

On compassionate governing

“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 easy to rule the Empire as rolling it on your palm.” from *Mencius*

Introduction

This question, which the *Mencius* gives one of many possible answers to, of compassion and cruelty in governing, is an age-old one. For example, Nicolo Machiavelli on the other hand, believed that a degree of cruelty was needed for a government to stay in power and rule the country. Even though the *Mencius* and Machiavelli speak of a time when the government had absolute, instead of democratic, power and the compassion and cruelty of the governing heart had more influence on the country, this quote is still relevant in our times. Nowadays the problem could also be rephrased as: Is it easier to govern in a way, that the sufferings of the people are addressed in a compassionate way (as quickly and effectively as possible) or in a colder and more rational way, which instead tries to help only some people or acts in a less compassionate way in order to prevent and prepare for possible future problems?

For this essay, I will not argue with the idea of all men having a heart sensitive to the sufferings to the others in depth, even though I believe this cannot be true in every case. If it were true, it would mean that there could be no non-compassionate government (as no man is devoid of a sensitive heart), and this is evidently not true, as our world and its history suggest. However, I believe this, in the case of the *Mencius*, to be just a romanticized way of generalizing the attitude of most people, not a solid argument, ready to be defended. I will mainly focus on the last and main part of the argument, which states that a compassionate government, with a sensitive (to the sufferings to the others) heart behind it, makes it easy to rule a country. I largely agree with the quote from *Mencius* and will try to broaden and support the argument even further transforming and bolstering the weaker points to an extent. Firstly, I will show how a compassionate government usually makes for a good country to govern. Secondly, I will argue that even the appearance of a compassionate government makes it easier to govern it and its people. Thirdly, I will demonstrate that a sensitive heart behind a government doesn't necessarily make the government a compassionate one as good intentions don't always lead to good outcomes. And lastly, I am going to address some real-world modern practical problems concerning compassionate governing.

A truly compassionate government

It seems quite self-evident that if there really is a sensitive heart behind a compassionate government, which rules in a way that tries to eliminate and prevent all kinds of suffering of its people, the people in turn would be broadly happy and willing, at least towards the government. And truly, it is easier for any government to rule happy and willing people rather than angry, disappointed and non-willing people. People are surely more inclined to behave in accordance with the law if they know that the government, which rules them, means only well and tries to be compassionate towards them in all of their decisions and rules. In that sense, the aims of the people and the aims of the government could be aligned in such a perfect way that one wouldn't necessarily need to follow governmental laws, but only behave out of self-interest and that behavior would match the laws put down by the compassionate government. I believe it is also important to note, that a compassionate government's decisions aren't always compassionate towards everyone and that a compassionate government isn't just another utopia meant to tolerate and alleviate the suffering of even the least moral people (murderers, rapists, etc.).

Yet, it could be argued, that even though acting compassionately makes the people love, instead of despise, the government more, it doesn't necessarily incentivize them to work harder or function better in a capitalist sense. It is definitely true that the promise of punishment is a more effective motive (for most people) than merely liking one's government. Here, it is necessary to draw a distinction between an easily governable country and a well-functioning country. Punishment might be a better way to achieve the latter one, but not the former one. A country that is based on violence and fear, like Hitler's Germany or Mao's China, is in fact harder to maintain because of the vast size of such a system of oppression where large amounts of resources are used just for the purpose of incentive/motive rather than producing/building/etc. something. Thus, a compassionately ruled society wouldn't necessarily be as well off as some other less compassionately ruled societies, meaning the living quality might be lower (building houses and establishing companies might take longer, or the line in the bank/post office might move slower, etc.), but the people would be still happy as everything would be meant for the alleviation of their suffering and so they and the system would be easier to govern.

A seemingly compassionate government

The issue that the *Mencius* doesn't appear to address is a government's seeming (but not sincere) compassion with an insincerely sensitive heart behind it and this kind of governing-style's influence on the ability to govern. This, however, seems much more relevant to the world we live in. Here I'm referring to such a country where the people are not subject to governmental violence and the government's insincere compassion is still largely believable to most people (as in a country with a truly compassionate government), in contrast to, for example, the USSR, which also claimed to want only good for its people. Such a governing-style would probably suit well for most modern politicians, because it would ultimately mean reaping all the benefits mentioned above without having to care for the people's suffering. Such a government would be even more able to govern easily than one of true

compassion, because the latter one has to take into consideration the needs of the people, while the former only has to seem to do so.

The obvious counter-argument would be one of morality, but that has hardly anything to do with the ability to govern a country. An immoral government can often enough govern a country more easily than any moral government. For example, it is hard to imagine someone with a truly sensitive heart to be able to deceive the people he/she is governing about, let's say, their suffering. Yet deception is easily one of the most useful tools a government can deploy, as even a sincerely compassionate government would sometimes have to lie in order to better the situation of its people. An immoral government would never face such a moral dilemma and would be, in that sense, also easier to govern.

The role of a sensitive heart behind a compassionate government

I think it is also important to comment on the fact that the existence of a sensitive heart/hearts behind a government doesn't necessarily make it a compassionate government and that the latter can also exist without sensitive hearts and out of pure principle. There are a number of factors that can contribute to not achieving good outcomes despite good intentions. A sensitive-hearted ruler might not possess all the knowledge or resources needed to make a government as compassionate as possible or his/her good nature might be undermined by the work of other ill-natured people around him/her and finally he/she might be deprived of a governmental position as it wouldn't be very hard to deceive and ruin such a good person. We could also imagine a government of cold metal robots, without any sensitive (or other, for that matter) hearts, who have been programmed to act compassionately. There is a possibility of a similar human government, which members don't usually act compassionately (donate to the poor, help people around them, etc.) even when given a chance, but would rule in a compassionate way, due to the principle of compassion, which they valued as an idea. Yet, I believe this doesn't change or damage the argument presented in the *Mencius* too much as the results of a compassionate government with or without a sensitive heart behind it, are identical.

Though, it could be argued, that at least the appearance of a sensitive heart somewhere behind a compassionate government, is important for the people to believe even more that the rulers are truly compassionate. Even though this would have no effect on the actual nature of such a compassionate government, it might eliminate some serious practical problems, which I will tackle below. So in practice, it seems to be most useful to stress the importance of a sensitive heart behind a compassionate government, even though it isn't strictly necessary for the functioning of such a government.

The modern practical problems of a compassionate government

There are, however, a number of practical problems with either a sincerely or insincerely compassionate government, with or without a sensitive heart behind it, in the real world, especially the modern democratic western world. Firstly, it is quite hard to distinguish a compassionate and non-

compassionate government from one another. As my modern rephrasing (in the **Introduction**) of the cruelty vs. compassion problem in governing already implies, no country would nowadays dare to confess to be cruel to their people and instead claim to be reasonable or trying to preserve present wealth for the future or bettering the whole economic situation, while not helping the people who are in dire need right now. The thing is, that all those ideas are reasonable and also compassionate, if sincere. Secondly, no compassionately ruled society can please everyone. Often enough most people are unsatisfied, because they feel their sufferings are not considered to be that important and even those with whose well-being the government is most concerned with, cannot understand that and are instead blindly unhappy.

This kind of skepticism towards politicians in the modern world seems quite inherent to all people. Sincerely compassionate and seemingly compassionate governments are regarded to be the same and the lies are thought to be painfully visible to all, even though they might not exist after all. This is in much due to the fact that real self-confessedly cruel governments are nowhere to be found, yet many obviously cruel governors still try pretend to be compassionate, which makes people vulnerable and extremely paranoid towards truly well-meaning rulers. This might not have mattered that much in the times of the *Mencius*, because the rulers had absolute power, the loyalty of a big army and other factors to support their rule (claiming to be supported by God, for example). But nowadays, democratic governments have to concern themselves with elections, where the people can express their unhappiness, however unfounded, in a way that matters. Even modern dictatorships have to look out for large revolutions, which could topple them.

Conclusion

In my essay, I have analyzed both a truly compassionate government and a seemingly, yet convincingly, compassionate government and found that they both have, the latter maybe even more, an easier time governing than a truly cruel government. I have found that a sensitive heart is not necessary for a compassionate government and that one can also exist behind a government without the latter being compassionate, but it is still better to stress the importance of a sensitive heart in order to make the people better believe in the possibility of such a government. Finally, I addressed some truly damaging modern practical problems to compassionate governing, mainly the fact that most people tend to not draw a distinction between seemingly, yet non-convincingly, compassionate governments and truly compassionate governments, considering both of them to be ill-wishing. In conclusion, it is surely as easy to govern a country “as rolling it on your palm” for a compassionate or convincingly compassionate-seeming government, but due to modern political developments, it is becoming harder and harder, meaning that one day soon, it might be as hard to govern compassionately as cruelly, because one’s subjects have a hard time seeing the difference.