

The Bridge of Benevolence: Hutcheson and Mencius

Alejandra Mancilla

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Abstract The Scottish sentimentalist Francis Hutcheson and the Chinese Confucianist Mencius give benevolence (*ren*) a key place in their respective moral theories, as the first and foundational virtue. Leaving aside differences in style and method, my purpose in this essay is to underline this similarity by focusing on four common features: first, benevolence springs from compassion, an innate and universal feeling shared by all human beings; second, its objects are not only human beings but also animals; third, it is sensitive to proximity; and finally, it has to be constantly cultivated in order to become a character trait. I will conclude with some brief remarks as to how this understanding of benevolence as rooted in feeling rather than reason, and in personal rather than impersonal relationships, helps to illuminate part of the discussion in moral philosophy today.

Keywords Mencius · Francis Hutcheson · Benevolence · Compassion · Animals

1 Introduction

Leaving aside important differences of style and method, whoever comes across the moral philosophies of Francis Hutcheson and Mencius will be inevitably amazed by their common insights. Two thousand years and eight thousand kilometres apart, the Scottish sentimentalist and the Chinese Confucianist both give a key place to benevolence (*ren*) in their respective moral theories, as the first and foundational virtue. Against many of their contemporaries and in spite of the turbulent historical periods in which they lived, Hutcheson (1694-1746) and Mencius (appr. 372-289 BCE) regard human beings as innately good, and thus think of morality not as going against our natural feelings, but rather as developing these feelings in the proper way. Unaware of the *is/ought* distinction that later became unavoidable for moral philosophers, they both start by presenting what they consider constant features of our human nature and, based on these, go on to justify what morality should look like.

Alejandra Mancilla (✉)
Centre for the Study of Mind in Nature (CSMN), Faculty of Humanities, University of Oslo,
P.O. Box 1020, Blindern, 0315 Oslo, Norway
e-mail: mancilladpic@gmail.com

Assuming that commensurability and translatability are not utterly unattainable ideals when comparing different cultural or intellectual traditions,¹ my purpose in this essay is to show that a bridge can be built between Mencius's and Hutcheson's moral philosophies: a bridge built on bricks of benevolence. After offering a brief account of their respective moral theories, I will focus on four features they have in common: first, benevolence springs from an innate and universal feeling shared by all human beings; second, its objects are not only human beings but may also be non-human animals (heretofore, "animals"); third, it is sensitive to proximity; and finally, it has to be cultivated into a habit in order to become part of our character. To conclude, I want to suggest how this special understanding of benevolence as rooted in feeling rather than reason, and in personal rather than impersonal relationships, helps to illuminate part of the discussion in moral philosophy today.

2 Hutcheson's and Mencius's Moral Philosophies in a Nutshell

Francis Hutcheson is best known in the history of philosophy for his theory of the moral sense, a special power whereby human beings are able to perceive the qualities of moral goodness and badness, independent of any previous reasoning or reflection.² Against rationalism, much in vogue in his time, but also against those who thought of moral commands as delivered by divine revelation, the Scottish philosopher claims that our moral judgments spring from this special sense immediately and naturally, in the same way that aesthetic judgments spring from a special sense of beauty.

While Hutcheson thinks of the moral sense as the origin of moral approbation and disapprobation, he takes the ultimate foundation of morality to be benevolence, our disinterested love of others. Hutchesonian benevolence resembles Christian love: to desire the happiness of others and rejoice in it with no view toward self-interest. The "others" are the people in our closest social circles, toward whom we feel a natural affection, but with time, practice, and reflection, benevolence becomes ever more extensive, to the point where it is able to go beyond our initial partial leanings and control all other affections. Anyone who observes human nature, according to the author, finds this "general propension of soul to wish the universal prosperity and happiness of the whole system" (Hutcheson 2007: 32). The ultimate aim of benevolence is to attain the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers (Hutcheson 2004: 125). Due to this phrase, which was later to become the utilitarian motto, Hutcheson has repeatedly been labelled as a "proto" utilitarian. However, instead of focusing solely on the consequences of actions, he still sees the cultivation of virtue as the main goal of morality and the true source of human happiness. Benevolence in this context is the most important virtue of all, as it is Hutcheson's belief that by pursuing the happiness of others we naturally attain our own.³

¹ For an opposite view, see MacIntyre 2006: 105.

² In this he follows and develops the ideas of Shaftesbury (1671-1713), who suggested that the origins of our aesthetic and moral judgments were, respectively, a sense of beauty and a moral sense.

³ The traditional cardinal virtues—temperance, courage, prudence and justice—are also seen by Hutcheson as contributing first and foremost to this end: "these four qualities, commonly called cardinal virtues, obtain that name, because they are dispositions universally necessary to promote public good, and denote affections toward rational agents; otherwise there would appear no virtue in them" (Hutcheson 2004: 102).

Benevolence or *ren (jen)* is also for Confucianism the most distinctive and highest virtue of human beings, simply defined by Confucius as “to love all men” (Confucius 1869: 12:22). The outcome of what a moral life should look like, it is especially demanded of rulers toward their subjects. But while the treatment of *ren* by Confucius is rather spare and unsystematic, it seems to be one of the merits of Mencius to have further developed an account of what benevolence is, where it springs from, and how it ought to be practiced by the individual citizen and the state ruler.⁴ In the same way that Hutcheson refers to benevolence as arising from a common tendency of the human soul, Mencius claims that “no man is devoid of a heart sensitive to the suffering of others” (*Mencius* 2A6).⁵ This “heart” is the site of both our affective and intellectual capacities, which is probably the reason why it has been rendered in different translations as “mind” or “mind/heart” (see respectively, Legge 1875 and Shun 1997). Although we share with other animals the desires and appetites, what distinguishes us is this special “organ” with which we guide our moral thinking. And the most distinctive trait of the human heart is, as Mencius says, that no matter how uncultivated or refined, it has a special sensibility when it confronts the misery and suffering of others. Together with this natural compassion (which is the “germ” of benevolence), Mencius refers to three other core sentiments which give rise to the other three core virtues: shame, the germ of dutifulness; courtesy and modesty, the germ of observance of the rites; and right and wrong, the germ of wisdom. For Mencius, “Man has these four germs just as he has four limbs” (*Mencius* 2A6), and to develop them is to become a virtuous human being.

Before proceeding to the next section, I would like to address an objection that might arise here and that—if granted—would seem problematic for my argument. It is this: is it not the case that Mencius’s moral philosophy can be more fruitfully compared with a virtue ethics à la Aristotle, or with a pluralist sentimentalism, à la Hume,⁶ rather than with Hutcheson’s “proto” utilitarianism? After all, we have just seen that Mencius considers benevolence as one virtue among others, while Hutcheson steers to ethical monism, erecting benevolence as the one and only virtue.

To this, I reply the following. First, a fundamental similarity between Mencius and Hutcheson—and shared by Hume, but not by Aristotle—is the role assigned to our natural feelings as constituting the basis of morality. In this sense, the first three philosophers can be labeled as “sentimentalists,” against Aristotle, who did not consider natural passions to be inherently good, unless tempered by practical rationality. That common trait seems to me interesting enough to investigate further.⁷ Second, my purpose is neither to try to show Mencius as a moral monist, nor Hutcheson as a late representative of traditional virtue ethics. Rather, what interests me is the pride of place that benevolence as rooted in feeling has for both authors,

⁴ For having systematized and carried further the theory of his master, Albert Verwilghen says that Mencius was to Confucius what Plato was to Socrates (Verwilghen 1967).

⁵ Hereafter, all passages from the *Mencius* refer to D.C. Lau’s translation and revised edition from 2003, followed by the Harvard-Yenching number.

⁶ For a comparison between Confucianism and Aristotelianism, see Yu 2007 and Wang 2010. For a comparison between Mencius and Hume, see Slote 2009 and Liu 2003.

⁷ In virtue of this “sentimentalism,” Mencian Confucianism has also been compared to some feminist ethics of care. See Li 2008.

independently of whether it is the only virtue or the first among others. In this sense, I think Mencius is closer to Hutcheson than either to Hume or Aristotle. Third, it could be argued that Mencius's philosophy is elitist and that its figure of the "superior man" or "gentleman" (*junzi*) is comparable to that of Aristotle's "virtuous man" (*phronimos*), with no equivalent in modern authors. This point, however, has been highly debated by commentators. Some, in fact, tend to see in his writings a clear tension between hierarchical and egalitarian tendencies, insofar as his idea of superiority is not necessarily linked to a social aristocracy, but rather to the individual's moral qualities (Nosco 2008). Finally, it seems telling that both Mencius and Hutcheson set their moral theories against a religious background which both Hume and Aristotle lack: Heaven and God or the Deity respectively.⁸ In the case of Hutcheson, if benevolence is the most important virtue, it is because by practicing it we execute God's will and we resemble Him. For Mencius, meanwhile, to follow nature—i.e., to follow our compassionate feelings—is to be in harmony with the heavenly principle. It must be borne in mind, of course, that—contrary to the Judeo-Christian tradition—this "heavenly principle" is not transcendental, nor does it imply the idea of a Creator. The point I want to make here, however, is not about the similarities or differences between their respective conceptions of religion, but rather how the latter is at the background of both moral theories.

3 Mencian and Hutchesonian Benevolence

3.1 The Natural Springs of Benevolence

Just as Hutcheson's moral theory is to a large extent a reaction to Thomas Hobbes and Bernard Mandeville, who saw human beings as purely egoistic creatures in pursuit of their own interests, Mencius's development of Confucianism could be contrasted to the views of Xunzi (295-238 BCE) who, like Mandeville and Hobbes, thought of human beings as narrowly self-interested. Just as for the British egoists morality was the only option for humans to live (or, rather, to survive) together in relatively peaceful terms, Xunzi conceived of morality as an artificial device which was externally imposed in the form of rules, in order to restrain individual conduct and behavior in a way acceptable to others. Mencius and Hutcheson, on the other hand, share the belief that we all have a natural tendency toward benevolence. They take this to be an empirical claim based on everyday observation and introspection.⁹

⁸ The view that Aristotle's philosophy should not be regarded as having a theological background is, of course, disputable. For an opposite view, see Jaeger 1934.

⁹ To hold such a belief is especially remarkable in the case of Mencius, who lived during an extremely violent period of Chinese history. Between 722 and 464 BCE, there were 1,219 wars, with only 38 peaceful years in between (Xiao 2010: 4). Rather than making him suspicious about the inherently good features of human nature, however, this experience seems to have shaped Mencius's political views on how rulers should change their behavior in order to make their people live in harmony with each other.

Hutcheson's account of this innate benevolent human tendency is extensive, especially in his *Inquiry*, where he insists time and again that the origin of benevolence is not self-interest, but an ultimate desire for the happiness of others:

As to the love of benevolence, the very name excludes self-interest. We never call that man benevolent, who is in fact useful to others, but at the same time only intends his own interest, without any desire of, or delight in, the good of others. If there be any benevolence at all, it must be disinterested: for the most useful action imaginable, loses all appearance of benevolence, as soon as we discern that it only flowed from self-love or interest. (Hutcheson 2004: 103)

This explains why we love those who are good even if they do not benefit us, and why we do not love evil characters (or, rather, apparently evil characters) even if we knew we would get a reward by so doing (Hutcheson 2004: 107-108).

Hutcheson offers several examples which show what he takes to be a fact of human nature. We just have to look around, he says, to “observe accurately the cares, the earnest desires, of persons on their deathbeds, and their friendly offices to such as they love even with their last breath,” obviously not expecting to get anything in return therewith (Hutcheson 2007: 30); or how some heroic characters give their lives willingly for the sake of their families, their friends or their country (Hutcheson 2007: 30). Moreover, if we examine ourselves, we will find in our hearts the tendency to cultivate natural affections and friendship, and to love admirable characters even if they are far away in history.

So certain is Hutcheson of the strength and governing power of this principle that he does not believe it has a counterpart. While there is such a thing as pure benevolence—unattainable by humans, but exemplified by the Deity—there is no pure malice, a disinterested delight in the suffering of others:

As to malice, human nature seems scarce capable of malicious disinterested hatred, or a sedate delight in the misery of others, when we imagine them no way pernicious to us, or opposite to our interest: and for that hatred which makes us oppose those whose interests are opposite to ours, it is only the effect of self-love, and not of disinterested malice. (Hutcheson 2004: 105)

In fact, what we consider as evil characters, Hutcheson thinks, are really deceived by excessive self-love, or ignorance and false opinions:

If we examine the true springs of human action, we shall seldom find their motives worse than self-love. Men are often subject to anger, and upon sudden provocations do injuries to each other, and that only from self-love, without malice; but the greatest part of their lives is employed in offices of natural affection, friendship, innocent self-love, or love of a country. The little party-prejudices are generally founded upon ignorance, or false opinions, rather apt to move pity than hatred. (Hutcheson 2002: 77)

Although he does not mention cases of pathological amoral conduct, like that of psychopaths, one could infer that he would probably blame a deficient moral sense: just as those who are born blind or deaf, these extreme cases could be understood as being the result of a birth defect, over which they exert no control. If this is so, they should also move pity rather than hatred.

Now, where does benevolence arise from? Not from reason or meditation, but from the universally shared feeling of sympathy, which Hutcheson defines as

a fellow-feeling, by which the state and fortunes of others affect us exceedingly, so that by the very power of nature, previous to any reasoning or meditation [purpose], we rejoice in the prosperity of others, and sorrow with them in their misfortunes; as we are disposed to mirth when we see others cheerful, and to weep with those that weep, without any consideration of our own interests. (Hutcheson 2007: 33)¹⁰

Although much has been said about the role and meaning of this sentiment in the philosophies of Hutcheson's distinguished alumni, David Hume and Adam Smith, little scholarly attention has been paid to Hutcheson's own account of sympathy, which undoubtedly influenced their views. In fact, he—and not Hume—is the first to describe sympathy as a sort of contagion or infection, whereby we are infused by the feelings of others.¹¹ The manifestation of pain and suffering is for Hutcheson the clearest instance by which this universal sentiment is triggered:

We may here observe how wonderfully the constitution of human nature is adapted to move compassion. Our misery or distress immediately appears in our countenance, if we do not study to prevent it, and propagates some pain to all spectators; who from observation, universally understand the meaning of those dismal airs. We mechanically send forth shrieks and groans upon any surprising apprehension of evil; so that no regard to decency can sometimes restrain them. This is the voice of nature, understood by all nations, by which all who are present are roused to our assistance, and sometimes our injurious enemy is made to relent. (Hutcheson 2004: 159-160)

As a further proof that this sentiment is not yet controlled by reason or prejudice, Hutcheson adds that even when the sufferer is not morally worthy we still feel moved by his misery: “Every mortal is made uneasy by any grievous misery he sees another involved in, unless the person be imagined evil, in a moral sense: Nay, it is almost impossible for us to be unmoved, even in that case” (Hutcheson 2004: 159). Furthermore, although in his earlier texts he thinks of benevolence as tending “to the natural good of mankind” (Hutcheson 2004: 91), he later refers to benevolence and compassion as directed also toward “other sensitive beings,” whose happiness or suffering we can apprehend (Hutcheson 2002: 67). It is important to bear in mind this subtle shift when proceeding to the next section, referred to as our feelings toward animals.

¹⁰ In this and the following passages from Hutcheson, angle brackets mean that the text enclosed has been omitted; square brackets mean that the text enclosed has been changed, and braces mean that the text enclosed has been added.

¹¹ It is important to distinguish this conception of sympathy as an immediate contagion of feelings, antecedent to any moral reasoning, from the one that Adam Smith later develops in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, where sympathy has a cognitive element built into it (for an illuminating comparison, see Carrasco 2011). Hutcheson's “sympathy,” in fact, is better understood as what Michael Slote calls “empathy” (a word that, as he points out, was not used until the 20th century): “identifying with others or feeling what they feel or forming one body with them or seeing them as parts of oneself” (Slote 2009, 2010). In what follows, I use the word “sympathy” in Hutcheson's original sense and argue that such a feeling was also at the core of Mencius's moral theory.

While Hutcheson takes his time to argue for benevolence and its related feeling, sympathy, as natural in human beings, Mencius, as a true representative of Chinese philosophy, sketches the same idea with a few powerful strokes. To illustrate the point, he resorts to the following image: “water does not show any preference for either east or west, but does it show the same indifference to high and low? Human nature is good just as water seeks low ground. There is no man who is not good; there is no water that does not flow downwards” (*Mencius* 6A2). This human tendency to goodness is in direct connection with the natural feeling of compassion, akin to Hutcheson’s fellow-feeling of sympathy. A way to check this empirically is to find a case where people are caught unprepared so we can see their spontaneous reactions in the face of imminent, vivid suffering. In one of his most quoted passages, Mencius offers such a case:

“Suppose a man were, all of a sudden, to see a young child on the verge of falling into a well. He would certainly be moved to compassion, not because he wanted to get in the good graces of the parents, nor because he wished to win the praise of his fellow villagers or friends, nor yet because he disliked the cry of the child” (*Mencius* 2A6).

While there are many interpretations of this passage, I find D.C. Lau’s most convincing. As he underlines, what Mencius stresses is the feeling which comes upon us at such a sight; this “momentary twinge [that] he [the man] felt in the first instance” (Lau 1970: 28). That it is a disinterested feeling is clear by Mencius’s claim that it would arise independently of any self-regarding considerations, like the favor that could be obtained from the parents, or the honors that the community could pay to him, or even the relief from the exasperating cries of the child. This, however, is very different from claiming that everyone put in that situation would actually run to help the child.

No matter how universal and shared is our first reaction to such a sight, people might take different courses of action that might not all lead necessarily to rescuing the child. Some, for example, might not act because of self-interest or out of mere neglect. This is where our practical deliberation enters the picture and takes that original feeling as a reason to act benevolently, so that we will run to help if we are able to.¹² Because, like Hutcheson, Mencius thinks of benevolence as triggered primarily by the sight of the suffering of others, it is important to note that he places special emphasis on the exercise of this virtue toward those who are in a disadvantaged position, especially in the case of the ruler. Reporting on the benevolence of King Wen he thus says:

“Old men without wives, old women without husbands, old people without children, young children without fathers—these four types of people are the

¹² There are of course limits as to what we are required to do in this case. Although Mencius does not refer to the point explicitly, probably he shares Confucius’s view on this matter. The latter gives a similar example: a person who merely follows her feelings will run to a well to rescue a man, even if she has to perish with him. To be truly benevolent, however, one does not have to be “beclouded by that loving,” which would be “foolish simplicity,” but act instead in a reasonable way (Confucius 1869: 17:8). I think this is also what David Wong has in mind when he claims that, although the original feeling of compassion typically entails “a recognition of a reason to act to prevent or stop the suffering, if one is able” (Wong 1991: 32), in practice it does not always manifest itself in correct behavior, because the agent might be moved by stronger impulses, or has not yet learned to show benevolence at the right place and in the right way, or has not properly developed these natural helping responses.

most destitute and have no one to turn to for help. Whenever King Wen put benevolent measures into effect, he always gave them first consideration” (*Mencius* 1B5).

Regarding moral failure, meanwhile, Mencius also seems to share Hutcheson’s view that there is no such a thing as proper moral evil (Shun 1997: 173-177). Rather, there are people who are drawn to other goals (mainly self-interested ones) instead of pursuing the ethical ideal. This is the case of King Hui of Liang, who was more concerned about making profit than about the welfare of his citizens (*Mencius* 1A1). There are then those who do not do enough to lead a moral life, although they know they should (like King Xuan of Qi, whose story is developed in the next section). And lastly, there are those who are so eager to do things right that they get it wrong, either by overwillingness or by following the wrong teachings—as those who follow Mozi and advocate love without discrimination, which is for Mencius equivalent to denying one’s father (*Mencius* 3B9).¹³

3.2 Compassion toward animals... and Its Limits

That animals can be moral objects is a relatively new claim in Western philosophy. Besides some scattered figures across history who pointed toward this possibility—Plutarch, Montaigne, and Bentham, among the few—the idea was not taken seriously until well into the 20th century. It is for this reason that what Hutcheson has to say on the rights of animals and the moral treatment they deserve is worth revisiting. At a point in European history where vivisections were performed on a daily basis and where the discussion was only just starting as to whether the trade of African slaves should be abolished (having to decide, first of all, whether they were truly the Europeans’ equals), it is at least surprising to find in the Glasgow professor a sensibility wide enough to include not only rational, but also all “sensitive” beings in the moral sphere. The surprise, needless to say, is even greater when we find similar thoughts suggested two millennia before on the other side of the world, by Mencius.¹⁴

Compassion, the “germ” of benevolence, is for Mencius not only felt toward other human beings, but also toward every creature capable of joy and suffering. This can be found in the passage where King Xuan of Qi is wondering whether he is

¹³ Regarding the first two points, Hutcheson asserts that: “An action is morally evil, either from intention of absolute evil, universal, or particular (which is seldom the case with men, except in sudden passions) or from pursuit of private or particular relative good, which they might have known did tend to universal absolute evil” (Hutcheson 2002: 36). Regarding overeagerness and bad teachings, meanwhile, he criticizes the influence of certain sects, especially when “the several factions are taught to look upon each other as odious, contemptible, profane, because of their different tenets, or opinions; even when these tenets, whether true or false, are perhaps perfectly useless to the public good” (Hutcheson 2004: 141).

¹⁴ It is important to acknowledge that a tradition of vegetarianism and compassionate treatment to animals already existed in India at Mencius’s time, coming from the *Rig Veda*, the most sacred of ancient Hindu texts. Hinduists, Jainists, and, later, Buddhists, shared the belief in *ahimsa* or nonviolence, and in this sense one could argue that they were the true pioneers in giving moral consideration to animals. Their reasons, however, were very different from those offered by Hutcheson and Mencius: namely, the belief that avoiding violence of any kind prevented the accumulation of bad *karma*, thus shortening the path to *nirvana*.

benevolent enough to rule his people, and Mencius reassures him that he must be if the following story is true:

I heard the following from Hu He: 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.” (*Mencius* 1A7)

At this stage, the reader might be wondering what good there is in sparing the life of an ox to kill a lamb instead, and if it is really compassion which is at the core of the king’s decision, or rather a drive to be more economical with the use of his property. Mencius foresees this objection and goes on to say that what really happened was that the heart of His Majesty could not bear to *see* the distress of the ox.

We feel compassion, then, toward animals, but for it to issue in a benevolent action physical proximity seems to be a prerequisite. According to Mencius, the King chose a lamb to be sacrificed not because he was stingy, but because the lamb was out of his sight, whereas he was confronted with the sight of the ox, whose appearance was like that “of an innocent man going to the place of execution” (*Mencius* 1A7). For those who were expecting a defence of vegetarianism in ancient Chinese thought, the implications of this are not very satisfactory: as long as we don’t *see* them and don’t *hear* their cries, Mencius does not condemn our slaughtering animals and eating them. What is more, he thinks it is the mark of the man of virtue not to refrain from eating meat, but to stay away from the places where the bloody business is performed, like stalls and kitchens.

I think the explanation for this apparent paradox is the following. When Mencius claims that it is permissible to sacrifice the lamb and not the ox, because the King cannot *see* it, his point is not that what we seek by acting benevolently is merely to appease our own uneasiness at the sight of the suffering of others (that would indeed be a poor moral ideal).¹⁵ Rather, Mencius is tacitly assuming that, when it comes to animals, the morally correct attitude is to act on our original compassionate response when their suffering confronts us directly, but not when it takes place away from our sight. Eric L. Hutton has suggested that, in this particular case, between two competing motives—namely, sympathy toward other sentient beings and considerations of ritual that require sacrificing those very sentient beings—the virtuous man gives more weight to the latter (Hutton 2002: 177). On the contrary, through socialization and enculturation (Wong 1991: 35), we do learn to find a reason to act in the suffering of other human beings, even if their suffering does not confront us directly. That is why King Xuan of Qi ought to help his people, but not necessarily the lamb.

It should be underlined, however, that this is an explanation of, and not necessarily a justification for, Mencius’s position. Like most philosophers East and West up to today, he is no exception when it comes to granting human beings a privileged moral

¹⁵ Kim argues convincingly against this interpretation and suggests that (1) what the King is feeling toward the ox is *cèyǐn zhī xīn*, “primarily construing another being’s misfortune with sympathetic concern, and that (2) the painfulness of *cèyǐn zhī xīn* comes from this concern-based construal of the object of one’s compassion” (Kim 2010: 407).

status—an assumption that animalists rightly question. What is important to note, however, is that, insofar as it is grounded in certain innate dispositions, his moral theory leaves the door open for having a legitimate concern toward members of other species, as long as they are capable of having certain feelings with which we can sympathize. Arguably, even though he did not follow the implications of his argument all the way, this is a big step to take.¹⁶

In his moral stance toward animals, Hutcheson is not far from Mencius, in that he acknowledges that our natural sympathy is not restricted toward humans:

when there's no hopes of repelling the injuries intended, with what powerful eloquence has nature instructed even the dumb animals, as well as mankind, under any oppressive sorrow or pain, or any great terror? How moving is that mournful wailing voice, that dejected countenance, weeping and downcast eyes, sighs, tears, groans? How powerfully do they move compassion in all, that they may promptly either give succour in distress, or desist from the intended injuries? (Hutcheson 2007: 84)

Because this is so, Hutcheson goes on to say that we should take animals into account in our moral deliberations, even if not on a par with the members of our own species: “There’s indeed implanted in men a natural kindness and sense of pity, extending even to the brutes, which should restrain them from any cruelty toward them which is not necessary to prevent some misery of mankind, toward whom we must still have a much higher concern and compassion” (Hutcheson 2007: 133). Thus, for Hutcheson all unnecessary cruelty toward animals is condemnable and shows an inhuman temper. As with Mencius, his examples are limited to domestic animals which form an inter-species community with men (Hutcheson 2007: 133-135; see also Garrett 2007). Again, the emphasis is placed on preventing unnecessary suffering rather than on increasing their happiness—the same criterion of action which is applied toward humans.

3.3 Benevolence and Proximity

Both Confucius and Mencius see benevolence as an extension of the feeling existing between parents and children, i.e., in the closest family relationship. This idea, plus his belief in the interdependence of all living creatures in the universe, results for Confucius in “a basic sympathy for the whole and its constitutive parts, in the image of extending care from family relationships into even larger concentric circles of care” (Twiss 1998: 41). For Mencius, meanwhile, the mark of a virtuous person is his ability to expand further the benevolence he shows toward his parents. This does not mean, however, that we should treat everyone in the same way. Against Mozi, who claims that the ultimate purpose of morality is to love everyone equally and impartially, Mencius thinks that the doctrine of indiscriminate love toward everyone is unnatural, and that it cannot be put into practice. As an example, he refers to the case of Yizhi, a Mohist who wants “to change the customs of all under Heaven” (*Mencius* 3A5), until it comes to burying his parents. Then he does so in the sumptuous traditional manner, thus showing that he contradicts his doctrine through his acts.

¹⁶ I thank an anonymous referee for pressing me to clarify this point.

What is morally right, then, is to display the degree of benevolence required depending on the relationship we have with different people and creatures in general: “A gentleman is sparing with living creatures, but shows no benevolence towards them; he shows benevolence towards the people, but is not attached to them. He is attached to his parents” (*Mencius* 7A45). Where Mencius takes these different degrees of benevolence as a given of human nature and accommodates his moral theory to them, Hutcheson adds a theological and teleological justification: it is not only natural that we care more for those closer to us, but it is also the best way to achieve happiness for all. That is, we are made by the Deity in such a way that if we develop our natural tendencies correctly, we will help produce the best possible outcome for everyone:

Now because of the vast numbers of mankind, their distant habitations, and the incapacity of any one to be remarkably useful to vast multitudes; that our benevolence might not be quite distracted with a multiplicity of objects, whose equal virtues would equally recommend them to our regard; or become useless, by being equally extended to multitudes at vast distances, whose interest we could not understand, nor be capable of promoting, having no intercourse of offices with them; nature has more powerfully determined us to admire, and love the moral qualities of others which affect ourselves, and has given us more powerful impressions of good-will toward those who are beneficent to ourselves. (Hutcheson 2004: 148-149)

The image of morality as consisting of concentric circles, going from one’s family and extending to humanity at large, has been well discussed particularly in regard to the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* of Adam Smith (Nieli 1986 and Griswold 1999). Recently, Michael Slote has also referred to this partialist approach to ethics when comparing common traits between Mencius’s and David Hume’s moral views: “both Hume and Mengzi believe that a graded, paternalistic concern for others that depends, roughly, on how close they are to us, is absolutely at the heart—forgive the pun—of morality” (Slote 2009). Much of what Smith and Hume have to say on this point, however, was already elaborated by Hutcheson.

The concentric circles of morality go, according to Hutcheson, from our closest family members to relatives in general, good friends, partners of different kinds, acquaintances, neighbors and compatriots, those with whom we share a polity for our common interest. In “men of reflection,” this good-will extends to all mankind and even to “all higher kinds of intelligent natures<if there are any>” (Hutcheson 2007: 81). But in practice it is seldom the case that we are able to positively affect, directly or indirectly, the interests of those occupying the outer circles of concern. The recommendation, accordingly, is to focus on those who are closer to us, unless we have the opportunity to render more extensive services, as is indeed the case of the ruler:

as there are very few who have either abilities or opportunities of doing anything which can directly and immediately affect the interests of all; and yet every one almost can contribute something toward the advantage of his kinsmen, his friends or his neighbours, and by so doing plainly promotes the general good; it is plainly our duty to employ ourselves in these less extensive

offices, while they obstruct no interest more extensive, and we have no opportunities of more important services. In doing so we follow nature and God {its author}, who by these stronger bonds has made some of mankind much dearer to us than others, and recommended them more peculiarly to our care<and benevolence>. (Hutcheson 2007: 82-83)

To strengthen his point, Hutcheson offers an analogy with the Newtonian laws of gravity. In the same way that gravitation increases as the distance between objects diminishes, benevolence is also greater upon nearer approach. And this “is as necessary to the frame of the universe as that there should be any attraction at all” (Hutcheson 2004: 149).

Hutcheson also underlines that, although benevolence may in principle be directed toward anyone, those who have great moral merit should be given priority. Because the benevolent are naturally more prone to benefitting us, that we behave with them in the same way is necessary to keep human society happy and in good order. Mencius agrees: “A benevolent man loves everyone, but he devotes himself to the close association with good and wise men” (*Mencius* 7A46). It could be objected at this point that Hutcheson might be more fruitfully compared to Mozi than Mencius. After all, Hutcheson insists that universal calm benevolence is worthier than partial affections, and that to attain the greatest happiness for the greatest number is the ultimate end of morality. As was said above, it is indeed usual to label him as a “proto” utilitarian, insofar as he advocates the most extensive benevolence toward all sensitive and rational beings as the highest moral attainment. It has been usually overlooked, however, that he regards this more as a heuristic ideal than as a practicable goal. Hutcheson sees the pursuit of morality not as an impersonal enterprise directed to “humanity” in the abstract but, on the contrary, as a matter of caring for individual persons:

We must not therefore, {from any airy views of more heroic extensive offices,} check or weaken the tender natural affections, which are great sources of pleasure in life, and of the greatest necessity. Nay it is our duty rather to cherish and increase them, in proportion to their importance to the common interest. But at the same time we should chiefly fortify the most extensive affections, the love of moral excellence, and the steady purpose of conformity to the divine will. While these nobler affections have the control of all the rest, the strengthening the tender affections in the several narrower attachments of life will rather tend to complete the beauty of a moral character, and the harmony of life. (Hutcheson 2007: 83)

Living in a time where religious factions and zealots were all too common, Hutcheson realizes, however, the danger of giving too much weight to partial affections, and his emphasis on impartiality and universality is directly aimed at counteracting those perniciously narrow tendencies. Furthermore, because he is confident that the Deity has designed the world in such a way that, by following our natural tendencies, we will best promote the happiness of the system, it is not contradictory for him to maintain these two assertions at the same time: both that the end of morality is to promote the greatest happiness for the greatest number *and* that caring more for those who are closer to us is actually the best way to further that end.

3.4 Cultivating Benevolence

A fourth similarity between Mencius's and Hutcheson's moral theories, and one which sets the latter further apart from classic utilitarianism, is the emphasis placed on the cultivation of the virtues. For Hutcheson, while warm affection springs naturally toward those closer to us, it is only through daily practice and reflection that we can extend it and turn it into a proper virtue:

What then properly constitutes a virtuous character is not some few accidental motions of compassion, natural affection or gratitude; but such a fixed humanity, or desire of the public good of all, to whom our influence can extend, as uniformly excites us to all acts of beneficence, according to our utmost prudence and knowledge of the interests of others: and a strong benevolence will not fail to make us careful of informing ourselves right, concerning the truest methods of serving the interests of mankind. (Hutcheson 2004: 132)

Although the tendency to virtue cannot be directly taught (as it is implanted in our nature), it is strengthened through constant cultivation (Hutcheson 2004: 178). Habit and instruction improve our disposition toward virtue in such a way that it is “but seldom that without their aids we can expect to see anything great and eminent” (Hutcheson 2007: 75).

To be benevolent is not to display some fleeting amiable emotions once in a while, nor is it to do good actions with no restraints or reasoning. To have a virtuous character one needs to inform oneself, take into account who the others are, what interests they have; and, above all, one has to do this habitually and constantly, as a permanent disposition which springs from the “mind.” Thus it happens, with time, that “what at first sight appeared hard and difficult, by custom is made easy and even delightful” (Hutcheson 2007: 99).

It is here, perhaps, that Hutcheson's moral theory resembles more that of the ancient schools, especially the Stoics (by whom he was greatly influenced).¹⁷ Against contemporary Western moral philosophies, which focus mainly on actions and their outcomes, he is here appealing to the traditional emphasis on human character. What matters is to become a benevolent person, more than a maximizer of benevolent acts or a rule-following individual. Moreover, our supreme happiness lies in the pursuit of this natural excellence. At this point, current moral philosophers would warn Hutcheson that there is a lurking tension in his theory between two very different moral ideals: one that sees the end of morality as being the promotion of the greatest happiness for the greatest number; and the other, that sees the end of morality as being individual happiness, attained through the habitual practice of benevolence toward all. Although I will not delve into this problem—which would make another essay by itself—one could say on Hutcheson's behalf that where we see a gap he saw a continuum, and where we see two different and confronting goals he saw two sides of the same coin.

¹⁷ Hutcheson translated *The Meditations of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus* in collaboration with James Moor. See also Bishop 1996, where he claims that Hutcheson's views on moral cultivation and development evolved from a purportedly self-interested view of virtue (whereby we seek it insofar as it gives the greatest pleasures possible) toward a more Stoical approach (whereby we cultivate virtue because we naturally seek moral perfection).

The idea of morality as a constant perfecting of oneself is also present in Mencius, whose philosophy—together with that of Confucius—has been repeatedly characterised as a virtue ethics. We already have in ourselves the basic moral “sprouts,” and the path to virtue consists in their permanent cultivation. Mencius compares the state of the person who forgets to develop these “sprouts” to that of a mountain which was at some point blooming and lush, but has become bare and dry through excessive pasturing and tree felling. When people see this, he says, they think it was always like that, and forget that this is not the nature of the mountain (*Mencius* 6A8). Selfish desires and neglect are to the human heart what grazing and logging are to the original mountain. If we do not check them, they prevent us from attaining virtue. Moreover, they take away what is distinctive of humanity, what sets us apart from the rest of nature.

How to cultivate virtue? Like Hutcheson, Mencius emphasizes the importance of repetition and instruction, especially at the early stages of moral development. Moral learning is not theoretical, but practical. It is not about applying abstract principles to concrete cases but, on the contrary, starting from concrete cases where we are already moved by our innate moral tendencies and then projecting them to other cases, for example, through the use of metaphor and analogy—as is clearly shown in the passage of King Xuan of Qi. As we let our original sprouts guide our actions, a (literally) virtuous circle is created: through the actual performance of virtuous acts, we feel joy and satisfaction, which in turn motivates us to keep doing them, thus perfecting our moral abilities ever more, and allowing us to judge in a wider range of cases. Moral development, in short, consists in the refinement of those basic feelings with which every human being is already endowed; a refinement which takes time, effort and permanent caring.

4 Concluding Remarks

My purpose in this essay has been to suggest how the concept of benevolence in Mencius and Francis Hutcheson shares key features. Far from being incommensurable and radically distinct, it is interesting to see how these two traditions of moral thought overlap at important points when it comes both to explaining the origins of morality and justifying its practice. Although this enterprise will seem highly contentious for most current moral philosophers—for whom the levels of description and prescription, the *is* and *ought*, should be carefully distinguished—for both Hutcheson and Mencius, one follows naturally from the other. The challenge for the moral philosopher is to identify the positive moral features present in human nature (which are those tending to the common good) and develop them, refraining at the same time from the selfish desires that might lead us astray or might make us careless of the good of others. To the objection that it is fallacious to derive normative claims from bare facts, then, they would probably reply something along the following lines: that morality is also “natural,” in the sense that, as human beings, we need it to attain a fulfilled life. In order to achieve this objective, morality does not require us to twist our nature or strive against it in order to comply with some principles derived, say, from abstract reason; rather, it is about “going with nature,” nourishing those feelings that are already there and letting them grow in the right direction.

How Hutcheson’s and Mencius’s understanding of morality as founded on benevolence could illuminate some current discussions in moral philosophy is the note on

which I would like to conclude. First, it is revealing to see the pride of place given to benevolence as a key virtue in two traditions seemingly as diverse as Scottish sentimental moral philosophy and traditional Chinese Confucianism. The idea that there are certain innate feelings in all of us which generate an immediate sympathy and interest toward others is not a novel insight of eighteenth century Glasgow professors, nor a discovery of old and wise Chinese masters, but rather a belief shared by different human cultures, in different places and times. To recover this centrality of benevolence and its founding feeling—sympathy—could be one useful task for moral philosophers seeking to justify our other-regarding duties today. Especially when it comes to moral motivation, contemporary moral theories have a hard time accounting for it. On the one hand, the absolute and demanding impartiality advocated by utilitarians, even for those who rationally agree with it, is hardly ever put into practice. Those who believe in the rational dictates of the moral law, on the other hand, are at pains to persuade those who do not. On the contrary, by starting from the universally shared human tendency to sympathize with others, Hutcheson and Mencius may easily give reasons as to why we should behave toward them with concern and respect. A further interesting aspect is that, although they define benevolence in terms of the promotion of the good in general, the examples used to show how this virtue arises focus mainly on our innate reaction to relieve the suffering of other creatures (especially those who are in a disadvantaged position), rather than to increase even more the wellbeing of those who are already well-off. This emphasis on the relief of suffering over the maximization of happiness is also more in accord with how moral motivation actually works.

Second, it would be a worthwhile exercise to figure out the demands that the virtue of benevolence according to these authors should make on us today. How a requirement such as proximity could be kept or reshaped in a global community is a crucial point in this sense. One could well say that, unlike the time when Mencius and Hutcheson were writing, today each and every one of us has a much larger impact on the lives of distant others, and that this difference in the circumstances should make us change our moral behavior accordingly.¹⁸ Because it is no longer obvious that only few of us have “either abilities or opportunities of doing anything which can directly and immediately affect the interests of all” (Hutcheson 2007: 82), our attitude as moral agents should maybe resemble more that of the virtuous Mencian king or the benevolent Hutchesonian ruler, who acknowledge the extent to which their actions can have a positive or negative impact not only over those who are close to them, but also over total strangers, co-citizens or not. This change in attitude could be brought about as part of our process of self-cultivation, for example, through mechanisms such as the use of relevant analogies. This would surely not result in our caring for everyone equally—that would be, as both authors are at pains to stress, against our natural feelings. But it would show that it is possible and plausible to gradually extend our natural feelings when the circumstances demand it. Maybe the only way for a truly moral cosmopolitanism, after all, is to start from the rock bottom of our emotions and slowly build our way up, instead of relying on a set of abstract commands issued from above and expecting that they will eventually motivate us

¹⁸ Of course, this interpretation is contestable, and I am not claiming here that Mencius and Hutcheson would agree with it, but merely that it is not altogether implausible to say that they could.

to act. If only for this reason, I conclude, Mencius's and Hutcheson's conception of benevolence as rooted in actual but perfectible human feelings merits further exploration in our contemporary world.

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