``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. ''

Introduction

In the excerpt, Mencius attempted to answer three questions.

Firstly, what is human nature?

Secondly, what is the impact of the ruler on the government?

Thirdly, what is the ideal type of government?

I therefore divide my essay into three main sections, entitled ``Human Nature,'' ``Compassionate Government,'' and ``Ideal Government.'' I will argue that Mencius's answers all face challenges, and satisfactory treatments of these questions all, ultimately, require the turn towards linguistic analysis and semantic investigation of the terms used.

In the conclusion, I will explain that it is because, for philosophy to progress, for better answers to such questions to be yielded, the turn to the study of language-sense-world relation is the necessary step.

Human Nature

Let P be the claim that ``no man is devoid of a heart sensitive to the sufferings to the others.''

This could be understood as a statistical claim or a metaphysical claim. I will show in turn how both are problematic, and why a linguistic turn is necessary.

The former is false. The statistical observation on the shared property, that all men alive do indeed have a sensitive heart, is falsified by the fact of the existence of the dead man, the man in a coma, the infant, and the psychopath. Therefore, as in line with the philosophical commitments of Mencius, P should be interpreted as a metaphysical point on human nature. (In this essay, I take it that human nature is synonymous as the essence of man, though fine distinctions may be made.) That is, P either claims that essence of man and the human nature is caring, sensitive, and empathetic.

I now consider the metaphysical interpretation of P. The question at hand is that, what is human nature? This in part depends on the epistemological question, how do we know what human nature is? That itself hinges on the answer to the semantic question, what does human nature mean? I will discuss these three questions in turn.

Many theories of human nature exist. With the tradition of Chinese philosophy, the debate between Mencius and Xunzi is prominent: is human nature good or evil? Clearly, everybody would feel sad when they see scenes of torture, feel obliged to help out when they see drowning boys, and feel ashamed or guilty if they had compromised their integrity. These seem to point to the existence of compassion, conscience, and kindness within each man. However, it is also true that laziness, greed, the quest for influence, the will for power, selfishness, and beastly impulses are also a strong element shared by all. Many other theories about human nature exist. Perhaps, as Paul Snowdon would argue, humans are animals, essentially; or, humans are just associations of consciousness; or maybe, as Peter Unger would argue, humans are nothing at all.

In face of such diverse opinions, each of which enjoys some evidential support, I think it is natural, logical, and coherent to say that every man is born with many sides -- the Dr Jekyll side and the Mr Hyde side. You are neither the devil nor the saint. You have both rationality and animality. Such mixture accounts seem to be more sensible than the more radical accounts which only emphasise on side of humanity, for indeed various sides have their points.

However, while pluralism may be relatively more satisfactory as it resolves some of the problems within the debate, it suffers the same epistemological doubt just as any other theories about human nature. I will now explain the problem of the veil of education. That is, since the points are only made by observing what is shared by all people, it is also possible that those qualities are not directly reflective of human nature per se, but are results of education, socialization, and assimilation.

Even if we move away from the moral side of the debate on human nature, the same problem is present. Consider the linguistic capacity and instinct. On the on hand, as Jerry Fodor and Noam Chomsky argue, there is evidence for us having innate ideas and universal grammar as part of human nature -- also known as genes -- leading to the phenomenon of language. On the other hand, John Locke argues for the blank slate thesis, which says that all knowledge and language

are acquired as people grow up. In fact, as Wittgenstein would say, not only are there no objective intrinsic constant meaning represented by language, language itself is a game, the rules of which need to be learnt by people as they get educated.

The similarity between the two debates is that, both the debate on the moral psychological side of human nature and the debate on the linguistic cognitive side of human nature are trying to deduce the unobservable (human nature) with only access to the observables (how people are like), and there is no way to easily conclude whether people are meant to be how they eventually turn out to be, or it is some other factors that kicked in half way through their coming of age. There is a vein of education, so to speak, which makes the discussion difficult.

In fact, this is a manifestation of a larger problem -- the vein of perception. While it is common-sensical to assume that the Real World exists and exists in the way we take it to be, all we get to know is how we feel ourselves. ``Reality is in the skull.'' There is no way you could tell whether the table actually exists, or only the sense data of the table exist; or whether the table appears in a certain way because it indeed is of that nature, or because your psychological state, the lighting, and the atmosphere are the more dominant factor here.

If this argument works for the natural world, it would only be more devastating for the social world. Consider a string. One may be bewildered why a hanging string is there on the roof, ``perhaps it's a prank.'' Another may take it as a ``fashion statement''. The third may take it to hang clothes. The point here is, only the third person would in fact hang clothes on the string, and it is indeed the thinking of the third person which turns the string into a clothes hanger. If I now ask the third person, what is the nature and essence of a clothes-hanger? To him, it is and has always been a clothes-hanger, but unbeknownst to him, the nature and essence of the string may have undergone dramatic changes, had someone else been the one around. It may very well end up in an art exhibition and be an iconic item. See, there are so many toilets in the world, but only the lucky one became Duchamp's toilet; there are so many stones in the world, but only one made its way into Johnson's logical fallacy; and there are so many Romantic poets in the world, but only the works of William Wordsworth was considered a statement on philosophy. Therefore the doubt is indeed potent: we can't be sure whether we really know the essence and nature of something when it is so deeply affected by social constructs, relations of power, and linguistic and sociological conventions.

At this stage, we have seen that it is not just the question on human nature that is difficult. In fact, questions on natures of anything are difficult. Therein lays the charge of skepticism: if there is no way to settle the nature of things, then, perhaps not only are we unsure about our theories of the nature of the things in question, we may not even be sure that things exist in the first place! The Cartesian Devil, which goes by the name of a crazy scientist, might have started a sensual simulation, supplying sensations to fool everybody. -- Such may very well be the harsh reality. It is just that you can't know. Let this argument be S.

Such is the argument for global skepticism, but it may also be used against it. Consider the following. I have mentioned earlier that P, that no man is devoid of a heart sensitive to the sufferings to the others, faces a difficult time explaining the abundance of evil and uncaring souls. One potential reply follows. Everybody has the capacity to care is innate, the actuality of caring isn't necessitated, as such capacity may remain dormant. Hence, even the worst criminal in the world is not devoid of a tender soul, a sentimental heart, a capacity for hope. It is just that you can't tell. Let this argument be S'.

Now, a paradox arises. S says, ``maybe nothing exists -- it is just that you can't know." S' says, ``maybe human nature does exists, in a tender, sensitive, caring character, even within the most inhumane people -- it is just that you can't tell." Clearly, the content of S and S' are incompatible, but the form of the two are the same. This form of argument should therefore be rejected by reductio ad absurdum, for it leads to contradiction. It should be rejected also because it appeals to something unknowable. Discussion of the unknowable is trivial because they are unknowable anyway. For these two reasons, I object the charge of global skepticism in the form of S, and the potential reply by Mencius in the form of S'.

Now, I have shown that it is obvious that both sides have not advanced much. Consequently, the metaphysical questions of whether and to what extent are such characteristics manifestation of innate human natures, or even whether such essences of humanity even exist in the first place, are difficult to answer, and it is best to maintain an agnostic state of mind.

This is pretty devastating, for, from veil of education, to veil of perception, and skepticism, what we have seen are all problems. Not just in Mencius's account of human nature, but almost any knowledge at all. What is the way out of this?

I think the only hope lies in a change in perspective. If we stop being so fixated on looking for an answer about that Human Nature in the Objective External Real World, we may instead look inside -- what do we mean by human nature? Since we all can use that phrase competently, it must mean something to us. You see, a linguistic turn is the natural progression in philosophy.

At this stage, I have argued that, we could indeed say that, most human beings as we know them are mixtures of good and bad, empathy and egotism, altruism and selfishness (this is on more solid grounds as it is an answer to a sociological question which could, in principle, be settled via empirical observations.) However, the metaphysical question seems to be more difficult to answer as there is very little solid ground upon which we could conclude anything with much certainty. This necessitated the turn to semantic analysis and linguistic interpretation of sense, reference, and use of the speech element, ``human nature."

I now turn to the second part of the excerpt.

Compassionate Government

Let Q be ``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."

Q may be understood as empirical or evaluative. I will now argue in turn that both are problematic and explain why a linguistic turn is necessary.

The former is invalid. The fact that Former Kings (who possess sensitive hearts) have had compassionate governments itself doesn't prove that whoever that possesses sensitive hearts would have compassionate governments, and whether the empire would be easy to rule. That does not follow. Such a problem has been long observed, and is particularly prominent in the tradition of the social sciences. A theory which explains the past may not work for the future. A few example follow. In the past, the European nations believe that it is natural the states are in perpetual warfare, until a state of relative peace emerged. Seeing that, the theorists concluded that there is a ``balance of power" which led to the peace amongst various nations. However, it was not long before further conflicts remerged and they theorists argued that there is a need for the rebalancing of power. Hence conferences were held and treaties were signed; in the meanwhile, there are still conflicts outbreaks from time to time, and history continued. Now, the balance of power has changed from a theory explaining peace to a practice for the sake of peace.

You see, particularly in social and political sciences, past theories are prone to counter examples, the black swans, and the surprises. Therefore, to argue about how the government would be like based on what Former Kings were like should be viewed with scrutiny.

Another problem for this type of government is quite the reverse: a theory about governance may be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Consider the case of Gustave who wrote the Crowd. That is book on how to manipulate popular opinion. Its prediction that the crowd would follow not reason but emotional appeals came true, but the interesting factor is that the Crowd is allegedly one of Adolf Hitler’s favorite books.

These two phenomena are enough to sure the complexities in making statement in sociology and politics. To simply assume that whatever that has happened in the past will continue is fallacious.

Other than the inductive fallacy, an ontological difficulty underpins the charge against this empirical interpretation of Q. Is it true that there are patterns in the social world? While it is at least reasonable, though also pretty shaky (for it is also a metaphysical claim which suffers the same type of problem as mentioned in the previous section on human nature), to argue that particles in the time of Isaac Newton behaved pretty much the same way as in the age of Albert Einstein, it is not as warranted to assume that a constant pattern of political, social, economic, and geopolitical evolution throughout the course of history. Hereby, a larger problem appears. It

is not just difficult to talk about how governments will be like when the kings are of sensitive hearts. It is in fact difficult to explain and predict any events in politics altogether. With ontological regularity, the application of the scientific method to the study of politics is futile. This difficulty is daunting and needs to be recognized when making claims in political philosophy.

Now, if Q is problematic as an empirical claim of what would happen in countries with rulers of a certain type, what about the evaluative interpretation? That is, it is preferable to have a compassionate government, ruled by a king of sensitive heart? Clearly, Mencius is not a realist political scientist. He is also concerned with showing what rulers ought to do and how government shall be run.

I now consider the evaluative interpretation of Q. Under this interpretation, two critical questions arise. The first is that, if ``ought implies can,'' can governments ever be compassionate? (I will not discuss the complications on the challenges to ``ought implies can'' in this essay, for it is a trivial technicality.) The second is that, is a compassionate government the ideal type of government? I now answer the first one. I will leave the second question to the next section.

It is obvious to note that, if the compassionate government is a logical impossibility, normativity behind the while claim is empty -- for it is entirely irrelevant to recommend whatever that is impossible to achieve. You see, it is clear that compassionate is seldom used to governments. It is meant for people, for only people have agency and capacity to feel. The intent, the psychological content, a matter of willing, is what makes one compassionate. Of course, subsequent to that, people, having felt compassionate, are usually motivated to act altruistically and considerately. However, it is very obvious that our understanding the word compassion includes both the act and the willing, the policies taken and the considerations behind.

Now, of course governments could carry out affirmative actions or plans of developments which is beneficial to most, if not all, of its population's welfare and rights. Such is at least theoretically possible, though it is not clear how that is necessarily done so long as the leaders of the governments cared enough -- for, they certainly also need to have a level of capability to devise the most suitable and conducive governmental policies and developmental plans. -- But a larger question goes to the agency condition. To say that a government is truly compassionate, the government needs to be an agent. That immediately grants the government the status of the moral agent, along with its corresponding obligations, rights, deserts, and responsibilities. You see, it is quite a commonsensical claim to say that, whoever that is capable of being moral, is responsible of being moral. If this is indeed true, then the fact that a government is compassionate implies that it is responsible, deserving of due punishments and praises depending on the degree of morality its actions and intentions demonstrate.

While it is not entirely nonsensical, to talk about the concept of collective responsibilities, (responsibilities which are not laid upon any of the individual participants, as in the case of institutional failures), serious challenges to this stance exist. One is that it is difficult to assign the status of moral agent to a non-sentient, non-human existence -- be it a company, a country, or a government. Another one is that, the premise that moral status is a function of moral capacity, may have deeply disturbing implications -- if the level of moral status, and in particular moral desert, is a function of the level of the capacity to act morally, does it not follow that the rich deserve the be rich because they, with more resources, are more capable to act morally? And therefore the poor deserve to be poor, simply because they are poor in the first place? Those seem to be undesirable conclusions that we should try to avoid.

On this ground, having examined the possibilities and moral implications, I argue that it is difficult, if not impossible, for governments to be truly compassionate.

Now, once again, we have seen the difficulties in establishing much with respect to an interesting and important question, the answers to which have significant influence on not just philosophers, but anyone in power or under the influence of public policies makings. Yet it is indeed difficult, for it is possible the Mencius meant something peculiar when he used to word compassionate. Since the domain of compassionate is usually on people, hereby the meaning seems to be more of a matter of the twist in language that is being done. What does it exactly mean for the government to be compassionate?

In this sense, a successful account to the question at hand lies in, once again, the semantic analysis and linguistic interpretation of our sense, reference, and use of the speech element, ``compassion,'' and ``agency.'' I will now discuss what the ideal society is, and whether it is the one as characterized by Mencius.

Ideal government

I know ask the following questions: is a compassionate government the ideal type of government? Is the Empire which is the easiest to rule, the most ideal of all?

I think it is pretty outrageous for anyone to claim the preferability of the type of governance is solely and merely a matter of the ease of governance. The fact that totalitarianism states are the easiest to govern in theory -- because you don't need to care about popular oppositions, elections,

or anything of the link -- and the almost universal distaste against totalitarianism proves my point here.

However, now we have a problem. While it is easy to say that ease of governance by itself loses its rationale when it represents nothing ideal or normatively desirable, we have to now juggle with the question on what the ideal type of government is. The sheer amount of disagreements over this topic is testament to the difficulty of the question. Aristotle, Hobbes, Hume, Kant, Locke, Marx, Laozi, Confucius, Rawls, ... it is almost impossible to even agree on what the ideal society should be like, and how the rule of governments can possibly be justified. Take the debate on the social contract theory, for instance. Each theorist starts off with a different account of what the starting point, a different set of criteria for rationality, and they end up with completely different accounts of that account which, ``would have been signed."

Now, our experience with the discussion on human nature warns us against delving into the metaphysical status of the social contract and the ideal society – for such discussions are likely to be futile for the same groups of reasons coming from the similar arguments: is the ideal society a theoretic construct, an evolutionary feature, a manifestation of the unjustified male dominance, a platonic form, a linguistic convention, or a means used to subjugate the weak wills? How do we settle such debates?

Instead, I think the disagreement here once again points to the thesis of pluralism. Although it clearly is the case that we have some level of agreement on what kind of societies are somewhat better, serious, reasonable people may disagree on the type of society that they prefer. Of course it is good, ceteris paribus, that people feel cared for in the society, but the myriad of interpretations of words like justices, fairness, legitimacy, and rights all point to the pluralism about the ideal society. In the end, I think that the question at hand here is once again made muddy because of the multiple interpretations of all those words.

Here we are back on the same track again: in face of disagreement, the question which naturally follows is: what is the right way to settle a question on the ideal type of society? And then, does that ideal type of society even exist? And ultimately, what do you even mean when you say, the ideal type of society?

As somewhat expected, the discussion here once again necessitated the turn to semantic analysis and linguistic interpretation of our sense, reference, and use of the speech element, ``ideal," ``justices," ``fairness," ``legitimacy," and ``rights."

Conclusion

In the excerpt, Mencius attempted to answer three questions.

Firstly, what is human nature?

Secondly, what is the impact of the ruler on the government?

Thirdly, what is the ideal type of government?

While his answers are interesting, problems arise. There are significant epistemic and ontological assumptions that may come unjustified, but we are quite lost in our clarification and investigation of such premises. By tracking down these three answers and possible ways of answer them, I showed that it would inevitably become necessary to turn to the only remaining source of hope: semantic and linguistic analysis of the terms used in the question.

This is not so much a surprise, as it is a prime example of how philosophy, fundamentally, is a language game, and now foundational answers are logically possible. This is also true in general. Two examples follow. For instance, epistemology studies how the word ``know'' ought to be used, and ethics studies the knowledge about what the word ``ought'' signifies. Or, consider the study of truth. If you don't know what truth is, you don't know what theory of truth is true, and what isn't. Yet, theories of truths themselves are answers to the question, ``what is truth?'' You see, you need a chicken to get an egg, and an egg to get a chicken. If you want to start from something, its roots are missing. Indeed, this, as parallel to what has been demonstrated in the previous sections of this essay, is the proof to the fact that, in philosophy, if one were to take a foundational style of philosophizing, he won't be able to find any solid ground upon which he could deduce solid, grounded, warranted claims.

This retreat to semantics is then necessary, and indeed the only thing promising left. For, while it is difficult to establish truths from the stretch, at least each of us shares some common understanding when various terms are used. To investigate the world through language and sense, that is what philosophy really is all about.