

moral potential, are actually unequal in terms of education, virtue, knowledge, and other moral and epistemic capabilities, Confucianism can defend rights as a “fallback apparatus” when the otherwise virtuous/affectionate relationship fails. In the end, Bai submits that Confucian rights would be “more contextual and less absolute than the rights” derived from liberal individualism and they are subject to “some higher goods rooted in and recognized by Confucianism.”

Thus understood, the political theory Bai advances in *Against Political Equality* is one of moderate Confucian political perfectionism and the regime that he espouses is a liberal nondemocracy. The four commentaries that follow critically investigate various aspects of Bai’s philosophical and interpretative arguments by focusing on his guiding philosophical methodology, the idea of modernity (and Chinese modernity), the relation between democracy and liberalism, and his interpretation of *Mencius*. All four commentaries and Bai’s response were presented in the book symposium organized, via Zoom, by City University of Hong Kong’s Center for East Asian and Comparative Philosophy on October 23, 2020. As the host of the book symposium, I would like to express my deep gratitude to all participants. I am also grateful to Ruth Abbey and Sue Collins, the editor-in-chief and the book review editor respectively, of the *Review of Politics* for publishing this book symposium, thereby helping it reach a broader audience in political theory.

## Between Philosophy and Political Reality

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doi:10.1017/S0034670521000024

At some risk of simplification, the argument of Tongdong Bai’s new book is that we can and should extract a set of core ideas from the early Confucian texts—those dating from the Spring and Autumn and Warring State periods (SAWS)—for solutions to certain problems that he believes modern democracy faces, all of which relate to the idea of “one person, one vote.” To be clear, Bai does not dispute the idea that liberal democracy includes other important principles. But, according to him, “what is often popularly considered essential to democracy, the institution of one person, one vote, is precisely the source of many problems with contemporary democracies” (53).

But what are these problems? Bai highlights four. The first has to do with a suspicion of popular government. The second is the lack of an effective way to ensure that present voters consider the interests of nonvoters past, present,

and future. The third is the worry that the institution of “one person, one vote” can reinforce existing power differences between the vocal and powerful and the silent (or silenced) and powerless. And lastly, Bai also finds it questionable whether voters are the best judges of their own interests or of the best ways to satisfy them.

In response, Bai offers us the vision of a “Confucian hybrid regime.” Drawing on Mencius, Bai argues that while voters can decide whether they are satisfied with the government, they are often not capable of deciding which policies have made or will make them satisfied. That is to be the preserve of the few. Importantly, Bai sees his proposal not as a straightforward argument for authoritarianism against liberal democracy. Rather, he sees it as ultimately compatible with a version of liberal democracy that is not built on democratic ideas (that is, individualism, equality, autonomy). His proposal involves, if you will, a meritocratic injection into what is still—broadly speaking—a liberal-democratic framework, an injection that limits the most democratic elements of this framework.

In what follows, I wish to offer two broad observations. The first relates to the point behind searching for answers to contemporary problems in early Confucianism, or as Bai asks early in his book, “Why Confucianism?” Here, I would distinguish between two proposals for why a modern theorist might want to search for solutions to today’s problems in an ancient philosophical tradition such as Confucianism. First, the theorist may have specific societies in mind where elements of those ancient traditions are still in force—where ideas from that tradition continue to shape present political culture. To the extent to which there is still a lot of good in those elements, there is reason to theorize with such a political culture in mind given the coherence of the proposals with existing beliefs and affections. (I have in mind Sungmoon Kim’s work in thinking about this first broad reason. See, for instance, his *Confucian Democracy in East Asia: Theory and Practice* [Cambridge University Press, 2014].) The second proposal comes to the fore for theorists with a more universalist frame of mind—and Bai exemplifies this. For him, the proposed solution “does not presuppose the social dominance of a ‘Confucian’ culture in a narrow sense—a culture Chinese or East Asians have allegedly adopted” (68). It is meant to be a solution to the perceived problems facing modern liberal democracies, whatever the background political culture.

But what is the warrant for the idea that either of these proposals is a good solution? One possible ground concerns the perceived efficacy of analogous measures in the past. The implicit thought is that practical solutions based on Confucian ideas had been effective in maintaining a (largely) stable state for a very long time. Inductively speaking, there must have been some good ideas in the mix given the sheer longevity of the Chinese state. But as far as I can tell, this is not the route taken by Bai—which is a good thing, because I am seriously in doubt about the persuasiveness of any such answer once the regression analysis has come in, so to speak. His is a purely *philosophical* discussion. But that brings me to a different kind of worry.

The worry is that philosophical ideas—even those formulated today—may be entirely useless for solving issues in the actual world. I should disclose that I am entirely comfortable with the idea that the Confucian texts in view are “philosophical”—you do not need to convince me that they are. Purely philosophical ideas may help us to clarify our thinking and urge us towards fruitful avenues of thought. They can even resolve *philosophical* problems. But a philosophical problem that calls forth a philosophical solution is one thing. The existence of people suspicious of the power of government, or their voting without regard to the interest of nonvoting stakeholders—these are conditions in the world. Thinking better, more clearly, may well be part of a solution; but at the very least, some major translation is needed.

I do not think Bai means to suggest otherwise, so this is not an objection. It is a reminder that the real challenge is not so much “Can Confucianism be understood philosophically?” as “Can political philosophy of any kind really help?” (as opposed to street activism or institution building, let us say), especially since Bai is not counting on these ideas to speak to entrenched ideas in the existing political culture. I suspect that I am asking for something unreasonable, but it would be nice to hear Bai help me out with this nagging worry: How exactly does Confucian political *philosophy* really matter beyond the ivory tower, once we are outside of polities where elements of the ancient traditions are still in force? Even if not an answer to the general question, perhaps a peek at his game plan would be illuminating, assuming that the efficacy of the plan does not depend upon its secrecy.

Let me move on to the second proposal. Truth be told, I remain somewhat skeptical that the “modernity” of the SAWS has enough of a bearing on the issues of our own times to resolve them. I do not contest that China during the SAWS witnessed the genesis of conditions analogous to what we can consider “early modernity”—namely, the emergence of a large, populous, well-connected, mobile, and plebeianized society of strangers, and the corresponding demise of institutional answers that were formerly applicable to a small, close-knit, nobility-based society of acquaintances. But as Han Fei Zi would be keen to remind us, those who look to the past for solutions to problems of the present risk emulating that farmer of Song who waited for another rabbit to knock itself out on a tree stump, having profited from such an incident in the past. To be clear, I would be just as skeptical of solutions to contemporary problems that looked to early European modernity or the American Founding.

One recent development has my attention here: the unprecedented information explosion that began around the turn of the century, under conditions described and analyzed by Martin Gurri (see *The Revolt of the Public and the Crisis of Authority* [Stripe, 2018]). How unprecedented? Gurri, citing a 2003 study by Peter Lyman and Hal Varian, noted that “more information was generated in 2001 than in all the previous existence of our species on earth” (22). This exponential expansion has not stopped. Gurri's book charts the implications that follow as people gain ready access to this information via the

Internet. A big one is the increasing difficulty for the elite to control the narrative—there are simply too many countervailing “different stories” out there. But at the same time, the same elite (political, economic, scientific)—having been installed in an earlier era of industrial mass communications—are accustomed to making claims to authority based on their competence, claims that are increasingly seen to be hollow because of the complexity of modern life.

There is really only so much that even the most well-intentioned elite can do to prevent pandemics or to have a large population vaccinated within short order. It also does not help that many citizens of democracies, despite their avowed distrust of authority, place unrealistic expectation upon governments to solve problems (balanced budgets but big welfare payouts; tackling climate change while keeping the workers and consumers happy; protect us from a pandemic, but don’t curtail our freedoms). This seems to be an important new normal that is not anticipated by earlier attempts to theorize modernity—whether those from the SAWS, or early modern Europe, the American Founding, or even developments in the post-World War II period. While the situation is still evolving, it makes me generally pessimistic regarding elite-based ideas for solving today’s problems—as long as the crucial requirement of peoples’ buy-in is still assumed (and I am not ready to drop it yet).

There is a partial silver lining. There really could be societies with an existing political culture that predisposes people to trust authority. I will even grant that some—though not all—of these societies are historically Confucian-influenced. But if this is what we are counting on, we are back to one of my earlier thoughts regarding the question “Why Confucianism?” since the theorist is thinking of a particular society or societies where suitable elements of the ancient tradition are still in force. Others have the advantage of being small enough for there to be a historically engendered sense of community (the Nordics are usually cited). Yet others have powerful states with a greater appetite to deploy mass surveillance and oversight of the Internet. But whatever the case, some additional real-world condition is being assumed, and it would be better for Bai to be clear about that.

There is much more in the book that I found interesting, particularly Bai’s discussion of compassion. But let me rest with the above two comments as an invitation for Bai’s comments.