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Moral Therapy and the Imperative of Empathy

Mencius Encountering Slote

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1 Introduction

Contemporary discourse on classical Confucian moral cultivation characterizes it, at least implicitly, as primarily a self-oriented project, its avowed communitarianism notwithstanding. More specifically, although scholarly discussions on classical Confucian moral psychology have presented a complex and nuanced picture of moral sentiments and their transformation, such discussions are largely confined to a moral agent herself. However, classical Confucian moral discourse also has a significant component that is primarily other-oriented, especially in the form of moral persuasion. This is most clearly demonstrated in the *Mencius*, much of which offers detailed accounts of Mencius trying to persuade a ruler to adopt the Confucian/Mencian moral-political-economic program. What is involved in moral persuasion is drastically different from self-cultivation and merits a separate discussion, especially given the fact that moral persuasion requires a deep understanding of the moral client, the particular context of the dialogue, and the moral agent herself. In other words, moral persuasion highlights three aspects of moral cultivation that are more salient than the self-oriented effort, namely a deep understanding of the heartmind[1] of another moral agent, an acute sensitivity toward the context of a particular dialogue, as well as a high degree of conscientiousness of one's own motivations when engaging in moral persuasions.

On the other hand, moral persuasion is usually interpreted by contemporary scholars to be conducted through moral argument. That is, early Chinese moral thinkers are understood to engage in moral argument, trying to convince their contemporaries the rightness of the paths they offer. However, such an approach to moral persuasion is more appropriate when the target of their effort is their intellectual peers, whereas if the target of this effort is rulers and those in power, as is often the case in many of the early texts such as the *Mencius*, this approach does

not necessarily offer the most fitting interpretative framework. I will argue in this essay that, when dealing with rulers, Mencius resorts to a mode of moral persuasion that can be better characterized as moral therapy.

In this connection, it is interesting to note that contemporary discourse on classical Confucianism sometimes also characterizes it as a form of moral therapy.[2] However, if moral therapy means the curing of moral diseases, it requires a moral doctor and a moral client ("moral patient" in contemporary ethics means something completely different, referring to someone who is incapable of "normal" moral sentiments and behaviors). But the contemporary interpretation of Confucianism is largely confined to the self-cultivation of a moral agent who is at the same time the moral doctor and the moral client without distinguishing the two, likely due to the self-oriented interpretation of classical Confucianism, whereas a therapeutic model implies such a distinction, at least in the modern sense of the term "therapy." As we will see in the following, the distinction between a moral doctor and a moral client is central to the moral therapy described in several famous passages of the *Mencius* wherein fascinating dynamics between the two parties unfolds in front of our eyes.

In this essay, I take seriously the characterization of Confucian moral philosophy as therapeutic and develop a framework of moral therapy to explore the therapeutic aspect of the Mencian moral project. I argue that Mencius, the moral doctor, attempts to change the interpretative script of cost/benefit in his moral clients' (often rulers') self-understanding to a moral script he discerns to be actually operative in the client's actions. The goal is to push a ruler to repair his relationship with the people in his political maneuvers.

In the latter part of the essay, I will engage Mencian moral therapy with Michael Slote's moral sentimentalism, especially with respect to their shared emphasis on the central role empathy plays in our moral life, in order to provide a broader context for the Mencian moral therapy. I will argue that Mencian moral therapy operates within moral sentimentalism that sees empathy at a moral imperative in our life, especially when dealing with people who are morally challenging.

2 Moral Therapy and Human Relations

It is important to observe, at the outset, that interpreting the Mencian mode of moral persuasion through the lens of moral therapy is different from doing it through that of moral argument. Clearly both methods are present in the text, but moral persuasion through argument has dominated the modern discourse on Mencian thought given the way philosophy is practiced in the modern academy. In this connection, it is important to point out that as methods of moral persuasion, moral argument and moral therapy actually have rather different objectives. Conducting a therapy is about clarifying and transforming a moral client's self-understanding and *winning over* the client as a result whereas engaging in an

argument is often more about *winning* an argument with the pretense that winning an argument itself *should* win over the opponent without taking into considerations of the psychological dynamics of those who lose an argument as well as the relationship between the two sides engaging in the argument. One can win an argument without winning over the person who has lost the argument, just as one can win over an opponent even when the former loses an argument to the latter. Clearly, moral persuasion is more than winning a moral argument. It requires that the moral doctor takes the totality of the moral client's heartmind into consideration and effects changes in the moral client's self-understanding in a way that resonates with the client.

Furthermore, what is also salient about moral argument is that any two persons can engage in an argument, without presupposing any relationship between the two; on the other hand, in order for moral therapy to be effective such that the client is won over and the goal of changing his/her heartmind and/or behavior is achieved, there needs to be a relationship of trust such that the client can trust the doctor. This relationship of trust can potentially open the client's heartmind to being persuaded. Without such a relationship, any argument, however sharp and powerful, is often futile, if not outright counterproductive, when the goal is to persuade the other side to change their heartmind. Another way to put it is that moral argument is about moral truth (whatever conception of truth it might be) irrespective of the relationship status of the parties involved whereas moral therapy is about understanding another person's heartmind in its totality within the context of a therapist/client relationship in order to bring about a better self-understanding of the clients themselves and effect changes in their behaviors and their troubled relationships with others. In the case of Mencius, helping a ruler to repair his frayed relations with his people is the primary objective of Mencius' therapeutic effort.

In a famous passage where Mencius is asked what he is good at, he replies, "I have an insight into words. I am good at cultivating my flood-like *qi*" (*Mencius* 2A2; trans. Lau 1970, with modifications). Most commentators focus on Mencius' rumination about the flood-like moral energy and do not pay as much attention to the first aspect of Mencius' strength, namely his claim to have insights into a person's state of heartmind by the way that person uses words. Clearly, Mencius sees himself as being good at both self-oriented moral cultivation and other-oriented moral persuasion. This essay will highlight the significance of the latter aspect, especially through the lens of moral therapy.

Mencius elaborates his insight into words this way: "From biased words I can see wherein the speaker is blind; from immoderate words, wherein he is ensnared; from heretical words, wherein he has strayed from the right path; from evasive words, wherein he is at his wits' end" (*Mencius* 2A2; trans. Lau 1970). This is a succinct summary of Mencius' thinking on how to get through to another person, given their particular state of heartmind. Mencius does it by paying close attention to the way words are used which offer invaluable clues to what the clients think

and feel about a particular issue. Indeed, much of the text portrays a Mencius who is adept at discerning the state of heartmind of his interlocutors. This is critically important in a therapeutic context that the doctor understands the client well.

Let us take a closer look at how Mencius offers a distinctly therapeutic approach to the moral ills of his time, especially when dealing with powerful rulers, in his effort to help rulers repair their problematic relationships with their people. As we will see, the Mencian moral therapy is to help a ruler to reset his strained relationship with his people such that both sides can enjoy a more mutually satisfying relationship, therefore helping to fulfill the ruler's political ambitions. Aided by his extraordinary discernment of his clients' heartmind, Mencius creatively crafts an alternative moral script that explains the state of heartmind shown through the clients' words/behaviors far more effectively than even the speakers themselves realize, in order to reorient their moral compass to the Confucian path.

3 Mencius' Therapeutic Approach to Problematic Desires

There is a cluster of remarkable passages in the *Mencius* 1B we will call "passages of problematic desires" (PPDs). These PPDs have a uniform theme: a king, in a conversation with Mencius on the grand topics of good governance and political ambitions, admits one or two weaknesses he has, believing they are a hindrance to fulfilling his dream of a virtuous leader. More specifically, in 1B1, a king tells Mencius that he is fond of music but embarrassed that the kind of music he enjoys is not that of former kings but rather popular music. In 1B3, King Xuan of Qi confesses to Mencius that he has a weakness, namely he is fond of valor, in the context of a discussion about the king's political ambitions. In 1B5, the king confides in Mencius that he has two weak spots, namely fondness of money and women, when Mencius is discussing how to practice kingly governance with the king.

What is fascinating about these PPDs is that the king is well aware of the problematic nature of his particular desires, be they his fondness for pop music, valor, sex, or money, and that the king is ashamed to admit those desires to Mencius. Such a sense of shame seems natural to the king. Indeed, much of the Mencian discussion of human nature dwells on the inborn nature of our moral inclinations, including the sense of shame which is the root of the virtue of righteousness. However, what is surprising is that Mencius, in his dialogues with the king, celebrates the fact that the king has those desires, instead of chastising or condemning him for harboring them, as might be expected from a well-known moralist:

> If you have a great fondness for music, then there is perhaps hope for the state of Qi. Whether it is the music of today or the music of antiquity makes no difference.
>
> *Mencius* 1B1; trans. Lau 1970, with slight modifications

In other words, Mencius is saying that there is some close relationship between having fondness for music and hope for the state of Qi. This is rather surprising as the relevance of the king's fondness for pop music to the ideal of good governance is not immediately obvious. The king is understandably intrigued, asking to hear about it more. Mencius goes on to prod the king to sharing his fondness of music with his people, instead of monopolizing the joy. We find Mencius making a similar point in 1B5 with regard to the king's fondness for money and sex.

1B3 makes a somewhat different point. Here the king considers his fondness for valor a weakness when the king asks Mencius for advice about how to promote good relations with neighboring states. Mencius makes the point that fondness for valor is not itself problematic and that such a fondness, if properly channeled toward the worthy case of bringing peace over the world, would actually be a great virtue and asset.

1B1 and 1B3 suggest that Mencius lays down two routes in dealing with problematic desires, namely, the sharing route and the rechanneling route. The common interpretative trope in the contemporary discourse on the Mencian thought focuses on Mencius' message of sharing and rechanneling the king's personal desires as a matter of moral cultivation or application. Few contemporary commentators have dwelled on Mencius' puzzling response to the king's admissions of problematic desires. But the reasons for Mencius' response is not as obvious as many interpreters might have assumed.

There are several ways to interpret Mencius' response in 1B1. An obvious one is to see it as a savvy Mencian tactic to gain the king's ear. Given how readily Mencius is willing to confront a king in uncomfortable situations registered throughout the text, this interpretation, while plausible, certainly does not preclude other possibilities. Another way to unpack this is to highlight the critical importance of music in the Confucian teaching. As is well known, music occupies a special place within traditional Chinese political discourse in representing the ideal of harmony.[3] However, Mencius' focus in this passage is not really on music *per se* since it is not important to him whether the king likes the kind of music that is more about political harmony or he prefers the popular kind that is for entertainment only. Rather, Mencius' emphasis is on the king's fondness, regardless of the particular object of such a fondness. That is, Mencius' celebration of the king's fondness for music is not really about king's music taste—the right kind can have a more apparent connection to political governance—but rather about the king's ability to be fond of things.

The third way to approach Mencius' surprising response is to see it as Mencius' genuine expression of relief of a certain kind. That is, Mencius is relieved that the king is capable of fondness for music, regardless of kind of music involved. It is possible to imagine that among the many rulers Mencius has encountered there are some who are not even capable of enjoying music. It clearly implies that if a king is not even capable of such a fondness, there would have been no hope for the kingdom under his rule. This begs the question: why does Mencius elevate the king's mere fondness for music to such a height that his kingdom's political future

is dependent on it? The third interpretation is more philosophically interesting as it demonstrates Mencius' keen sense of what fondness for music can reveal about the moral potentials of the king. We will focus on the third interpretation in the following discussion.

In this connection, Christopher Small, in an influential book on music or what he calls "musicking" (i.e., participating in any activities of music performance that includes performing, listening, practicing, or dancing), observes:

> The act of musicking establishes in the place where it is happening a set of *relationships*, and it is in those relationships that the meaning of the act lies. They are to be found not only between those organized sounds which are conventionally thought of as being the stuff of musical meaning but also between the people who are taking part, in whatever capacity, in the performance; and they model, or stand as metaphor for, ideal relationships as the participants in the performance imagine them to be: relationships between person and person, be- tween individual and society, between humanity and the natural world and even perhaps the supernatural world.
>
> Small 1998: 13, my italics

He further points out that when we are musicking, we "explore, affirm and celebrate" those relationships (Small 1998: 215). There is quite a bit of contemporary scholarly literature on the connection between music and empathy. What emerges from these discussions, for the purpose of this essay, is a strong connection between music and empathy. In light of this, we can interpret Mencius' response to the king's fondness for music as well as the king's apparent sense of shame in his admission that he prefers pop music to ritual music as important indicators that the king is not lacking in terms of "normal" human sensitivities and emotional range. The king is not morally sick. No wonder Mencius is relieved.

Furthermore, Small's observation on the music's implications on human relationships is also relevant to what Mencius points out to the king. The king's fondness for music gives Mencius a glimpse into the king's heartmind pertaining to his relationship to those around him. Indeed, helping the king to repair his relationships with his people lies at the heart of the Mencian moral therapy. To accomplish this, Mencius offers an alternative moral script that affirms the king's problematic desires by bringing out in the open their implications in morality and relationships. This means that Mencius discerns a moral script operative in many of his conversations with the rulers. His moral therapy hinges on such a discernment as well as an effective way to articulate the script.

4 Moral Script

A moral script, according to Martin Hoffman (2000: 10–12), is a habitual association between transgression and guilt (actual and/or virtual), developed

early in childhood, that forms the basis of the moral behaviors and motivations of a moral agent. Because of its early formation, the impact of moral script in our lives is powerful, if at times hidden. Due to the king's expression of shame or self-doubt in his admissions to Mencius his harboring of problematic desires listed above, it is clear that there is such a moral script operative in the king. More specifically, what is operative in the kings Mencius talks to in the text is a moral script of an ideal ruler that pits morals against desires, pleasure, and ambition. Put differently, there is an implicit script in a king which says that to be good ruler he must guard against his problematic desires like the desires for money, sex, valor, and even his political ambition. We will see that Mencius discerns such a moral script in the king's heartmind, taps into it, and reformulates it in his therapeutic approach. In so doing, Mencius takes advantage of precious and often fleeting moments in order to persuade a ruler to be more humane and benevolent to his own people.

In the PPDs we examined previously, Mencius advises the king to let his people have a chance to enjoy what he himself enjoys, such as sex, wealth, and music on the one hand and to channel his fondness for valor and political ambition toward the worthy cause of bringing peace to the world on the other. The first advice is more universally applicable whereas the second advice is more relevant to a ruler. Let us put aside the second advice for now (we will come back to it later in the essay) and focus on the first.

What Mencius is doing in the first case is to recast the operative moral script that pits virtues against problematic desires by affirming the legitimacy of those desires, considered problematic even by the king himself, while encouraging the king to let his people have a chance to enjoy them. Such a move problematizes the *monopoly* of desired objects, rather than the desire itself or any particular desired object. This effort is evident in all of the PPDs we have examined above.

However, the most striking passage that details Mencius' effort to reshape a client's moral script can be found in *Mencius* 1A7, the famous ox-sparing passage, wherein Mencius asks the king whether the following incident happened:

> The King was sitting in the hall. He saw someone passing below, leading an ox. 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 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.'
>
> trans. Lau 1970

Once the king admits that it indeed happened, Mencius asks the king to explain why he spares the ox but substitutes a lamb for it. Apparently, many people regard the king's action as being stingy since an obvious explanation for what motivates the king's action is the difference in value between the two. But as a king he is

unlikely concerned about the cost of an ox versus a lamb. If that difference in cost between an ox and a lamb cannot be the reason for the king's action, the only explanation seems to be that the king is just silly and that he does not really know what he is doing. The king readily concedes this point since no sensible alternative has presented itself. This is precisely where Mencius demonstrates his extraordinary discernment of a precious teaching moment.

Mencius latches onto the king's own perplexity and sees some flicker of humanity, however fleeting, in such an incident as it provides Mencius a way into the king's heartmind. He manages to identify an unconventional perspective from which the king's action makes better sense than king's begrudging about the cost of an ox and, more importantly, sheds light on the moral sensitivity the king exhibits. Furthermore, Mencius views the incident from the perspective of *relationship* instead of cost. That is, Mencius sees the difference between the ox and the lamb not in terms of their cost but in terms of the king's relationships with them:

> 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.
>
> 1A7; trans. Lau 1970

In other words, the king saw the ox, but not the lamb. This means that the relationship between the king and the ox is more immediate and concrete than his relationship with some poor lamb which is more distant and abstract, as captured in the common expression "out of sight, out of mind." Reorienting the episode in the direction of the king's relationship brings forth the moral implications of the king's actions.

What Mencius is doing here is to bring out in the open the moral script operative in the king's heartmind and dismiss the script of profit. In the script of profit, there is a cost–benefit analysis that involves calculation and evaluation of the cost versus benefit. This is clearly the script people resort to when commenting on the king's motive in substituting an ox with a lamb to perform a sacrificial ritual. According to the script of profit, the king is miserly. However, the problem with this analysis is that it does not make sense since as a king he is unlikely to be concerned with the minor difference in the cost of an ox versus a lamb. An alternative analysis is that the king does not know what he is doing. Mencius is perceptive enough to see that the script of profit is an inappropriate one to interpret the king's actions and motivations, but Mencius does not think the king is just silly, either.

As a skilled moral doctor, Mencius sees a different script at work, namely the moral script, that is reflected in the sympathetic reaction at the sight of the suffering of another sentient being, activated by the king's sighting of a trembling ox. In

Mencius' eyes, the king's action is motivated by pity toward the ox in fear. In so doing, Mencius points out to the king his own benevolence toward the ox of which he is unaware:

> 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 pity for the animal.
>
> *Mencius* 1A7; trans. Lau 1970

The king is impressed by Mencius' ability to see something in him that eludes even the king himself:

> For though the deed was mine, when I looked into myself I failed to understand my own heart: You described it for me and your words struck a chord in me. What made you think that my heart accorded with the way of a true King?
>
> *ibid.*

Here the king expresses his awe of Mencius' extraordinary discernment. Of course, it does not hurt that Mencius tells the king that he has what it takes to be a true king. When the king says that Mencius' words have struck a chord in him, it is a good indication that a relationship of trust is established between the king and Mencius which is required of any effective therapy.

It is interesting to observe in this connection that at the very beginning of the *Mencius*, a king asks Mencius how he can profit (*li* 利) his kingdom. Mencius brushes aside the concern for profit and insists on a discussion of righteousness (*yi* 義). In light of what we have discussed here, it is clear that the script of profit is the dominant one that guides a king's thinking and behavior. What Mencius is doing there is to shift the profit script to the moral script. That is, from the very beginning of the text, the *Mencius* embarks on changing the dominant script of the time from profit/benefit/cost to that of morality/benevolence/righteousness. The script of profit clearly does not apply in the case of the king sparing an ox and replacing it with a lamb whereas the moral script provides a more sensible explanation about the king's motivation in that anecdote. Such a theme persists throughout the *Mencius*, both as a central topic of discussion and as the method by which moral persuasion is conducted and this is sometimes referred to as the debate between profit and righteousness in the text (*yi li zhi bian* 義利之辯).

5 From the Personal to the Political

In order to create a therapeutically effective environment, Mencius has to be able to discern an opportune moment when conversing with the king, taking into considerations the king's reactions and other sentiments expressed in the course of

their interactions on that occasion. The breakthrough comes precisely when the king realizes that he does have the potential to be a benevolent ruler, similar to the extolled figures of sage kings. This demonstrates Mencius' perceptive discernment in trying to persuade the king that the latter already has what it takes to become a benevolent ruler. According to Mencius, all that the king has to do "is take this very heart here and apply it to what is over there" (*ibid.*). Mencius is making the point that if the king is capable of showing benevolence toward an animal he certainly can be benevolent toward his people. Indeed, the primary motivation in Mencius' moral therapy is to push a ruler to repair his relationship with his people. One way to repair the king's relationship with his people is shown in the many passages wherein Mencius advises the king to let his people have a chance to enjoy the things the king himself takes pleasure in that include music, garden, money, and sensuous pleasure. This is the sharing route of the Mencian moral psychology as noted above.

However, there is another aspect of Mencian thought that specifically targets rulers. We have encountered this earlier when discussing PPDs. In *Mencius* 1B3, the king is well aware of his fondness for valor as a hurdle to becoming a benevolent king. Mencius' response is again fascinating:

> I beg you not to be fond of small valor. Putting your hand on your sword and snapping with anger, "How dare you oppose me!" is to show the defiance of a common fellow which can only be pitched against a single adversary. You should make it something greater . . . .
>
> If there was one bully in the Empire, King Wu felt this to be a personal affront. This was the valor of King Wu. Thus he, too, brought peace to the people of the Empire in one outburst of rage. Now if you, too, will bring peace to the people of the Empire in one outburst of rage, then the people's only fear will be that you are not fond of valor.
>
> *Mencius* 1B3; trans. Lau 1970, with slight modifications

Mencius is making the point that fondness for valor is not itself problematic. What *is* problematic is the pettiness of its expressions. If the king could model himself after ancient sage kings, who are motivated by moral outrage on behalf of people suffering under tyrannical rules, and channel that moral outrage toward the worthy case of bringing peace to the world, fondness for valor would actually be a great virtue and asset for a political leader.

In 1A7, Mencius deals with a similar issue concerning the king's political ambition. Here Mencius confronts the king for the latter's warmongering endeavors. He asks the king to explain why he launches wars: "Perhaps you find satisfaction only in starting a war, imperiling your subjects and incurring the enmity of other feudal lords?" The king rejects this and mentions his ambition as the motivation to starting a war. When Mencius prods the king to tell him what his ambition is, the king is reluctant to answer. Mencius goes through a list of regular objects of desire and the king says no. Mencius ventures a guess about the king's ambition:

> In that case one can guess what your supreme ambition is: You wish to extend your territory, to enjoy the homage of Qin and Chu, to rule over the Central Kingdoms and to bring peace to the barbarian tribes on the four borders. Seeking the fulfilment of such an ambition by such means as you employ is like looking for fish by climbing a tree.
>
> 1A7; trans. Lau 1970, modifications

There are at least two points worth noting. First, here Mencius is no longer dealing with the king's basic desires for money, sex, and other pleasures as we have seen previously. As a ruler, those desires can be easily met. Here Mencius is addressing the king's political ambition. Second, Mencius does not belittle the king's ambition or doubt his abilities to realize such an ambition. Many places in the text show that Mencius actually lauds such an ambition. In other words, just like Mencius' affirmation of the king's desires for pleasure and wealth discussed above, Mencius also affirms the legitimacy and appropriateness of the king's political ambition. Mencius points out to the king that the problem is not with his ambition per se, but with his way of accomplishing it. He reminds the king that if the king continues to do what he is doing in order to realize his ambition, it will not end well. The king is clearly interested in what Mencius has to say:

> "I am dull-witted," said the King, "and cannot see my way beyond this point. I hope you will help me towards my goal and instruct me plainly. Though I am slow, I shall make an attempt to follow your advice."
>
> 1A7; trans. Lau 1970

This gives Mencius an ideal opening to pitch to the king a comprehensive Confucian program which includes economic policies, family policy, and others. Clearly, Mencius' effort, when conversing with a ruler, focuses on persuading the king: first, that the Confucian program is conducive to the king's realization of his political ambitions; second, that it is laudable and not shameful to harbor grand political ambitions; and third, that the king has what it takes to be a sage king.

To sum up, I have tried to make the case that the Mencian moral therapy is an effective way to reveal the presence of a moral script operative in "normal"[4] human beings, even in rulers. Such a moral script points to universalist human moral inclinations that are often hidden but can be manifested in our everyday behaviors and desires. To accomplish this, Mencius takes on (conventionally considered) problematic desires and effectively uses the moral script to demonstrate subtle ways desires express themselves that disclose a hidden well of moral sentiments that can be harnessed for personal wellbeing as well as political ambition. At the center of the Mencian moral therapy is to tap into the operative moral scripts and reformulate them such that they can be used towards more worthy goals of repairing the frayed, often abusive, relationships between a ruler and his people.

6 Mencius Meets Slote: Empathy in Moral Therapy

According to Michael Slote, one of the few prominent contemporary Western thinkers who have taken an interest in Chinese philosophy in recent years, Mencius' approach to ethics resonates strongly with Hume, whose sentimentalism places a great deal of "emphasis on compassion, sympathy, and benevolence as the basis for moral thought and action" (Slote 2009: 290) and sees a great deal of possibilities in the joining of hands between the contemporary efforts to revive interest in empathy and traditional Chinese philosophy (Slote 2010b: 306). The sentimentalist approach to ethics is in sharp contrast with Aristotle's rationalist approach with which many contemporary Confucian scholars have drawn much of their comparison, despite the fact that the Aristotelian ethics leaves little room for those moral sentiments. Slote's own works represent contemporary revival of sentimentalism that can be traced back to eighteenth-century British thinkers like David Hume, Francis Hutcheson, and Adam Smith, etc., and can provide a helpful framework to articulate some of the underlying assumptions of the Mencian ethics, especially the role of empathy in Mencius' moral therapy.

As we have discussed in this essay, moral therapy can be a more effective method of moral persuasion than moral argument, if the goal is indeed to win over another moral agent instead of winning an argument, because moral therapy attempts to understand moral agents in a way moral argument does not take into much consideration. At the heart of the Mencian moral therapy is the moral doctor's attempt to understand the moral client's underlying motivations or "moral script," often opaque to the client him/herself. Slote's methodic articulation of empathy offers unique insights into the central role played by empathy in a Mencian doctor's attempt to understand his moral clients.

Empathy is often distinguished from sympathy, although their distinction is not always clear-cut. As Slote puts it,

> Empathy occurs when . . . you feel another person's pain or joy. But sympathy for the person who, say, feels pain doesn't require us to feel their pain and is a matter, rather, of wanting their condition to improve (and hoping or wanting to do something oneself to bring that about).
>
> Slote 2014: 12

In other words, empathy is feeling what another person is feeling whereas sympathy is more specifically the feeling of sorrow for another person's misfortune. Our earlier discussion of Mencius' moral therapy clearly indicates that both empathy and sympathy are at work. Indeed, there is quite a bit of evidence showing that sympathetic concern for others is dependent on our empathic capacity (*ibid.*), which resonates with what is operative in Mencius' thought. As Bryan Van Norden observes,

> Regarding the distinction between "empathy" and "sympathy," I suspect that Mengzi would regard *sympathy* as merely the "extension" or "filling out" of

> *empathy*, rather than marking a categorical distinction between the two reactions. I think Mengzi would worry that any fundamental distinction between empathy and sympathy would come close to the sort of "two sources" view of ethics that he criticizes the Moist YI Zhi for holding (*Mencius* 3a5)."
>
> Van Norden 2009: 305

Therefore, for the purpose of the following discussion, especially when it comes to Mencius' thought, we will not strictly differentiate between empathy and sympathy.

One of the most interesting theoretical developments on empathy by Slote is the distinction he draws between empathy with others' joy/suffering and empathy with those agents' empathic concerns for other people or objects. The former is directed at the state of affairs of another being including human, animal, or even inanimate objects—let us call it first-order empathy—and the latter refers to empathy with agential empathy—let us call it second-order empathy (Slote does not use first-order/second-order to describe empathy). As we will see in the following, Mencian ethics operating on both orders of empathy, differentiating a moral doctor's empathy with the clients in the therapeutic context from moral clients' empathy/sympathy with their objects. I will argue that the Mencian moral doctor often operates on the level of second-order empathy, appealing to a ruler's first-order empathy in order to help the king extend his empathy/sympathy to his people so as to become a benevolent ruler. Let us delve into the two orders of empathy in some detail.

First-Order Empathy

In the sentimentalist discourse, discussions around first-order empathy tend to focus on its partialist character, often in contrast with the utilitarian rationalist approach to ethics with its universalist aspirations. That is, "we empathically react to nearby and visible suffering or need more than to suffering or need we merely hear or know about" (Slote 2010a: 21) and "we are empathically partial not only to what we perceive (and what is therefore, given the way things are in the actual world, in our vicinity) but also to what is contemporaneous with our concern" (Slote 2010a: 22). Indeed, much of the attraction as well as the problem with sentimentalism is its partialism. Slote offers the examples of trapped miners and a drowning child in need of immediate help to illustrate the attraction of sentimentalist partiality:

> When miners are trapped in a mine, we feel more empathy for them than for the greater number of future miners we might save by installing safety devices, and we also think it morally better to save those miners than to invest in safety devices. (The suggestion that we should invest in safety equipment *rather than* saving the miners would actually *horrify* most of us.) Similarly, it goes more against the grain of empathy to ignore a child drowning right in front of one than to not give money to Oxfam that one believes will save a single child in a

> distant country, and we tend to think that it is morally worse to ignore the drowning child than to not give to Oxfam.
>
> Slote 2010a: 22, original italics

The *prima facie* similarities between Slote's examples and some of Mencius' cases are striking. The moral deliberation that privileges those who are spatiotemporally close (and/or perceptually immediate) to the moral agent over those who are more distant and only heard about (and/or conceptually known) is in sharp contrast with the utilitarian critique of partialism that carries problematic implications on the central moral issue of justice. On the other hand, sentimentalism appreciates human beings as embodied beings and intrinsically partialist, implying that universalist and rationalist approach does not appreciate human beings in their complicated embodied existence. Therefore, if the challenge for rationalism is how to reach the particular, given rationalism's commitment to the universal,[5] the challenge for sentimentalism is the opposite, namely, how to reach the universal given sentimentalism's partialist orientation. So the question for Slote is whether or not he can account for justice in his sentimentalism. One of Slote's theoretical ambitions is precisely to provide such an account.

Slote believes that "social justice could be conceived entirely in sentimentalist care ethical terms" (Slote 2010a, 124) and that "empathy is the key to care ethics' greatest potential development and plausibility, both in general and in the sphere of justice" (*ibid*.). According to Slote,

> it is possible to understand the justice of (a given society's) laws, institutions, and social customs *on analogy with* the ethics of individual acts and attitudes of caring. . . . So a sentimentalist ethics of empathic caring can say that institutions and laws, as well as social customs and practices, are just if they reflect empathically caring motivation on the part of (enough of) those responsible for originating and maintaining them.
>
> Slote 2010a: 125, original italics

Slote essentially treats the problem of justice as a case of more consistently extending our empathy to others. He uses women's equality as an example to illustrate how empathy-based justice should work: "patriarchal social attitudes can embody a lack of empathic concern and respect for the aspirations of girls and women (e.g., to become doctors), and we can certainly say that all laws, customs, and institutions that reflect such attitudes are as unjust as the attitudes themselves (and the situation or society in which they flourish)" (Slote 2010a: 126–7).

However, as Virginia Held points out in her critique of Slote, empathy alone is not adequate in raising women's and girls' own expectation of their rights:

> The problem here, as I see it, is that Slote presupposes what he tries to provide. If women and girls already believe they have rights to equality and have a

> sense of entitlement to be treated as equals, then not respecting them in this way will be a failure of empathic concern. But girls may have been well-cared for and yet have grown up without developing aspirations for equal political power or equal careers. Centuries of caring parents failed to apply ideas of justice to girls, and it was not until girls understood their rights to equality that they developed aspirations to equal careers and political power. If women believe it is appropriate and right for men to support their wives and daughters and for women to be subordinate to their male "providers," then suddenly expecting them to be economically self-sufficient might show inadequate empathic concern.
>
> Held 2011: 316–17

In other words, empathy alone is insufficient in generating the ideal of gender equality, as evidenced by centuries of parental care in human history much of which did not produce—or has not produced—the ideal of gender equality. Due to the difficulty, if not impossibility, in generating the ideal of gender equality from within empathy itself, Held proposes that "the meanings, goals, and practices of justice can be different from those of care, and to arrange that different values are given priority in different domains of society" (Held 2011: 317).

Interestingly, Held's worry about the inadequacy of empathy in accounting for justice can be seen in Mencius' thought, which does not have a robust notion of justice to begin with. In some ways Mencius faces a similar challenge, namely how the concern for the near and dear be extended to the far and distant. Indeed, the objective of the Mencian moral therapy is to help a ruler channel his partialist moral sentiments toward the universalist aspiration of becoming a benevolent king. However, it is clear that the Mencian (and Confucian more broadly) extensionist strategy is not meant to completely transform the graded nature of empathy but rather to render it more open (instead of being completely blocked by selfishness and self-centeredness[6]). Slote echoes such a sentiment:

> [P]eople are likely to develop more empathy for (groups of) people they know than for those they don't. Still . . . we do have the capacity to develop *some* substantial empathy and concern for distant people we don't know, and in that case, it is perhaps not too much to expect people to develop a *greater degree* of empathic concern *for their compatriots*.
>
> Slote 2010a: 215, original italics

But such an empathic care does not necessarily translate into concern for equality and justice specifically. It could well have been empathic concern for the well-being of others, however well-being is understood in different cultures and societies, many of which do not entertain the idea of equality.

Since there is no separate notion of justice in Mencius' thought, notions of empathy and benevolence are allowed to do all the conceptual work. One of the

consequences of the Mencian moral partialism is that the problem of justice remains unresolved. Mencius, and the Confucians more generally, is known to be rather unapologetic about one's special treatment accorded to one's family members, parents in particular.[7] If Mencius is indeed a sentimentalist (and there are good reasons to categorize him as one), the problem he faces in regard to the partialist nature of empathy/sympathy provides an interesting test case, at least in historical terms, about the viability of a robust notion of justice that is grounded in empathy. Without the challenge posed by a robust notion of justice separate from his empathy-based sentimentalism, Mencius does not really struggle with the imperative of justice that is expected of a moral philosopher. Mencius' willingness to bite the bullet and pay the price of justice in order to retain benevolence as the defining quality of being human points to the task facing contemporary Western ethicists who work in the intellectual environment wherein the ideal of justice reigns supreme.

Second-Order Empathy

Having dealt with first-order empathy, let us move to its second-order version. Second-order empathy, namely empathy with agential empathy, takes on the issue of moral evaluations within the empathy-based moral sentimentalism. Slote offers an astute description of its dynamics in the following passage:

> When we empathize with agential empathy, what we are doing is very different from what the agent is doing. The empathically concerned agent wants and seeks to do what is helpful to some person or persons (leaving aside animals for simplicity's sake). Empathic agents feel empathy, for example, *with* (the point of view of) certain people their actions may affect and are concerned *for* or *about* (the welfare or wishes of) those people. But when we feel empathy with empathically concerned agents (as agents), we empathize with them, not with the people they are empathizing with or focused on. We empathize, in other words, *with what they as (potential) agents are feeling and/or desiring*, and such empathy is, I believe, the core or basis of moral approval and disapproval.
>
> Slote 2010a: 34, original italics

Slote finds in second-order empathy a sentimentalist basis for moral evaluation. More specifically, in developing a sentimentalist, empathy-based framework of moral evaluation, Slote connects moral approval/disapproval with agential warmth/coldness. Accordingly, when one shows empathy toward others, one experiences what others are experiencing vicariously. When we empathize with that very empathic agent, we experience warmth toward that person. And this empathic agential warmth constitutes moral approval of the agent's empathy toward others (Slote 2010a: 35). As Slote elaborates,

> People whose capacity for empathy is fully developed will . . . have a different empathic reaction to (the characteristic actions of) agents whose empathy is also fully developed from that which they will have to (the characteristic actions of) agents who have less developed empathy. In particular, if agents' actions reflect empathic concern for (the well being or wishes of) others, empathic beings will feel warmly or tenderly toward them, and such warmth and tenderness empathically reflect the empathic warmth or tenderness of the agents. I want to say that such (in one sense) reflective feeling, such *empathy with empathy*, also constitutes moral approval, and possibly admiration as well, for agents and/or their actions.
>
> Slote 2010a: 34–5, original italics

On the other hand, unempathetic actions exhibit coldness towards others which registers the agent's disapproval of others' actions. Slote believes that moral judgment is grounded in such second-order empathic warmth or coldness in a sentimentalist account which "correspond[s] pretty well to differences in the (normative) moral evaluations we tend to make about those situations" (Slote 2010a: 21). Slote gives the example of its correspondence with the deontological distinction we make with regard to the degree of seriousness of moral wrong between doing harm and letting it happen to support his empathy-based account of moral judgment.

One of Slote's challenges is to make the case that empathy is relevant to moral thinking and moral justification. In that regard, he hopes to demonstrate that "empathy has something important to do with our *understanding* of moral claims and moral distinctions" (Slote 2010a: 25, original italics). This reflects the philosophical landscape of Western ethical discourse which tends to privilege the rational (Aristotle famously touts it as the defining quality of being human) over the emotive such that an appeal to the emotive needs to be justified in a way the appeal to the rational does not. Slote hopes to provide a more philosophically sensible explanation for many of our common moral reactions and judgments that match traditional deontological evaluations but questioned by the utilitarian approach whose moral calculation problematizes much of our commonsense moral intuitions and judgments.[8]

In this respect, it is interesting to observe that Mencius and the Mencian moral tradition does not seem to have any problem with empathy, compassion, and benevolence. Rather, such sentiments are regarded as self-evident points of departure that need no further justification, other than their constitution of human nature endowed by Heaven, within much of the Mencian moral discourse.

The Imperative of Empathy

It should be clear from our discussion that both orders of empathy are at play in the Mencian moral universe. Mencius' empathic response to the king when the

king expresses embarrassment about his various problematic desires, e.g., his desires for wealth, sex, pop music, and even power, are examples of first-order empathy. Mencius' counsel of a ruler about the latter's reaction to an ox being led to its own sacrifice is a case of second-order empathy, namely Mencius' empathy with the king's sympathy for a helpless animal. Slote's observation of second-order empathy/sympathy is especially relevant to the king's sympathy toward a sacrificial ox as Mencius is clearly concerned not so much with the wellbeing of the ox, which is the object of the king's sympathy, as with the king's sympathy itself. This is evidenced in Mencius' warning that a gentleman should not be close to the kitchen where he would be exposed to the killing of animals, which would presumably make it hard to eat meat.[9] Furthermore, Mencius' effort to see flickers of compassion and benevolence toward an animal shown by a usually ruthless monarch means that Mencius resorts to empathy as a response to the king's sympathetic reactions to the ox, in contrast with others who see the king's action as a sign of his stinginess or simple idiocy.

It is worth pointing out that empathizing with a cruel ruler is not an easy task, especially for a well-known moralist who is willing to confront a ruler directly. Mencius' empathic response to the king's sympathetic concerns or even problematic desires should be understood as a conscious decision he makes in order to find hope in a hopeless situation. Mencius clearly believes empathy is more effective in changing the heartmind of another person, especially a ruler, than condemnation under certain circumstances. It is conceivable that in order to be empathic with a cruel ruler Mencius has to dip deep into his own heartmind and finds that fountain of empathy, the flood-like moral energy (*haoran zhi qi* 浩然之氣), consciously directs it toward the moral client, usually a king, in front of him in order to help the king preserve his humanity in the way he governs. He sees it as his mission to persuade the rulers of his time to adopt a more humane and benevolent policy toward their suffering people during an extremely violent period in Chinese history. This is the imperative of empathy in Mencian moral therapy.

7 Conclusion

To conclude, in this essay we have tried to develop a framework of moral therapy in order to better appreciate certain distinct features in Mencius' approach to moral persuasion, especially pertaining to his unique way of dealing with problematic human desires and connecting them to the cultivation of moral virtues. We have shown that critical to the Mencian moral therapy is his ability to discern an implicit moral script operative in everyday actions of another moral agent, often a ruler in the *Mencius*. Mencius' objective is to bring such a script out in the open and help the ruler repurpose it for the moral-political cause of benevolent governance.

Our brief examination of Michael Slote's moral sentimentalism has shown that an empathy-based, rather than rationalist, virtue ethics offers a potent interpretative framework to rearticulate certain unique features of the Mencian moral discourse, especially the ubiquitous role played by empathy. We have seen that Mencius sees empathy as both a critical aspect of our moral nature and an effective way to engage with another moral agent who might not be receptive to moral persuasion under normal circumstances. As Slote observes,[10] knowing the motivation of another moral agent is critical in the Mencian moral philosophy, especially when compared with Aristotle for whom such a knowledge does not even come into consideration.

Clearly, Mencius has a lot to contribute to contemporary moral discourse, being among the earliest moral sentimentalists if we accept Slote's categorization of him. Edward Slingerland goes as far as claiming that "Mencius is arguably a much better resource as moral psychologist than Aristotle, the premodern thinker to whom contemporary virtue ethics typically turns" (Slingerland 2007: 380). Slote's systematic and nuanced deliberations on empathy, care and their moral and political potentials can be especially useful for contemporary moral philosophers sympathetic to the Mencian (and the Confucian more broadly) paradigm to explore core Mencian moral insights for a more robust Confucian moral and political project in the contemporary world.[11]

Notes

1 In this essay I translate the Chinese word *xin* 心 in the classical texts as "heartmind," instead of heart, mind, heart-and-mind or heart-mind as adopted by other translators. Heartmind is obviously not an English word, but a neologism trying to capture the widely shared scholarly consensus that ancient Chinese did not differentiate between heart and mind the way they are used in contemporary English. Since we are dealing with classical Chinese texts that are translated into contemporary English for contemporary Western readership in this context, it makes sense to highlight this point in the way the word *xin* is translated. For me, the attraction of heartmind as a single term is precisely its ambiguity, much like *xin* in different texts and contexts. It runs the gamut of the emotive, cognitive, evaluative, calculative, voluntary and whatever other functions *xin* performs, with different texts leaning toward different aspects. In other words, the fact that pre-modern Chinese thinkers allow *xin* to perform such a wide range of roles (without feeling the need to clarify which one) suggests the underlying assumption of the singularity of heartmind. Heartmind has the advantage of being both familiar and strange, not unlike *xin* in all its complexity and ambiguity in various Chinese texts through the ages.

2 For example, Philip J. Ivanhoe portrays Confucius's *dao* as "a kind of therapy for his disordered age" (Ivanhoe 1991: 57). Edward Slingerland calls Mencius a moral psychoanalyst (Slingerland 2011a: 98)

3 Readers can refer to Erica Brindley 2012 for a detailed study of the role of music in early Chinese politics and philosophy.

4 "Normal" here is a statistical concept.
5 This is not uncontested, but we will leave it to another occasion as the focus in this essay is sentimentalism rather than rationalism.
6 Ivanhoe usefully differentiates selfishness from self-centeredness: "Being self-centered overlaps with but is different from our normal conception of being selfish. Being selfish means to give excessive or exclusive weight to one's own narrow interests over and against the interests of others; being self-centered means to take the self as the center of one's thoughts about the world" (Ivanhoe 2015: 243).
7 One of the problematic implications of this partialism is nepotism of which the Confucians are sometimes accused of (Graham 1989: 302). While Mencius is certainly susceptible to such a charge, there are resources in his thought that can help to mitigate it.
8 What Slote has in mind here is Peter Singer's famous critique of commonsense moral judgment with its implicit partialism in Singer's essay "Famine, Affluence, and Morality."
9 As Slingerland observes (2011b: 407), despite the lament of hypocrisy by some contemporary commentators, Mencius' advice makes sense in the environment wherein even the notional possibility of vegetarianism does not exist. Of course, this does not mean that the Mencian empathy-based moral sentiment should not be developed to its logical conclusion in the contemporary world wherein the wellbeing of animal world and the broader ecological concern are of utmost urgency.
10 This is from Slote's comment on my presentation during an international conference, "Slote Encountering Chinese Philosophy," held on March 16–17, 2018, at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.
11 I would like to express my appreciation to Yong Huang for organizing the wonderful conference, "Slote Encountering Chinese Philosophy," on March 16–17, 2018, at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and for inviting me to be part of this conversation. I would also like to thank Michael Slote for his comments on an earlier version of this essay as well as all the conference participants for their helpful critiques. Of course, all errors and inadequacies remain mine alone.

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