government**

Applying this to government, I believe it is foolish to believe that humans will always follow their inherent moral sense or act according to a rational mode of conduct. After all, the only thing it takes for a political entity to act immorally is a misalignment of personal interests with those of the larger community.

### **6.1. The Keys to Power**

“No Man Rules Alone” – C. G. P. Grey, in his video thesis “Rules for Rulers”.

When it comes to leaders, their inability to rule alone makes them dependant on various persons and entities. In “The Dictator's Handbook”, Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Smith called the various people who a leader needs to satisfy in order to govern “The Keys to Power”.

According to them, before proper governing can take place, the Keys' wants and needs must be met or they will conspire to overthrow the current Leader in order to reach their own goals. This, of course, has been observed in the past in the form of military coups and other types of revolutions.

They state in their thesis that “bad behavior [in government] is almost always rewarded” because the only way to reach perpetuity in power, is to satisfy the Keys which may signify a compromise to the Leader's morality. In a dictatorship, there are fewer Keys to power, because the power is distributed among fewer entities and persons, while in a democracy there are more Keys to power, which come not only in the form of political leaders but also in the form of demographics, each with their own interests.

This misalignment of interests and priorities makes it so nearly all decisions made by the leader cause resentment among some groups.

By accepting Smith and Mesquita's thesis, one cannot agree with Mencius' proposition that a King with a “sensitive heart” can govern an empire in the manner he wants to with ease. Compassionate government can only be accomplished once every single key to power, from the lowliest public official to the most important minister, can reach a clear view of the proper goals to aim for; in Mencius' words, a “compassionate heart”. In other words, it is all a matter of incentives.

## **6.2 Conclusion Derived From the Analyses of these Keys' Existence**

The perfect government may never be reached but, through the extension of those which we consider to be part of our tribe to the entirety of humanity or even to the entirety of conscious creatures, individuals can start to act in order to prevent the Worst Possible Misery for Everyone, and thus have this action reflect itself in the form of good government. And, if we all do it together, sharing our perspectives in argument and debate and trying to reach a consensus, maybe one day, as more and more Keys to power start to participate in these discussions and actions, we will reach a truly compassionate government from the very top all the way down to its base.

### **7. Summary**

- The existence of an innate moral sense can be proven via the Darwinian Evolutionary Theory.
- This moral sense tends to apply only to those which one considers part of his or her "tribe".
- A moral culture based on rationality must be able to expand the idea of those which are considered part of the "tribe" to all human beings and maybe even to all conscious creatures in order to reach a well-guided morality.
- This culture of morality can and must be based on the avoidance of "The Worst Possible Misery for Everyone".
- "The Worst Possible Misery for Everyone" helps us solve questions of morality even when the agent is not imputable for his or her actions.
- "No man rules alone", thus a "Compassionate Government" requires every Key to Power to have a well-guided morality, which comes from applying the principles mentioned above and discussing and arguing particular issues with others.

## **8. Conclusion, Afterthoughts and the Burkean Parlor**

### **8.1 Conclusion**

Throughout this essay, I have argued in favor of the existence of an innate moral sensibility (a "sensitive heart", in Mencius' words). Consequentially, I felt it necessary to structure a model for an individual's morality around the existence of this innate moral sensibility which accounted for its deficiencies. In the end, and with the help of Grey, Smith and Mesquita's thesis, I argued against Mencius' idea that all it takes for a "compassionate government" is a king with a "sensitive heart". I proposed instead that a "compassionate government" must require the incentives and objectives of every single Key to Power to be aligned with a well-guided moral view.

### **8.2 The Burkean Parlor.**

Having created this model, I did leave, in my description of it, a rather important part of it nearly unmentioned: argumentation, debate and consensus. I left this for the conclusion because I believe that an explanation of it is an afterthought which mustn't be included in the model itself and because of its, in my opinion, conclusive nature. I believe it to be imperative that no one person feels as if he

or she is the sole arbiter of justice. Thus, argumentation and debate in order to reach a consensus between the various parts is built into my model of morality. To make my own thoughts on this aspect of the model clear, I would like to invoke the words of Keneth Burke; and, specifically, his parlor metaphor. It goes approximately as follows:

“Imagine you enter a parlor; others have long preceded you. They are engaged in a discussion too heated for any of them to stop and tell you what it’s about. You then realize that the discussion has gone on for so long that nobody in the parlor can retrace for you all the steps that it has taken. You stay and you listen in to the conversation until you believe you have caught the tenor of the argument. Others leave the parlor, but you stay. You put in your oar; someone aligns himself against you; other comes to your defense, resulting in the gratification or humiliation of your opponent, depending on your partner’s arguing ability. But the hour grows late and you must depart, and you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.”

I attest that it is this spirit of open-ended, constant, and interminable discussion which must be part of every individual’s moral framework. Now that I have listened to some of the voices in the parlor, let this stand as my oar; let others support or argue against me; and let us keep alive this necessary element of a well-guided morality and an inspired philosophical set of mind.