

ON AVOIDING DOMINATION  
IN PHILOSOPHICAL COUNSELING

The central moral question of how we shall be with one another places itself in boldest relief in such asymmetrical relations as between parent and child, physician and patient, pastor and parishioner, counselor and client. In such relationships between presumed authority and innocence, the potential for domination and its companion, subservience, casts its ever-present shadow. And when its darkness is felt, domination is commonly clothed as help and care.

As philosophers counseling others on how to live — in attempting to nurture sprouts of goodness, as Mencius put it — might not we foist a philosopher's notions of the singular primacy of rationality and logical thinking, our own ideas of the good life, and the dregs of our own pains upon others either with delusions of the power of philosophy or with our own agonies? If so, would we not then appropriately be dismissed as buffoons or scorned for dominating others? Morally the matter of buffoonery seems harmless and, so we turn here to the avoidance of domination — a matter morally replete and integral to philosophical counseling as an attempt to help others.

To ground our claims about avoiding domination, we borrow a case of philosophical counseling from Mencius,<sup>1</sup> We stay close to the text in order to present a case of what we believe to be an excellent example of philosophical counseling, to provide a framework for indicating the ways in which such a relationship can and sometimes does degenerate into domination, and to invite your help in this exploration.

*Mencius Counsels the King*

King Hsuan of Ch'i has come to Mencius to inquire "how virtuous a man must be before he can become a true King." Mencius replies that a true King brings peace to the people and that no one can stop a king from doing so. King Hsuan wants to know if "someone like myself" can do this, bring peace to the people. Mencius responds in the affirmative and proceeds to ask the King if what he has heard is true.

The King was sitting in the upper part of the hall and someone led an ox through the lower part. The King noticed this and said, "Where is the ox going?" "The blood of the ox is to be used for consecrating a new bell." "Spare it. I cannot bear to see 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."

Upon the King's agreeing that this did in fact happen, Mencius tells him that "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." Notice how Mencius locates the King's question, which seems to come "out of the blue," in the King's own experience. The King's response reveals the concern that brought him to Mencius: "You are right. How could there be such people? Ch'i may be a small state, but I am not quite so miserly as to grudge the use of an ox. It was simply because I could not bear to see it shrink with fear, like an innocent man going to the place of execution, that I used a lamb instead." Apparently the King was surprised and disturbed by what he believed to be a false accusation in the face of his having acted with good intentions.

At this point Mencius does not commiserate with the King, but tries to help the King appreciate the perspective of his people: "You must

not be surprised that the people thought you miserly. You used a small animal in place of a big one. How were they to know? If you were pained by the animal going innocently to its death, what was there to choose between an ox and a lamb?" The King laughs and wonders what was really on his mind. On reflection, he is clear that he did not begrudge the expense. All the same, he acknowledges that he *did* use a lamb and that it would, therefore, be "only natural that the people would have thought [him] miserly." Mencius reassures him that "there is no harm in this" and adds that "it is the way of a benevolent man."

In telling the King that what he has done "is the way of a benevolent man," Mencius begins to tend the King's "sprout of benevolence." Indeed, nurturing sprouts of goodness is the whole point of Mencius' counsel. He does so by clearing away some of the agony of feeling misunderstood specifically by first acknowledging what the King was *feeling*, "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." The King responds that Mencius has "surmised" his heart even though he himself had "failed to understand [his] own heart." The King says, "You described it for me and your words struck a chord in me." Then he asks, "What made you think that my heart accorded with the way of a true King?"

Before proceeding to Mencius' response, let us note what has just happened. With Mencius help, the King has come to see a sprout of goodness in himself. Importantly, counselor Mencius responds to the fullness of the King's experience — to his feelings, reasonings and meanings. Mencius' reply does *not* speak to the King's question of how he, his counselor knew that his heart accorded with the way of a true King. Instead, Mencius goes directly to the task of helping the King cultivate that sprout. Let us listen in.

Mencius: *Should someone say to you, "I am strong enough to lift a hundred chun, but not a feather, I have eyes that can see the tip of a fine hair but not a cartload of firewood, would you accept the truth of such a statement?"*

King: *No.*

Mencius: *Why should it be different in your own case? Your bounty is sufficient to reach the animals, yet the benefits of your government fail to reach the people. That a feather is not lifted is because one fails to make the effort; that a cartload of firewood is not seen is because one fails to use one's eyes. Similarly, that peace is not brought to the people is because you fail to practice kindness. Hence your failure to become a true King is due to a refusal to act, not to an inability to act.*

King: *What is the difference in form between refusal to act and inability to act?*

Mencius: *If you say to someone, "I'm unable to do it," when the task is one of striding: over the North Sea with Mount T'ai under your arm, then this is a genuine case of inability to act. But if you say, "I am unable to do it," when it is one of massaging an elder's joints for him, then this is a case of refusal to act, not an inability. Hence your failure to become a true King is not the same in kind as "striding over the North Sea with mount T'ai under your arm" but the same as "massaging an elder's joints for him."*

*Treat the aged of your own family in a manner befitting their venerable age and extend this treatment to the aged of other families; treat your own young in a manner befitting their tender age and extend this to the young of other families, and you can roll the Empire on your palm*

There ends the counseling session. What are we to make of it? What happened between Mencius and the King that makes it a case of philosophical counseling? How might it have degenerated into a case of domination? What we have to say is not intended as an analysis of a classical Chinese text, as such. Nor is this an essay comparing understandings across philosophical traditions, East and West, such as notions of *akrasia*. Instead, here the story of the sacrifice of the lamb exemplifies our conception of philosophical counseling. Let us begin our reflections by attending more closely to how the session evolves.

### *Analysis of the Counseling Session*

The King initiates the session with a concern about whether *he* himself can be a "true King." His doubt arises from criticisms of his well-intentioned action, sparing the ox. Mencius helps the King identify what occasioned the criticism and elicits a declaration of desire. That is, with Mencius' assistance, the King says that the people think that he's not a true King, but that he himself desires to be one. Mediated by counsel, the people's criticism occasions the King's recognition of his own desire. Even if not yet a true King, King Hsuan is with Mencius a true person, wondering how he could become better than he is.

The exchange that follows consists in Mencius' assurances, with which the King is enabled to move from his palpable concern fraught with self-doubt to being merely puzzled. Mencius again takes great care to assure the King that he has the potential to become a true King and a good man. Here Mencius can be confident, for the King, being human, is moved by compassion, and is trying to do good; hence, "the heart behind [his] action is sufficient to enable him to become a true King."

Having been assured that he has the potential to be a true King and that there was goodness in his action, the King becomes puzzled. How then, he wonders, could his people so badly misunderstand his action, which indeed sprang from compassion. In part three of the counseling session, the King places this puzzle before Mencius, who responds with

further reassurance regarding his moral potential and, at the same time, shows the King how his action might appear to other people. In this exchange Mencius redoubles his assurances in response to the King's puzzlement about how *they* the people could have misunderstood *him* so badly. Here it is utterly important to this story as a case of Mencius' trying to *help* the King that the King actually understand that it is Mencius' conviction that the King did in fact act from a good impulse, so that he can trust counselor Mencius and take him as an ally supporting his own quest. Within this context of trust, Mencius points out that the people's criticism was reasonable. If the rite called for sacrificing an ox and the King sacrificed a lamb, in fact he had killed an animal, and a less expensive one at that. How could his feelings of benevolence toward an animal have been evident to his people? A more likely explanation would be miserliness.

The King, reassured by a trustworthy ally, is now able to feel bemused with himself. That is, with his approach of providing credible reassurances and explanations of the initially disturbing view that others have of the King, Mencius provides a way for the King to shift from hurt or agony occasioned by criticism to puzzlement, and then to bemusement with himself: a laugh and query, "What was really in my mind, I wonder?" Notice here that unlike today's typical psychological counselor, Mencius' approach involves a focus on discomfort or pain only in identifying the King's concern. Mencius' response constitutes grounded reassurance, not an exploration of the etiology of the pain. The focus is, accordingly, not on the King's past, but on the "sprout of benevolence" that showed itself through compassion enacted in sacrificing the lamb instead of the ox.

The fifth exchange consists in Mencius' shifting focus to the feeling of benevolence and the possibility of its extension. Having helped the King clarify his action and the people's unsettling criticism and having reassured the King, Mencius relocates the focus from the particular event and self-doubt to the feeling of benevolence. The germ or sprout of living well, of becoming a good person, of becoming a "true King," of im-

proving oneself -- centers Mencius' counsel and accounts for its *moral gravity*. In this case, Mencius tries specifically to help the King cultivate his heart of compassion, the germ of benevolence. Hence, he calls the King's attention to his own *feeling* of benevolence. With the King centered in his heart of compassion, Mencius implores him to extend his "bounty" to the people. He points out that the lack of peace derives from the King's *failure to practice kindness*. That is, Mencius places responsibility for discord at the feet of the King, yet does not appeal to feelings of guilt or attribute a moral deficiency to the King who, were he to follow his own heart, would be a good man.

In the sixth and final exchange, the King questions his own power to practice benevolence and Mencius counters that not inability or impotence but only a refusal to act could prevent the King from becoming what he desires to be. In asking "what is the difference in form between refusal to act [as Mencius imputes] and inability to act," the King searches for extenuating conditions that might absolve him of responsibility. Mencius rejoins with a direct, clear argument that that there is no excuse for the King *not* to extend his goodness to his people. Extending kindness is, after all, in Mencius' words, not a matter of "striding over the North Sea with Mount T'ai under [his] arm, but the same as 'massaging an elder's joints for him.'" The message is that the King *can* practice kindness if only he follow his heart, but with better reason and greater clarity of action than he achieved in the sacrifice of the lamb. Here it may be important to remember that the King was *moved* to save the ox. Thus, Mencius links what we are moved to do when we follow our hearts to the welfare of others. And there the session ends.

As a counselor seeking to nurture his client, Mencius tries to cultivate germs of goodness. As a client, one is inclined to take Mencius' advice, for it feels good to act in accord with compassion, in accord with the "original heart." In this case, counselor Mencius helps the client King to recognize his heart of compassion, to trust that his goodness can grow through practice, and, if the session is successful, to extend kindness to the people. The client King moves from *agonizing* to *being puzzled* to

*being bemused with himself*, counselor Mencius elicits a declaration of a desire to be a true King; assures and reassures the King of his potential to do so; helps the King see that the trouble lay not in his people's perceptions, but in his own action; calls on the King to focus on his heart of compassion and to see beyond his sparing the ox. Thus, Mencius tries to help the King not just understand, but also trust and believe that all of the premises in the practical argument of what it takes to be a true King are satisfied, save for the King's actually *practicing goodness*.

Notwithstanding the fact that at the end of the session it is unknown what the King will in fact do, we believe that the session succeeds as a case of philosophical counseling. Both to suggest how it succeeds and to indicate the limits of philosophical counseling, we turn now to the ways in which the session might have miscarried.

### *Pitfalls of Philosophical Counseling*

In this interaction with Mencius, King Hsuan of Ch'i apparently was able to move from *discomfort* with the people's criticism to *puzzlement* about how they might perceive his action so differently from what he intended to *bemusement* with his own choice of action. What if instead King Hsuan had been a version of Henry Ford, who reportedly blamed almost everything that did not feel good to him on the Jews? Most likely, he would quickly have become disgruntled with Mencius' failure to understand that they, the others, were wrong, that it was *their* failures and actions that cause his pain. Moreover, he might have believed that if he were not to control them, then they would control him, to use Eli Sagan's description of the dynamic of paranoia.<sup>2</sup> To borrow a description from the James Glass work on power and psychosis, then Henry Ford might have projected his own demons onto others, becoming terrified by what he saw.<sup>3</sup>

In such a case of paranoia or psychosis more generally, the ensuing stance of domination would render philosophical counseling impossible at best. At worst, persisting in *philosophical* counseling – in ignorance



of the client's deep psychic disorders — would risk fueling psychotic fires. Alternatively, if counselor Mencius were to understand the structure of psychosis, he would also understand that there could be no simple philosophical route from pain to puzzlement, much less to bemusement with oneself. To expect such understandings from philosophical counseling alone would be folly. One might even argue that engaging in philosophical counseling beyond its capacity risks abuse, particularly domination. Put differently, if a client is psychically unable to move from pain to puzzlement to bemusement with self, philosophical counseling is probably inappropriate, if not hazardous.

For even the mildly psychotic client, Mencius' reassurances of self's goodness are liable to reinforce the client's persuasion that "the problem" rests with the other. In such psychoses or psychotic "moments," the pain dissipates only as one scapegoats the other or, in extreme cases, acts with aggression. Caught up in tyranny, the self cannot benefit from the kind of reasoning that the Kings' move to puzzlement assumes — a move that requires believing in one's own goodness alongside with that of the other. More broadly speaking, when persons are psychotic, they are imprisoned in their own fantasies, out of reach of the rational and sympathetic imagination on which philosophical counseling relies.<sup>4</sup>

Let us now imagine that counselor Mencius was a different person entirely. What if it were instead Henrietta the Expert Philosopher doing the counseling? (It is rumored that Henrietta is a spiritual cousin of Henry Ford, but both would likely deny the kinship). Henrietta the Expert Philosopher believes in the great worth of philosophy and takes to heart the idea of the philosopher king. Of course, she is sophisticated enough to know that philosophers tend not to end up as kings; her commitment is to having those with "superior knowledge" — in her case, philosophical knowledge — prevail.

Let us imagine further that Hennifer, centered on her expertise, is unable to respect the understandings of her presumed unequals (non-philosophers and philosophers), much less able to take pleasure in their company, save when others validate and extend her mastery. To borrow

from Jessica Benjamin, she has resolved the human paradox of needing both recognition and freedom. Unable to share mutuality – a way of being that embraces the paradox of freedom and recognition, along with the joint authoring of lives that this suggests – Henrietta dominates others, including counseling clients.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, Henrietta the Philosopher is a brilliant thinker, whose work graces the pages of some of the most rigorous philosophical journals.

For reasons known only to her (but perhaps unknown to her as well), she started a part-time practice in philosophical counseling that she maintains alongside her academic appointment. Being the extraordinarily well-versed, adept philosopher she is, Henrietta can move deftly across the spectrum of Western moral, social, and political theory and can also speak knowledgeably of some non-Western traditions. Were one's encyclopedia of philosophy to be lost at sea, one would likely not hesitate to put her on a list of persons with whom to be marooned on some island. To her clients, Henrietta exudes expertise, thereby engendering an awed confidence. In telling one's story to her, one has the sense of having God's ear.

A client comes to Henrietta with some discomfort, much as King Hsuan approaches Mencius. She punctuates her listening with terse diagnostic questions. About thirty-five minutes into the fifty-minute hour, she begins a summary of what she's heard, much as one might describe repairs needed to fix an automobile that won't start. Diagnosis and prescription follow, issued with a confidence and putative clarity that seem to follow as conclusions to unassailable arguments. Clients walk away feeling somewhat small, but perhaps smarter for the encounter, having learned any of a number of things, e.g., that there are three conceptions of the self in 17th-Century French philosophy, only the weakest of which was displayed in the client's thinking today.

Henrietta treats philosophical counseling as she might administer a tutorial. This does not constitute philosophical counseling as an enterprise dedicated to helping others live well. For their nurture, clients are left to their own devices. If one needs to move from pain to puzzle-

ment to bemusement, any assistance in doing so is left to chance and circumstance. From the very way Henrietta positions herself in human relationships, it is clear that she knows nothing about nurturing or cultivating a life, neither another's nor her own. Hence, in order to nurture rather than to dominate others, the counselor, philosophical or otherwise, has no choice but to straighten herself out. With this conclusion, we return to Mencius' practical and moral imperative that to straighten out others one must straighten out oneself.

*UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON*  
*MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY*

#### NOTES

1. Throughout we use D.C. Lau's translation of *Mencius* (London: Penguin Books, 1970). The particular case of philosophical counseling appears in Book I Part A, Chapter 7.
2. See Eli Sagan, *The Honey and the Hemlock: Democracy and Paranoia in Ancient Greece and Modern America* (Basic Books, 1991).
3. See James M. Glass, *Psychosis and Power: Threats to Democracy in the Self and the Group* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995).
4. We find most illuminating on this point an essay by Richard Wollheim, "The Sheep and the Ceremony" in his book, *The Mind and Its Depths* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).
5. See Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988) esp. pp. 12 and 31-36.