

'No man is devoid of a heart sensitive to the sufferings of 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]

Mencius states that no man is completely insensitive to the pain of others and that a sensitive heart leads to a compassionate government. As a result, governing becomes easy, according to him. The concept he describes is more comprehensive than it may seem and consequently, his idea of a compassionate government is unrealistic. It is, however, worth striving for. In this essay, I will defend this thesis by first determining what is meant with 'compassion', which is crucial to the content of the citation. Secondly, I will also discuss what a compassionate government is. Next, I will explain the problem with the correspondence of concepts and its consequences for compassionate governance. Furthermore, I will argue that even if a governor is compassionate, this does not make ruling easier. Lastly, I will explain why we should strive for a compassionate government, despite the complications it entails.

In Mencius citation, it is not clear what he means by a sensitive heart or how he defines compassion. Is compassion only feeling what another person experiences? In my opinion, compassion is more than that. Compassion means having the ability to mentally and emotionally relate to someone else's experience (usually negative experiences), without having experienced it yourself. However, it means also that you act upon this mutual feeling, to aid the person who is really suffering. When a person has lost a loved one, for example, just feeling sad for them is not real compassion, but just a superficial relation to that situation. Real compassion is feeling mournful as well, but being able to overcome that feeling, which is possible because you are not experiencing it directly yourself, and comfort the other.

Mencius has a point when he states that compassionate government – and thus compassion – can manifest itself because of a sensitive heart. A heart, in this case, is defined as the emotional life of a person. A *sensitive* heart is open to the feelings of other people, without casting immediate judgement. Instead, it takes in the state of the other and in sharing the experience, can provide help and comfort. How this translates to governing, I will discuss in the next paragraph. Now that I have established what is meant by compassion, I will attempt to define what a compassionate government is.

Presumably, people install a government to maintain a society, to make sure that it will not turn into chaos. There have been various ideas as to how a society can be ruled best. Some, like Machiavelli, think that a ruler should have all the power and use any means necessary to secure the wellbeing of the state. Plato thought that the republic was the best form of governance and saw democracy as the least desirable way to rule. I would argue that democracy is definitely a possible way of maintaining a society well, *if* it is built, first and foremost, on compassion. Why? A society consists of people who are connected. And people are primarily connected by compassion. (Note: I am talking about a connection on a deeper or more emotional level than just having a business relation or being connected to someone because you have seen them once.) Communication is an important aspect of governing, because miscommunication can lead to misunderstandings, which can result in things going wrong. What is compassion other than an almost subconscious communication of feeling? Between two people who befriend each other, compassion is the beginning. In a whole nation, compassion is the thing that can bind them together in a way that avoids conflict, unlike, for instance, the desire for property does. Therefore, compassion and empathy are the building blocks of the society we as humans construct. By promoting and stimulating compassion between citizens, one can avoid the society becoming chaotic. A compassionate government merely has to make sure that what they decide is not motivated by greed, the desire for power or contempt, but by compassion. As the previously discussed definition of compassion suggests, a compassionate

government listens to its people and tries to act in a way that relieves the suffering in a society. Having established what a compassionate government is, I will now discuss the problem of (not) corresponding concepts and its consequences for a compassionate government.

The sceptic question of whether the concepts in our minds correspond with the concepts of others and the possibility that they do not, is important in this discussion about (compassionate) governing. (Note: I am not discussing at this point the correspondence between the concepts in our minds and the outside world and I am postulating the existence of other minds.) I would like to use the idea of spectrum inversion to illustrate the problem of corresponding concepts. This will also illustrate that a ruler and his or her people do not always have to have corresponding concepts, but that it is salient in the case of compassion. Spectrum inversion is the idea that I see the colour red, but for other people, it appears as blue. Every time I see something red, however, I have learned to call it blue. It is practically impossible to discover that I see a colour differently. So, the two concepts of the colour blue, in this example, do not correspond. Even if a ruler has a different concept of a colour than his people, his governance is not hindered by it. However, if a ruler has a certain concept of compassion, but the people under his rule have another concept of it, it causes problems. This has really happened. In the 20th century, when it was forbidden to be homosexual, governments tried to 'cure' homosexuals from their so-called sickness. From the governments' standpoint, this was a relatively compassionate policy – they did not throw the men in prison. However, for the actual homophiles of that era, it was anything but compassionate – they were denied their right to love. This proves that it is important for a government to have a similar concept of compassion – as well as of other subjects – as the people whom they rule, to be able to rule compassionately.

One could argue that it is impossible to establish whether or not concepts such as compassion are the same for different persons, even if you talk about it. In a democracy, the parliament consists of multiple officials, who can have different views. Moreover, it is unlikely that a population of millions harbors people who all have the same view. Often, it is the opposite. So how can one know, especially as a ruler, what compassion is for others? As I said before, communication is a key part in this issue. I think that by listening to the people and communicating with them, a government can definitely distil a widely accepted idea of compassion. However, there will always be individuals who disagree, which is why this part of the idea of a compassionate government is unrealistic.

This brings me to my next point. Even if one would be able to establish a compassionate government, this would not make ruling easier. This stems from the fact that if the government (and thus the rulers) is indeed compassionate, then the rulers relate to all the misery in their country or area. I dare say that the more compassionate a ruler is, the harder it becomes for him or her to rule. By experiencing not only the suffering from a few, but having the responsibility for and relating to the suffering from a whole people or country, is hard on both your mental and emotional state. The suffering in a country often seems to be endless; whenever one problem is solved, another arises. It takes a strong heart and mind to be able to handle that. In a way, compassion is both the strength and the weakness of a ruler. To make this a bit more comprehensible: a king or government cannot at the same time allow immigrants to come to their country (be compassionate toward the immigrants) and keep them out (being compassionate towards the habitants of the country). With a sensitive heart, which related to both sides of the issue, it becomes harder to make decisions.

A striking example of this is found in a scene from the series *Game of Thrones*, in which Danaerys, a young woman learning and discovering how to be a ruler, is listening to the complaints of the citizens from a city in which she just freed all the slaves and killed their masters. When she has listened to a few

citizens, after making an emotionally difficult decision about allowing a son to bury his father, who was a slave master, she tiredly asks her right hand how many more there are waiting outside. After only a few cases in which she tried to make compassionate decisions, she is already feeling drained. This shows that trying to be compassionate towards the ones you rule may result in them liking you, but takes a lot from you as a ruler. This is the other aspect that makes a compassionate government unrealistic: it is very hard to find someone (let alone multiple persons) who is suited and willing to take on the burden of ruling with a sensitive heart and trying to rule compassionately. (Note: I am aware that Mencius stated that no man is devoid of a sensitive heart, but for the comprehensiveness of my point, I deemed it not relevant enough to discuss it in this essay.)

A counterargument can be that while ruling does not become easier for the ruler on an emotional level, it might become easier to make people listen to you and follow your policy. Generally, when someone is liked, he or she is listened to more as well. However, while a compassionate government may result in people behaving better, this does not outweigh the heavy burden of feeling the suffering of a whole people.

Despite a few flaws in Mencius statement, we can learn from it. Nowadays, it seems that governing is focused on everything but compassion. It is about wealth, about property, about war, but what governing is really about seems to be forgotten. In essence, governing is trusting others to create a society in which multiple people can live with as much freedom as possible, while trying to avoid harming each other. Locke proposed a social contract in which people sacrificed part of their freedom for protection, while Rousseau spoke of a social contract focusing on the 'common will'. Looking at Mencius quote, however, I find myself inclined to conclude that living in a society which has some form of governance, always has an unspoken social contract. Taking a look at current affairs and seeing the polarization in a lot of countries, seeing the issues about religious intolerance, seeing the debate about nuclear weapons, I think that a possible solution to a lot of these problems is making – or at least trying to make – governing about compassion. Although I have argued that it is unrealistic to reach a fully compassionate society, I would like to apply a free interpretation of Aristotle's wisdom here. If we act opposite as to how we feel inclined to act, we may reach a balance or find the 'golden midway' in governing. If the social contract focuses on compassion instead of materialistic things, and governing starts from there, it is possible to create a safe and tolerant society. Therefore, despite its unrealistic aspect, a compassionate government is worth working towards.

To conclude, in this essay I have discussed why Mencius idea of a compassionate government is unrealistic, but nonetheless worth working towards. Firstly, I attempted to define what is meant by compassion. Then I talked about what a compassionate government is. Subsequently, I discussed the problem of correspondence of concepts between different minds and between a government and its people and how this makes a compassionate government unrealistic. Next, I explained the other aspect that makes a compassionate government unrealistic; the fact that ruling compassionately does not make ruling easier, as opposed to what Mencius says. Finally, I argued that governments should still strive to rule compassionately, despite it seeming unrealistic and hard to achieve. Compassion is what connects us as humans and it is what a government connects to their people as well.