

Political implications of compassion in Mencius

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Abstract

This paper examines Mencius' view on compassion in the political realm by proposing that Mencius defends compassionate governance by reconciling the two extremes of Yangist self-love and Mohist universal love. This paper proposes a reading of two famous stories, namely, the story of a young child on the verge of falling into a well, and the story of King Xuan of Qi sparing an ox as paradigmatic cases for understanding Mencius' account of compassion in the political realm. This paper argues that Mencius succeeds in his defense of governance with compassion against the other two extremes of self-love and altruism. To provide an argument for compatibility with egoism or self-love, this paper offers an analysis of Mencius' idea of the ruler sharing pleasure with his people instead of denying pleasure for himself. In this sense, a good ruler does not need to sacrifice his self-interest. To counter the demand of universal love of the Mohists, Mencius develops a position that the Confucian ideal ruler, while not sacrificing his self-interests, those interests need to be guided and directed by a proper process of moral cultivation of his compassionate heart so that he can readily share his pleasures with all the peoples in his kingdom. These readings indicate Mencius' expanded argument for political implications of compassion in the moral universe of the Confucian school.

Keywords

Mencius, compassion, governance with benevolence, self-love, impartial love, sharing of pleasure

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Mencius' political thought is known by scholars as an expansion of Confucius' idea of moral politics. Confucius merely offers a vision of an ideal political state that is governed by a ruler who has achieved moral cultivation. But there is no record of Confucius' discussion on how governance through benevolence could be possible in the political realm. In *the Analects*, Confucius once explains that *ren* (仁) or benevolence is “to love one's fellow men” and then when one practices *ren* in the political sphere, one would “raise the straight and set them over the crooked” (*Analects* 12.22). If a ruler governs the people by virtue, the people's conduct would be rectified and then “...those who are near are pleased and those who are far away are attracted” (*Analects* 13.16). Mencius' notion of governance with benevolence or compassion (*renzheng* 仁政) is an attempt to work out with more details how compassion could serve as a practical guidance in the political

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realm. However, studies on the concept of compassion in the *Mencius* have mainly focused on ethical issues, such as the characteristics of a compassionate heart (*cinyin zhi xin* 惻隱之心), the relationship between compassion and benevolence, and the moral psychology of compassion (An, 1998; Chan, 2004; Kim, 2010). Mencius' view on the role of compassion in politics has not been adequately investigated, even though his moral philosophy is the result of attempts to elaborate on Confucius' moral politics in order to respond to key political questions and debates of his time. During the Warring States Period (ca. 475–221 BCE), when Mencius spent his days, some Chinese thinkers participated in lively debates on the possibility of cultivating a system of social bonding which could serve a large society of strangers and on the way to govern a state in times of conflicts and turmoil.¹ They were aware that in the eyes of most rulers at that time, only physical force, benefits, and self-interests mattered. While competing thinkers focused on searching for strategies to increase their own benefits and the military might of their state, Mencius advocated governance by virtue and moral cultivation of the ruler. His theory of the original goodness of human nature is known to form the theoretical bedrock for a politics of moral sentiment. According to Mencius, all human beings have four moral dispositions in their heart-mind, namely compassion, shame, respect, and feeling of right and wrong. He suggests that a compassionate heart, that is the heart that cannot bear to see sufferings of others, is a basis of governance:

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 a government, it was as easy to rule the Empire as rolling it on your palm. (*Mencius* 2A.6)

Why does Mencius rely on compassion as an emotional foundation of governance? Why should governance through benevolence be considered as a good policy in time of extreme self-interests? How does Mencius defend compassionate governance against opposing views? This paper will look into Mencius' view on compassion in the political sphere in order to better understand his notion of benevolent governance. The political implications of compassion could be better appreciated if we look at Mencius' concept of compassionate governance as a defense against competing views, such as the Yangist self-love and the Mohist universal love. This analysis sheds additional light on Confucius' moral politics, as it takes into closer consideration the feasibility of compassion as practical guidance and realistic strategy.

Yangist egoism and the Mohist love without discrimination² were Mencius' main targets of criticism:

Yang advocates everyone for himself, which amounts to a denial of one's prince; Mo advocates love without discrimination, which amounts to a denial of one's father... If the way of Yang and Mo does not subside and the way of Confucius is not proclaimed, the people will be deceived by heresies and the path of morality will be blocked. (*Mencius* 3B.9)

For Mencius, it was an obligation to defend the way of former sages against such extreme views. Most of the investigation regarding Mencius' refutation of Yang Zhu and Mozi have put emphasis on the theory of the original goodness of human nature and on the debates on one or two roots in 3A.5, rather than analyzing his responses to the political implications of the Yangist and Mohist thoughts (Li, 2010). A major political implication of Mohist universal love involves extreme self-sacrifice and impartial non-distinction between public and private life. This explains why, according to Mencius, the way of Mo would lead us to reject our parents. It seems that Mohism would advocate the idea of universal love not only to challenge Confucian nepotism, but also to offer an alternative social glue for a large society of strangers.³ Mohists believe that people would prefer

and trust a government or a ruler exercising impartial care because impartial care would bring about more benefits to all people, while a government with partial concern would not be just and trustworthy. On the contrary, for the Yangists, one should complete one's human nature (*xing*性), protect genuineness, and should not involve in any risks to one's own body and life (Graham, 1990: 13). Yangist extreme individualism implies severance from any community participation and political responsibility. Van Norden argues that Yang Zhu is not a strict egoist but rather a privatist claiming that "humans are self-interested by nature." "Pursuing one's self-interest involves doing things that maximize one's health and longevity, and possibly also prudent satisfaction of physical desires" (Van Norden, 2007: 211). To pursue self-interest here also includes the love of one's family. This explains why Mencius blamed the Yangists for the fact that their position could lead to a denial of one's prince, even though not for a denial of one's parents (Van Norden, 2007: 209).

In the *Mencius*, most of the rulers ask Mencius how to provide benefits to the state. If Yangist egoism means privatism, the Kings' dialogues with Mencius implicitly move from a position of self-love and egoism. Although only a few passages refer directly to Mohism and Yangism (see *Mencius* 3A.5, 3B.9, 7A.26, and 7B.26), Mencius' answers to the rulers illustrate how he responds to and argues with both of them. Our claim is that, for Mencius, government based on compassion is compatible with self-love and universal love.⁴ In other words, compassion can be a practical guidance for government of people and even strangers without suppressing the ruler's self-interest and pleasure. If the ruler cultivates his own compassionate heart, his self-interest and his various pleasures can be directed by compassion, and therefore help sharing pleasure with the people.

In order to clarify Mencius' concept of compassion and its political implications, we can consider two famous stories.

Two paradigmatic cases of compassion in Mencius

In 2A.6 and 6A.6, Mencius states that the emotional thrust of benevolence is *ceyin* (惻隱), or compassion.⁵ Yet he does not provide a clear meaning for this term. He illustrates *ceyin* or sympathetic attitude through the well-known stories of a young child about to fall into a well, and of a king sparing the life of ox about to be sacrificed.

2A.6. No man is devoid of a heart sensitive to the sufferings to the others (*buren*). Such a sensitive heart was possessed by the Former Kings and this manifested itself in compassionate government. With such sensitive heart behind government, it was as easy to rule the Empire as rolling it on your palm. My reason for saying that no man is devoid of a heart sensitive to the suffering of others (*buren*) is this. Suppose a man were, all of a sudden, to see a young child on the verge of falling into a well. He would certainly be moved to compassion (*ceyin*), not because he wanted to get in the good graces of the parents, nor because he wished to win the praise of his fellow villagers or friends, nor yet because he disliked the cry of the child...

1A.7. ...The King was sitting in the upper part of the hall and someone led an ox through the lower part. The King noticed this and said, 'Where is the ox going?' 'The blood of the ox is to be used for consecrating a new bell.' 'Spare it. I cannot bear to see (*buren*) it shrinking with fear, like an innocent man going to the place of execution.' 'In that case, should the ceremony be abandoned?' 'That is out of the question. Use a lamb instead.' ... [Mencius said] 'The heart behind your action is sufficient to enable you to become a true King. The people all thought that you grudged the expense, but, for my part, I have no doubt that you were moved by compassion [*buren*] for the animal.' ... 'You must not be surprised that the people thought you miserly. You used a small animal in place of a big one. How were they to know? If you were pained by the animal going innocently to its death, what was there to choose between an ox and a lamb?' The King laughed and said, 'What was really in my mind, I wonder? It is not true that I grudged the expense, but I did use a lamb instead of the ox. I suppose it was only natural that the people should have thought me

miserly.’ ‘There is no harm in this. It is the way of a benevolent man. You saw the ox but not the lamb. The attitude of a gentleman towards animals is this: once having seen them alive, he cannot bear to see them die, and once having heard their cry, he cannot bear to eat their flesh. That is why the gentleman keeps his distance from the kitchen.’⁶

Van Norden (2007: 248) explains the meaning of *ce* (惻) as “grieving about,” while *yin* (隱) would refer to “suffering.” *Ceyin* would mean “grieving about the suffering of others.” Mencius also uses the term *buren ren* (不忍人), a heart sensitive to the suffering of others, to describe compassion. To better grasp Mencius’ view of compassion, we should therefore think of *ceyin* (惻隱) in connection with *buren* (不忍). Chan (2004: 177) explains that “the mind of *buren ren* refers to the mind that cannot bear to see the suffering of others, and that contains a desire to do something to help to alleviate the pain.” Shun (1997: 49) sees *ceyin* as “the capacity to be moved by the immanent or actual suffering of other”; when it is related to *buren*, it also means “the inability to bear the suffering of other whether caused by oneself or not.” According to Shun, the use of *buren* in passage 1A.7 suggests that *buren* attitude is not limited to human beings, but it involves a desire of not harming sentient creatures at large, and of alleviating their sufferings.

Even though we translate *ceyin* as “compassion,” it is important to distinguish it from other closely related emotions, such as sympathy, empathy, and pity. Sympathy in particular seems to share key characteristics with compassion. Darwall (1998: 261) discusses Lau’s translating *ceyin* in the story of a child falling into a well as “sympathy” or “sympathetic concern” rather than “compassion.” For him, sympathy

(a) responds to some apparent threat or obstacle to an individual’s good or well-being, (b) has that individual himself as object, and (c) involves concern for him, and thus for his well-being, for his sake. Seeing the child on the verge of falling, one is concerned for his safety, not just for its (his safety’s) sake, but for *his* sake. One is concerned for *him*. Sympathy for the child is a way of caring for (and about) him.

Perhaps the difference between sympathy and compassion lies only in the degree of misfortune. Snow (1991: 197) argues that sympathy involves a response to a wider range of misfortunes, including less harmful ones. We sympathize with someone who has lost his way in a foreign city, or who missed an appointment because of traffic jam. In this sense, we can use sympathy in an interchangeable way with compassion, since it indicates an attitude of caring for others’ well-being. And yet, compassion is perhaps a more precise translation of *ceyin* in the passage above as it involves a moment of great danger to the young child.

Empathy involves sharing the same feeling as another person by way of identification with this person. If one empathizes with a mother who grieves over her dead son, one can feel the same sorrow in her. Empathy sometimes takes the shape of emotional contagion (Darwall, 1998: 263–264), such as when we feel joyful while walking in a cheerful crowd without being aware of the situation. Empathy can be a response to both negative and positive condition. For example, I could feel empathy with my friend who is sorely missing his girlfriend, or with a friend celebrating a wedding. Compassion, on the other hand, is a response to a negative condition only. I could feel compassion for a friend in trouble, but I could not feel “compassion” toward her joy. Another crucial difference between empathy and compassion is that while compassion requires a desire to relieve other’s plight, empathy does not require any such condition.

Likewise, pity does not require believing in and desiring to relieve the condition of a sufferer. Pity implies condescension and superior position toward the object of the emotion. Superiority here refers to a more advantageous position, not necessarily in relation to a social status: for example, a hospitable person may feel pity for a friendless one, a healthy person for the victim of a

deadly disease, or a better-off person for a beggar. More specifically, an agent with pity believes that they would not experience negative condition in the same way as the object of pity. The agent seems to be an observer who keeps their own vulnerability at a distance from what the suffering object undergoes (Snow, 1991: 196–197). This condescending attitude can explain why people sometimes are angry or dislike being treated as objects of pity.

On the contrary, a compassionate agent needs not be in a better or superior position than the object of compassion. One would feel compassion toward the victim of a tsunami regardless of one's own position. The core aspect of compassion is an altruistic concern for someone else's well-being. Unlike pity, a compassionate agent holds a belief that "that could be me" (Snow, 1991: 197). Nussbaum (1996: 31–35) argues that compassion requires identifying with the pain of the object, or at least imagining oneself to have or share possibility and vulnerability similar to sufferer. Similarly, Blum (1994: 176) proposes that compassion involves the capacity of imagining oneself dwelling in the condition of the other person: "...the imaginative reconstruction involved in compassion consists in imagining what the other person, given his character, beliefs and values, is undergoing, rather than what we ourselves would feel in his situation." However, it does not seem to be a necessary condition for the degree of compassion to be imagining oneself as another, nor is the belief that we might experience the same misfortune required. Sometimes we feel compassion for the pain and struggle of a dog caught in a dog meat trade, without imagining ourselves experiencing such misfortune. The point is that compassion is an other-regarding rather than a self-regarding emotion. Our vulnerability and awareness of others' suffering can move us to be concerned for their well-being regardless of our own pain and distress.⁷ For this reason, the meaning of *ceyin* appears as more closely related to compassion than to any other emotion.

Consider Mencius' stories of the child falling into a well and of King Xuan of Qi sparing an ox. Mencius does not claim that everyone who sees an innocent child being in danger would *actually* help the child. He claims only that anyone would be alarmed and certainly be moved to compassion without thinking first of self-interest and one's own benefit. Compassion does not arise from reflection, but from one's sensibility and awareness of the imminent danger and serious pain of an innocent child. In the case of King Xuan, the King did not save the ox because he felt pain by putting himself in the position of the ox, nor did he have any direct experience of an ox's pain. Instead, his concern for the ox's life stems from witnessing it shrink with fear, and from what he felt when he realized that the ox would be harmed by him. The unbearable sorrow caused by the experience of an imminent harm threatening people or any sentient being is an essential characteristic of *ceyin*.

Both stories are often read as Mencius' account of moral psychology and moral metaphysics. Yet, Mencius' descriptions of *ceyin* and sympathetic attitude belong to a political context and carry political implications. Before bringing up the story of a child falling into a well, he had recalled that all former Kings could not stand seeing sufferings of others when they governed the people. In addition, he argued, all human beings have the same heart as the former Kings. If we want to know the wise Kings' sensitive mind behind compassionate government, we should explore into our own heart when we imagine the suffering of an innocent child. Likewise, in 1A.7, Mencius explored King Xuan's heart and found significant aspects in common between King Xuan's compassion toward the ox and the compassionate heart of a true King governing the people. If King Xuan desires to be a true King, he should use the same heart to relate to his people. These two famous stories are paradigmatic cases: they do not only explicate moral psychology and the moral metaphysics of compassion in Mencius' work, they also involve the basic features and attitudes of a ruler's compassion. Thus, the political implications of compassion need to be better clarified.

There is a crucial distinction between the two stories. They show that the object of *ceyin* could be a stranger or someone whom an agent has obligation with. In the story of King Xuan, the ox was regarded to as a subordinate to the King. The King realized that he was superior to the ox, and

that he had the power to kill or spare its life. When the ox shrank with fear, he understood that he was the main cause in bringing about the ox's suffering, hence the only one who had the authority to divert the ox's pain. His compassion toward the ox, therefore, did not only result from feeling unbearable pain in seeing the ox's pain: it was also a realization that it could be his responsibility and obligation to alleviate the ox's suffering. In the first story, the sight of an innocent child on the verge of falling into a well, does not entail any obligation to care for the child. The imminent danger of the falling of the child is not "caused" by anyone. The feeling of alarm and compassion, therefore, does not arise from the sense that it is directly under one's authority and responsibility to alleviate the child's suffering, like for the King and the ox; it arises instead from an innate altruistic concern for someone else's well-being. These distinctions significantly imply that compassion could be manifested in two distinct political spheres when a ruler practices governance with benevolence. The first one is a familiar sphere or relationship between a ruler and his subjects. A comparable feature in King Xuan's compassion toward the ox and toward his people is that both the ox and the people are inferior and subordinate to the King. Their well-being depends upon the support and command of the ruler. King Xuan has the power to kill or to spare the ox. Similarly, a ruler has the authority and capacity to relieve the sufferings of his people. A government policy could inflict a life of hardship or could promote a life of ease and well-being of the people. It is a matter of compassion. King Xuan could not bear to see the ox being harmed by him. In the same way, if King Xuan extends his compassionate heart toward his people, he certainly would not be able to tolerate seeing *his own* people suffer *because of him*. The obligation and duty toward the people as a ruler here are manifested in the ruler's vulnerable and sensitive heart rather than by a cold calculation of benefits for himself as the ruler. In my view, this shows how Mencius offers an elaboration on Confucius' idea that when a ruler practices *ren* in the political sphere, he would "raise the straight and set them over the crooked" (*Analects*, 12.22). Confucius realizes that political institutions and government officials have the power and authority to make decisions and regulate the lives of the people. A ruler's benevolence or love toward his people is manifested by restricting the crooked officials who could cause great harm to them. Mencius affirms Confucius' political idea and explicates it by focusing on the compassionate heart of the ruler.

However, a ruler's compassion should not be limited to their own people. It should also be extended to a broader society of foreign strangers. Yet, to cultivate benevolence in the political sphere, a ruler needs to practice it in close and familiar sphere and then extend it to others in an ever more inclusive circles of gradation. This explains why Mencius advocates that, in cultivating virtue of benevolence, we just extend our heart toward another object of emotion: "For every man there are things he cannot bear. To extend this to what he can bear is benevolence... If a man can extend to the full his natural aversion to harming others, then there will be an overabundance of benevolence" (*Mencius* 7B.31).

Mencius offers arguments for governance based on moral sentiment and virtue that let him escape the two extremes of Mohist altruism and Yangist egoism. While a ruler's concern can start from family members, relatives, and close officials, considering them as a priority and thus revealing a clear sign of self-interest, his compassion can embrace the whole people and even reach strangers in the kingdom and beyond. Actually, Mencius' develops Confucius' idea of a ruler's magical power to attract those who are far away. In the *Analects*, the Governor of She asked about government. Confucius replies as follows: "Ensure that those who are near are pleased and those who are far away are attracted" (*Analects* 13:16). In *Mencius* 1A.3, King Hui of Liang asks Mencius how to increase population. His answer offers an elaboration on how governance with compassion can generate content among people in close proximity, while attracting others from far away without any coercion or military threat. Mencius said that the people of Liang were harmed and frightened by King Hui's fondness of war. Even though the King tried to relieve famine by moving population

from crops failed area, people far away were not eager to becoming his subjects. This is because the King's pleasure served only himself but did not satisfy the needs of the people. For Mencius, the fundamental principle of governing is winning the hearts of the people: "Amass what they want for them; do not impose what they dislike on them" (*Mencius* 4A.9). This saying shows clearly that Mencius extends the Confucian golden rule (*shu* 恕) into the political realm (Bein, 2013: 61–73; Chan, 2014: 173). If the King overcomes his own fondness of killing and exercises *shu*, "the people will turn to him like water flowing downwards with a tremendous force" (*Mencius* 1A.6).

Note that in the Warring States Period, government policies trying to increase population were intended to strengthen state sovereignty. The deployment of troops, resources, and equipment needed a large population. Most Kings in ancient time were concerned about how to increase population and how to attract peoples from neighboring states. According to Mohism, an anti-Confucian school of thought, disorder arises from discrimination. The remedy lies with impartial care. Moreover, the Mohists seem to believe that impartial government is a good policy for attracting people, and for fostering a social bond within a large society. Consider Mozi's "caretaker argument," which claims that someone sent by the ruler to a distant state would entrust an impartial person to take care of their family because this impartial person would take care of them as if they were his own family, without discrimination. Van Norden (2007: 180–181) argues that this argument would fail when, in a situation of famine, an impartial caretaker would not be able to deny caring for *any* other strangers as well. Indeed, according to the Mohist principle, he would have to give food to the others even though there is only enough to keep his family alive. Partial caretaker should be a more desirable choice. Hence, Mencius' notion of governance with benevolence would also challenge the Mohist idea of impartial care in response to the political concern of increasing a state's population.

Compassion as political guidance

For Mencius, 4A.1, a good government means a "government that tolerates no suffering." Compassion is not only an emotional foundation of governance in the theoretical sense, it could also serve as a political guidance for realistic policies. Support for the people's well-being and winning their hearts are the fundamental principles of Mencius' political philosophy:

Benevolent words do not have as profound an effect on the people as benevolent music. Good government does not win the people as does good education. He who practices good government is feared by the people; he who gives the people good education is loved by them. Good government wins the wealth of the people; good education wins their hearts. (*Mencius* 7A.14)

The *Mencius* provides details on how a ruler or a government should practice benevolence toward their people. To understand how compassion works as political guidance, we should emphasize that for Mencius, a good government or a ruler should pursue at least three policies.

First: alleviate the people's sufferings and impede officials to harm them. During the Warring States Period, starvation and warfare, the main causes of hardship, stemmed from rulers' fondness of war and their ambition to expand their territory. Mencius pointed out that those rulers took the people away from their work during the busy seasons, making it impossible for them to harvest the land and take care of their families. People suffered cold and hunger, while family members were separated and scattered. For Mencius, causing people to suffer from starvation and lose their family is no difference from killing them with a weapon or a misrule (*Mencius* 1A.4–5). In a conversation with King Hui of Liang, he suggested that the King should give up fondness of warfare and stop putting the blame for starvation on bad harvests, but rather reduce taxation and punishment, allow

people to harvest in busy seasons, and distribute commodities to people starving from famine (1A.3–5). He pointed out that in order to begin exercising a compassionate heart in governing, the king should realize first that his fondness of warfare, along with abusive government institutions, are the main causes of the people's distress.

Even though constant warfare brought great harm and sufferings among the people, Mencius admits that not all warfare can be avoided. But only a "just war" can be acceptable, a war that does not serve the benefit of a ruler and his people, but rather is waged in order to alleviate people's sufferings in an enemy state and prevent them from being abused by their own government. Mencius declares:

When it is a state of ten thousand chariots attacking another of equal strength and your army is met by the people bringing baskets of rice and bottles of drink, what other reason can there be than that the people are fleeing from water and fire? Should the water become deeper and the fire hotter, they would have no alternative but to turn elsewhere for succour. (*Mencius* 1B.10)

Clearly, the criterion of a just war relies on a ruler's compassion toward people in a different state, that is, toward "strangers." Additionally, the support offered to those people would eventually weaken the enemy state, and build up a new balance of power among the different states. In this way, a compassionate government as an instance of moral virtue could achieve a "humanitarian" purpose while performing a "realistic" policy, "empowering" the status of the ruler as well as the well-being of the people in both states.

It is noteworthy that even though a ruler's compassion can include both his own people and strangers from far away, it does not mean that all of them are treated equally and impartially in the sense of the Mohist care. Shun (1997: 31–32) reminds that the Mohist care does not require affection. Impartial care here refers to an unemotional will to benefit people and avoid harming them. He argues that the Mohist *jian ai* (兼爱) should be translated as "indiscriminate concern," rather than "universal love," which connotes an attitude toward the object in a special relation. Yet Confucius' ideal government would use benevolence and the cultivated heart-mind as guidance, which means that impartial and equal care cannot be pursued. An additional question is how a benevolent ruler would treat the people while *all* their plights need to be alleviated. In this case, serious suffering needs to be given priority. Mencius advocates that those who suffer most seriously should be helped first. His concern resonates with a remark made by a contemporary leading moral philosopher. According to Nussbaum (1996: 31), compassion requires "the belief that the suffering is serious rather than trivial; the belief that the suffering was not caused primarily by the person's own culpable actions." It is not clear that *ceyin* is a response restricted only to a serious and terrible misfortune. However, when Mencius discusses the ruler's compassion, he emphasizes that a benevolent ruler would not bring about serious harm toward the people. He adds that "it is contrary to benevolence to kill one innocent man" (*Mencius* 7A.33).

Nussbaum (2014: 195) argues that compassion also requires "the *eudaimonistic* judgment, namely, a judgment that places the suffering person or persons among the important parts of the life of the person who feels the emotion." Sometimes we have a strong emotion in relation to things that correspond to what we value in our life or well-being. I argue that Mencius also shares this characteristic of compassion when he suggests that the government should consider sufferings of four types of people as priority:

Old men without wives, old women without husbands, old people without children, young children without fathers – these four types of people are the most destitute and have no one to turn to for help. Whenever King Wen put benevolent measures into effect, he always gave them first consideration. (*Mencius* 1B.5)

In Confucian ethics, family relationships are valued as the most significant part in achieving a good and ethical life. The four types of people are those who suffer the loss of love and care from their family. No one would refuse the seriousness of these kinds of suffering. Confucianism promotes benevolence in the family in order to cultivate our capacity to imagine sufferings caused by the loss of family members and other beloved ones; for Mencius, if the ruler neglects them or brings about serious harms to the people, he would no longer be a legitimate ruler (1B.6).

Second: provide support for people's well-being and moral needs. For Confucius, a benevolent agent does not only care for others' well-being, but also helps them fulfill their moral personhood:

...a benevolent man helps others to take their stand in so far as he himself wishes to take his stand, and gets others there in so far as he himself wishes to get there. The ability to take as analogy what is near at hand can be called the method of benevolence. (*Analects* 6.30)

Mencius extends this idea of sympathetic attitude to the political sphere by suggesting that, before providing support for education and moral needs to the people, their welfare should be sufficiently provided by the government. He believes that only a gentleman (*junzi*) can have a constant heart in spite of a lack of constant means of support. Uncultivated people, on the other hand, will be "lacking constant hearts, they will go astray and fall into excesses, stopping at nothing. To punish them after they have fallen foul of the law is to set a trap for the people" (*Mencius* 1A.7). A compassionate ruler cannot allow himself to set a trap for the people. He would be determined to provide sufficient means to support the people's welfare, then drive them toward education and moral goodness (1A.7, 3A.3). However, to win people's hearts does not mean that a government should satisfy all their pleasures. Mencius suggests that a government should satisfy their basic material needs, organize resources, and provide support for them to practice benevolence within family and the community, through such policies as the land demarcation system called "well-fields" (*jing* 井). A "well-field" consists of nine plots of square lands. The central plot of well-fields belongs to the state, while the other eight plots are each held by eight families who share the duty of caring for the plot owned by the state. Mencius explains: "If those who own land within each *jing* befriend one another both at home and abroad, help each other to keep watch, and succour each other in illness, they will live in love and harmony..." (3A.3). This policy shows how a compassionate ruler would help the people fulfill their moral goodness by means of political and economic organization.

Winning the people's heart constitutes the last policy in Mencius' view of compassion as political guidance. It encompasses the idea of sharing pleasures, such as enjoying with the people, allowing people to use public resources, and sharing the pleasure of being loved and respected. This last policy shares significant elements with Yangist theme of self-love, and needs to be discussed in more detail.

Governance with compassion: Mencius on sharing pleasure

Mencius believed that the political problem in his time lay in the government's lack of moral feeling and in seeing virtue as no source of power. His view on *renzheng* is a defense of how moral sentiment could play a significant role in regulating the people. However, his notion of benevolent governance seems to be impractical since rulers in the time of the Warring States only cared for self-interest, material or bodily pleasure, and profits. Mencius admits that human beings are predisposed to desire, self-satisfaction, and pleasures such as sex, wealth, and profit (6A.10, 6A.14). What is not acceptable is to allow such pleasures and desires to override benevolence and righteousness. To pursue only self-interest, material pleasure, and profit will ultimately lead to

Yangist egoism; the state would be ruined, and harmonious community would become impossible to achieve. We can better understand Mencius' argument by considering a conversation with King Hui of Liang, who asked Mencius to provide some advice that would profit his state. Mencius answered in the following:

What is the point of mentioning the word 'profit'? All that matters is that there should be benevolence and rightness. If your Majesty says, 'How can I profit my state? And the Counsellors say, 'How can I profit my family? and the Gentleman and Commoners say, 'How can I profit my person?' then those above and those below will be trying to profit at the expense of one another and the state will be imperiled. When regicide is committed in a state of ten thousand chariots, it is certain to be by a vassal with a thousand chariots, and when it is committed in a state of a thousand chariots, it is certain to be by a vassal with a hundred chariots. A share of a thousand in ten thousand or a hundred in a thousand is by no means insignificant, yet if profit is put before rightness, there is no satisfaction short of total usurpation. No benevolent man ever abandons his parents, and no dutiful man ever puts his prince last. Perhaps you will now endorse what I have said, 'All that matters is that there should be benevolence and rightness. What is the point of mentioning the word 'profit'? (*Mencius* 1A.1)

If the King's only concern is profit, those below will also seek profit. Eventually the state will be ruined. Mencius did not suggest the King to eliminate his desire for profit. Rather, he persuaded the King to prioritize benevolence and righteousness by showing how the Confucian ideal society would be more desirable. If the King wishes to establish a harmonious state, profit should not be his main concern. Although the term "profit" (利) may include public interest, not just individual self-interest, the pursuit of profit as a goal is a misstep. This is because, paradoxically, most people are inclined to pursue their own self-interest rather than the interest of others; hence, it can hardly produce a benefit for the state as a whole. But, if we are all pursuing our self-interest, why would *renzheng* be a political policy? In other words, how could benevolent governance be compatible with self-interest or self-love? Mencius answers this question by advocating the idea of sharing pleasure. The term "pleasure" here broadly refers to physical and material pleasure such as wealth, sex, and power, as well as to the pleasures of social relationship, of learning, of being cared for and respected, and of helping others.⁸ Thus, Mencius' idea of extending pleasure does not involve only sharing material goods for mutual benefit: it also includes pleasure caused by other kinds of joy, such as to be respected and cared for. The conversation with King Hui (1A.2, 1B.2) provides an explication. While the King was standing over a pond, bragging about his terrace, his beautiful garden and rare dears, he asked Mencius: "Are such things enjoyed even by a good and wise man?" His question implied that enjoyment arises from being wealthy. Mencius answered:

Only if a man is good and wise, is he able to enjoy them. Otherwise he would not, even if he had them... It was with labor of the people that King Wen built his terrace and pond, yet so pleased and delighted were they that they named his terrace the "Sacred Terrace" and his pond the "Sacred Pond" and rejoiced in his possession of deer, fish, and turtles. It was by sharing their enjoyments with the people that men of antiquity were able to enjoy themselves... When the people were prepared "to die with" him, even if the tyrant has a terrace and pond, birds and beasts, could he have enjoyed them all by himself? (*Mencius* 1A.2)

Mencius argues that true enjoyment arises only when one shares pleasure with others. If the King's wealth brings about people's suffering, his enjoyment could become a danger to himself. In the past, people were pleased and delighted when King Wen built the terrace and the pond. That was because King Wen governed by virtue, and the people loved and respected him. The real pleasure for the ruler lies in seeing people enjoying these things together with him, rather than enjoying them all by himself. In this sense, the source of people's pleasure lies not only in satisfying their

material needs, but also depends on the ruler's virtue in establishing a flourishing relationship with the ruled.

In 1B.1, Mencius repeated the same point during a conversation with the King of Qi. The King indicated that he was fonder of popular music than of ancient music. Mencius indicated that they would make no difference provided the King shared his pleasure with the people. He asked the King which enjoyment would be greater, one in the company of few or one in the company of many; the King answered, "in the company of many." This is a response to Yangist egoism, which holds that lonely pleasure is preferable to sharing pleasure with other people.⁹ After asking the King, Mencius elaborates about sharing enjoyment:

Now suppose you were having a musical performance here, and when the people heard the sound of your bells and drums and the notes of your pipes and flutes they all with aching heads and knitted brows said to one another, "In being fond of music, why does our King bring us to such straits that fathers and sons do not see each other, and brothers, wives and children are parted and scattered?" (*Mencius* 1B.1)

For Mencius, self-interest is not an evil that must be eliminated. The problem is rather that the ruler's desires and pleasures are not informed by moral cultivation. We observe how winning the people's hearts is a fundamental principle of governance and a necessary condition of a ruler's legitimacy. If a ruler governs by virtue, his desire and pleasure would be oriented by his compassionate heart, and could become a source of the people's own pleasure.

The idea of sharing pleasure appeared for the first time in the *Analects*. Mencius extended it to the political realm. In the *Analects*, Confucius asked Yen Yuan and Zilu about their determination. Zilu answered: "I should like to share my carriage and horses, clothes and furs with my friends, and to have no regrets even if they become worn." Yen Yuan replied: "I should like never to boast of my own goodness and never to impose onerous tasks upon others." Then Zilu asked Confucius about his determination, to receive the following answer: "To bring peace to the old, to have trust in my friends, and to cherish the young" (*Analects* 5.27). We can observe that Zilu's answer views pleasure as sharing benefits and material goods, while Yen Yuan prefers to share humility and not impose any burden upon others. It remains unclear whether Confucius agrees with them or not. We should not conclude that, in Confucius' view, enjoyment alone and pleasure from sharing material goods together play no role in his ideal of a good life. It could be argued that Confucius, in this conversation with his closest disciples, emphasizes the pleasure of harmonious relationship as the source of other pleasures, including material ones. Friends cannot truly enjoy material goods together if they lack mutual trust and sincerity. One cannot enjoy one's own goodness without bringing peace to the old and cherishing the young. Arguably, Mencius applies this view to the political realm by focusing on harmonious relationship between the ruler and the people.

Nevertheless, there is one sense of sharing pleasure that has not been emphasized in the *Analects* and yet plays a significant role in understanding Mencius' notion of *renzheng* and its relation to self-interest. We have seen that the ability of sensing someone else's feeling is a key characteristic of compassion. Confucianism promotes benevolence within the family as a way to cultivating one's capacity of imagining other humans' distress and desires. Similarly, in the case of the ruler's self-interest, Mencius does not refuse the ruler to enjoy sex, wealth, food, music, and security; these pleasures and desires are experienced by every human being. The King's own pleasure could help him figure out why such pleasures are also basic needs *of* and *for* the people. In other words, Mencius believes that all human beings enjoy pleasure in a similar way. It would be wrong for a ruler to obstruct the people's pursuit to secure their basic needs. The conversation with King Xuan of Qi in 1B.5 focuses on this point. After the King heard about the Kingly Ways from Mencius,

he argued that he could not practice it because of his fondness of wealth and women. Mencius answered that,

In antiquity Kung Liu was fond of money too... It was only when those who stayed at home had full granaries and those who went forth to war had full sacks that the march could begin. You may be fond of money, but so long as you share this fondness with the people, how can it interfere with your becoming a true King? ... In antiquity, King Dai was fond of women, and loved his concubines... At that time, there were neither girls pining for a husband nor men without a wife. You may be fond of women, but so long as you share this fondness with the people, how can it interfere with your becoming a true King? (*Mencius* 1B.5)

A ruler should realize that his capacity to enjoy pleasure is the same as the people's, thus allowing them to satisfy their own desires. In conclusion, there are three ways to share pleasure in the political realm: sharing material goods for mutual benefit, recognizing the other's capacity to feel the same pleasure and vulnerability as we do, and sharing the pleasure of being loved and respected. A ruler is allowed to pursue self-interest, desire, and pleasure. As a ruler, though, he must cultivate a compassionate heart, practice the virtue of benevolence, and share pleasure. In this way, it can be argued that Mencius has successfully provided a political guidance for the ruler to practice the virtue of compassion as a policy of practical governance.

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Notes

1. I agree with Yang (2006: 257–261) and Bai (2014: 335) who claim that moral teachings in Mencius and other pre-Qin Confucians need to be understood as a response to political concern and to the quest for new forms of harmonizing society and governing a state during the Warring States Period.
2. Yang (2006: 262–265) presents Shang Yang (390–338 BCE) as one of the philosophers who advocated a political philosophy opposite to Mencius. Shang Yang suggested a punishment-based philosophy of governance, built on the assumption that people can be better controlled through fear.
3. According to Bai (2014: 339), political questions were the foci for pre-Qin Chinese thinkers. One of the fundamental concerns of their times was the search for a new social bond. While Confucius' concept of humanity and Mencius' concept of compassion provide answers to such fundamental problem, Mohist impartial care, albeit a challenge to Confucians' answer, is also a response to the same problem.
4. In this paper, the terms "universal love," "impartial love," and "love without discrimination" are used interchangeably to refer to the Mohist idea of "*jian ai*" (兼爱); the terms "self-love" and "self-interest" refer to Yangist egoism.
5. The term *ceyin* has been diversely translated as "commiseration" (James Legge, Sin Yee Chan), "compassion" (D. C. Lau, Bryan W. Van Norden, Kim-chong Chong), "pity and compassion" (Irene Bloom), and "sympathy" (Xiusheng Liu).

6. I use “compassion” instead of “pity” in order to correspond to my interpretation of *ceyin* and *buren* in Mencius’ thought.
7. However, in the case of compassion toward a human being, Nussbaum (2014: 194) argues that the imagination of someone else’s predicament as our own and the thought of experiencing a similar condition play an important psychological role in judging the seriousness of someone’s plight.
8. We follow the definition of pleasure in Confucianism as proposed by Chen (2010: 180–182). I borrow parts of Chan’s arguments to discuss the point of sharing and extending pleasure in a political sense. For further discussion on pleasure in *Mencius*, see Nylan and Huang 2008.
9. Chen (2010: 186–190) argues that Confucianism and Zhuangzi Daoism hold different views on pleasure. While Confucianism emphasizes sharing pleasure, Zhuangzi prefers individual pleasure and holds that pleasure cannot to be shared.

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