Joseph Chan, *Confucian Perfectionism: A Political Philosophy for Modern Times,* Princeton University Press, August 2014, pp. 256.

After being marred by all kinds of political turmoil in the twentieth century, Confucianism began to experience a steady revival in recent decades. Meanwhile, with the rise of China as an unignorable force in the world, this ancient Chinese philosophy has also received mounting attention from the West. The book represents an attempt to explore Confucianism from a western perspective. It is unique, in the sense that it uses the norms and terminology of western normative philosophy to reconstruct and modernize Confucianism, and simultaneously draws Confucian resources to enrich and revise the western tradition of liberal democracy. It therefore represents an effort to channel the two philosophical traditions with the hope of strengthening and developing both.

Despite the author's modesty about the book's ambition, it nevertheless takes up a daunting problem which has long obsessed Confucianism. Since its inception, Confucianism has confronted a huge gap between its high ideal and the low reality. It has suffered from a lack of effective means to transform its social and political ideals of the Grand Union (*Datong*) and Small Tranquility (*Xiaokang*) into actuality. The traditional Confucian means, such as rites, moral edification, and the *Kingly Way* of governance, were all found inadequate or unfeasible to restrain people's behaviors in reality and failed to maintain an ideally harmonious social order in which a public-spirited ethos would prevail.[1] The early Confucian masters, Confucius, Mencius and Xunzi, were however unwilling to abandon those ideal means because their conceptions of social ideals are characterized not just by a prevalent thriving ethical spirit, but also by the ethical nature of the means by which those ideals are achieved. Rites, for example, are an ideal means Confucian masters proposed to tackle the problems arising from unfavorable situations in the *Small Tranquility*. Confucius's teaching in the *Analects* suggests that rites are embedded with ethical values such as harmony, benevolence, righteousness and deference, and therefore would help the lesser ideal of *Small Tranquility* to keep alive the spirit of the perfect ideal, the *Grand Union*. But rites and other ideal means were found ineffective in nonideal situations. Other than the ideal means, the early Confucian masters actually did have some alternative means to handle the problems in unfavorable conditions.

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[1] A bit of clarification is perhaps needed here. The Confucian doctrine scrutinized by the author is confined to the classical pre-*Qin* period, comprising the literatures of Confucius, Mensius and Xunzi. It does not refer to the two thousand years long complicated and multi-faceted tradition of Confucianism which includes many later developments and interpretations. More importantly, the Confucian doctrine discussed in the book should not be conflated with the real political system that existed in China for over two thousand years. Despite the sustaining appeal of such Confucian social and political ideals as the *Datong* and *Xiaokang* worlds, what actually was in operation was an autocratic monarchy with some Chinese characteristics. While the Confucian edification did play some role in curbing the arbitrary rule of the centralized monarch, what existed in reality was unquestionably a far cry from the Confucian ideals.

They could, for example, opt for the Legalist strategy of using rewards and punishments administered through law to regulate people's behaviors. But Confucians categorically rejected the Legalist strategy on the grounds it would not guide people to the right motivation for their actions and would hence be detrimental for the cultivation of their moral character. Caught in the impasse of ideal means being ineffective and effective means being nonideal, Confucians resigned to fate as to whether their social ideals would materialize or not. To break this impasse, Joseph Chan, the author of the book, proposes that the political institutions in western liberal democracy can serve as viable means for realizing Confucian ideals.

Chan has obviously set aside the debates about whether Confucianism is compatible with Western philosophical tradition, or whether the two traditions are commensurable in terms of metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, or methodology. Chan's focus is directly political, and he adopts a "piecemeal" approach when weaving together Confucianism and Western liberal democracy. The main aim of his book comprises grafting certain liberal democratic institutions into Confucianism, but grounding them in the Confucian ideas rather than the liberal democratic thought. In the process of coupling the two, Chan develops what he calls "Confucian political perfectionism," or simply, Confucian perfectionism. As the main strategy for the whole project, Confucian perfectionism is intended to be a doctrine which assesses social and political institutions with reference to "the Confucian conception of the good" rather than "the liberal conception of the right." In Chan's view, the liberal democratic institutions which have emerged in modern times, such as limited government, separation of powers, democratic elections, two-chamber legislature, human rights and civil liberties, and social justice, have all proved effective in setting things straight in real societies and should therefore be absorbed by Confucianism as good candidates for viable means. But it is Confucianism rather than liberalism which will provide a justificatory foundation for them. Any problem of incompatibility is to be resolved by either revising and modernizing Confucianism, to the extent of abandoning its most uncongenial parts, or by reshaping and re-justifying the liberal democratic institutions, with Confucian ideals as their aspiration. After such reconstruction of both traditions, those institutions would not only deal effectively with the problems arising from unfavorable conditions but also retain the spirit of Confucian ideals.

It of course is not easy to do several things at the same time and to unify everything into a single scheme of Confucian perfectionism. Moreover, if Confucian perfectionism is to be established as a new philosophical doctrine, it must be able to answer all the important questions in political philosophy - those normative questions the discussions about which constitute the bulk of the liberal tradition. The book confronts these challenges. The first part of the book deals with such foundational issues as state authority and the political institutions which best serve the ideal conception of authority. The second part moves on to other fundamental issues like human rights, civil liberties, and social justice and welfare. These issues concern both the state-personal and interpersonal relationships, two important categories of relationships normative political philosophy aims to regulate. The book may not have exhausted all important issues in normative political philosophy, but it does offer a

new Confucian perspective on the above important issues through sketching an outline of Confucian perfectionism.

To resurrect Confucianism to the contemporary world, considerable reinterpretive work is needed to render this ancient philosophy compatible with the basic intellectual progresses characterizing modern times. A good example is political authority. In Confucianism, political authority used to be closely associated with an old interpretation which saw the people and territory as properties of the ruler. Authority was therefore justified as an extension of the ruler's ownership right over his own properties. This ownership-right interpretation of political authority, as such being controversial, is nonetheless unacceptable to any modern society which has come to embrace the idea of popular sovereignty and constitutionalism. Chan rejects it and, by reinterpreting the relevant Confucian texts, replaces it with what he calls a service conception of authority. According to this conception, political authority is justified, instrumentally, by its ability to serve, i.e. to protect and promote, the well-being of the people, and, intrinsically, by its being constitutive of a relationship of mutual commitment between the governing and governed. Political authority justified in this Confucian way differs importantly from authority justified by the consent theory in western liberalism. Another example of reinterpretation is about the idea of monism of authority. Early Confucian masters believed that the authority of a 'Sage King,' a person with perfect virtues and capacities of judgment who possesses a full understanding of the Way, is monistic and supreme and hence needs no limitations. This puts Confucianism at odds with the modern ideas of limited government and separation of powers. Chan reconstructs certain early Confucian arguments for monist authority and argues that they can actually be compatible with the modern ideas. Since it is difficult if not impossible to find a Sage King in reality, Chan argues that we should opt instead for a feasible political system that offers power to people with "flawed but above-average levels of virtue and intelligence", allowing them to cooperate, complement and check each other to achieve a balanced view of the Way for governance and to prevent their abuse of power. Chan asserts that the notion of monist and supreme authority, regardless of who assumes the position of power, must be abandoned if Confucian political thought is to have any validity today.

Reinterpretation is just one way to modernize Confucianism. Being an ancient philosophical tradition, Confucianism remains a rich pool of resources to be tapped for modern use. To be sure, another way to modernize it is to abstract ideas from the raw materials, shod them in modern terms, and develop them into a system of principles. Chan does exactly that when he tries to work out a conception of social justice and welfare for his project of Confucian perfectionism. Rather than grounding justice on equality or individual rights, Chan derives a duty of justice on the part of the ruler from the Confucian core idea of benevolent rule. More importantly, he analyzes relevant texts in *Mencius* and *Xunzi* to arrive at the conclusion that their views on resource distribution amount to what we call principles of sufficiency in modern western philosophy. Provision of material resources is aimed to guarantee a secure life for everyone so that they can pursue a higher, ethical life, rather than to achieve equality or fulfill one's subjective conception of good life. This also means

that the Confucian 'sufficiency' view has the advantage of setting a rough but objective standard for sufficiency threshold. But in Chan's Confucian perfectionism, social justice is just a part of a larger Confucian social ideal. On basis of the principles from Mencius's famous well-field system, Chan develops a multilayered system of social provision which gives priority to mutual aid from family or close social ties over assistance from the government. The system allows all possible aid providers to play a role in social welfare, including the family, the village or commune, and the government, and incorporates principles of mutual care, sufficientarian justice, as well as personal merits and responsibility.

When it comes to transplanting western political institutions into Confucianism, Chan proposes that Confucianism can satisfactorily provide the justificatory foundations for them. In Chan's view, the reason why those western institutions can be absorbed by Confucianism is not only that they can tackle real-life problems, but also that they can tackle them in a way that accords with and expresses the spirit of the Confucian ideals. A good example is democratic elections. The dual function of democratic elections is to select virtuous and competent people to run the government (the selection function) and to reward or sanction elected officials by reelecting them or not (the sanction function). By guaranteeing morally and intelligently eligible candidates for positions of power, democratic elections promotes the Confucian political ends, such as the improvement of people's well-being, and directly embodies an effort to achieve the Confucian ideal political relationship, a virtuous relationship of mutual commitment and trust between the ruler and the ruled. Democratic elections can therefore be justified in Confucian terms. Moreover, Chan argues that Confucianism can actually provide a robust ethical foundation for all institutions of democracy. The well-functioning of democratic institutions relies ultimately on civic virtues or civility of the people, which are mostly the result of education. But the civic education advocated by liberals focuses only on the acquisition of knowledge of public affairs and critical-thinking abilities and does not emphasize the nourishment of ethical character traits. In Chan's view, Confucianism has a long tradition of stressing the cultivation of human virtues, which are broader and more fundamental than civic virtues. Chan therefore contends that the moral education advocated by Confucianism is more effective than civic education in engendering the virtues necessary for the success of democracy.

In formulating his Confucian perfectionism, Chan does not accept western political institutions without hesitation. It is a fact that not all institutions can fit squarely into Confucianism – they were born out of the western tradition and, whether they can be supplied a Confucian justificatory foundation or not, they may still be uncongenial in some way. Chan's acceptance of them is a critical one. He assesses them, modifying them where necessary so that they can not only be aligned with the Confucian ideals, but also get along well with other existing features of Confucianism. For example, Chan's Confucian perfectionism absorbs, among other things, the idea of bicameral legislature - composed of a democratic lower chamber and a nondemocratic higher chamber - a common but essential feature in liberal democratic regimes. But different from the legislatures in the West, Chan's second chamber has Confucian features with regard to its membership and functions. Members of Chan's

second chamber come from seasoned public servants or politicians, whose virtues and capacities have stood the test of long-term service in the public sectors. They are selected by their fellow colleagues - people who have worked closely with them in public service for an extended period of time. This colleague-based selection approach is inspired by the Confucian classical texts which tell us that virtue and competence can only be found by close and long-term observation, and Chan believes that this approach is better at finding qualified people than elections which are done through mass media or competitive examinations, like those in traditional China, that only test people's knowledge on paper. The functions of the second chamber also differ to some extent. In addition to passing bills and balancing the views of the first chamber, it also has an educational function. The way in which the second chamber debates the public affairs will set up a good example for the whole citizenry of what a reasonable, disinterested, and public-spirited debate should be like. This, in Chan's view, fulfils the Confucian idea that political leaders should set themselves as moral examples for people to emulate. Another institution modified by Confucian perfectionism is human rights. Chan contends that Confucianism, unlike liberalism, does not see human rights as an essential constitutive element of human dignity. In the Confucian ideal society people are engaged in all kinds of virtuous and benevolent relationships which would render human rights useless. But in Confucian perfectionism, human rights remain as a powerful fallback apparatus which would be resorted to in nonideal situations, especially in conflicts when virtuous relationship breaks down and the weak are left with nothing else to protect themselves against the powerful. Moreover, Chan contends that Confucian perfectionism, with its emphasis on virtues and its preference of a shorter list of human rights, would also help prevent the rampant rights-talk which tends to erode social cohesion and wrongly annuls such traditional moral vocabularies as common good, virtues, and duties. In short, though human rights are not part of the Confucian ideal, they are necessary and effective means to tackle real-life problems in nonideal situations and can be modified to fit into Confucian perfectionism.

There are of course issues that, despite efforts of reinterpretation or modification respectively on either side, still pose problems for the project of Confucian perfectionism. This of course is not surprising, given that the author is after all trying to combine two distinct philosophical traditions. One of the hard nuts is individual autonomy. As is well-known, Confucianism with its emphasis on submissiveness of individuals in a hierarchical system is often criticized in modern time for not recognizing individual autonomy, that is, autonomy in personal sphere. A son must be submissive to the father and wife to the husband, for example. Is it possible, then, to incorporate individual moral autonomy into Confucianism? Chan's answer to this challenge is dubious, and therefore open to further debate. On the one hand, according to his reading of the Confucian texts, Chan argues the Confucian moral agent does enjoy individual autonomy, when he voluntarily accepts the demands of morality and reflectively engages in moral life. On the other, he admits that traditional Confucian moral autonomy is compatible with only a narrow range of life choices in study, career, marriage, and other areas of personal life. These two interpretations of Confucian autonomy are however in tension. The first interpretation is, to certain

extent, reasonable, for it is in line with the idea of self-cultivation of virtues by individuals in Confucian ethics. But Chan seems to have neglected the fact that the Confucian virtues, at least some of them, are precisely the reasons for the limited range of life choices. Filial piety, for example, advocates submissiveness of children to their parents, and the more a Confucian moral agent cultivates and practices this virtue, the less possible he will be able to make his own choice. This is just one example to show how Chan's two interpretations of the Confucian moral autonomy could curtail each other. Chan seems to have spared little effort in solving this tension. But without a proper handling of the opposition, it would be less convincing to make the proposal that Confucian ethics can incorporate a moderate notion of personal autonomy, one that is compatible with the pluralism of values and lifestyles of modern society and one that can sometimes be outweighed by other ethical values.

As is shown, all the above issues have been dealt with in such a way that they contribute to Chan's scheme of Confucian political perfectionism. Chan works very carefully, hacking off a piece here, suturing on a piece there, until he has arrived at a version which, to him, seems to combine the best elements of both Confucianism and liberalism. This is the most important original contribution made by Chan, and it is what distinguishes the book from other recent literatures on Confucian political philosophy. No doubt, this excitingly new doctrine of Confucian perfectionism will be subject to public discussion and appraisal, with its strengths and weaknesses being examined. But some immediate and coarse responses can be offered here. For example, it is uncertain whether Confucian political philosophy can be interpreted as political perfectionism. Confucianism is a broad and multifaceted tradition, regarded as a comprehensive system of ethics, philosophy, and even theology. While it is true that Confucian ethics has often been interpreted as a kind of perfectionism, it remains a question whether its political philosophy should also be interpreted so, or purely so. Aristotle's perfectionist ethics also provides a particular conception of good life, but it does not prevent political doctrines such as liberal democracy to be born out of the western tradition of thought. The skepticism about the political perfectionism interpretation is reinforced by the fact that, unlike other perfectionist doctrines, the Confucian good is not, or not just, valued for its own sake. Virtues, for example, are an essential part of the Confucian good. But the Confucian virtues are considered not just intrinsically valuable but also instrumentally valuable, for it is also part of Confucianism that only by cultivating virtues can people achieve real harmony. A related and equally important question for Confucian political perfectionism comes from a familiar quarter. As we all know, political perfectionism has always been criticized by liberals for abandoning state neutrality among different conceptions of the good. The Confucian state would also be challenged for giving up state neutrality in favour of the Confucian conception of the good. Such a challenge would become even more forceful when virtue is part of the Confucian good to be promoted by coercive political institutions and state policies. If Confucian perfectionism is, like Chan says, a moderate one which does not go that far to promote its unique conception of the good, allowing more space for plural conceptions of the good, then the question becomes whether and how it can differ from other forms of political perfectionism. Nonetheless, it is no doubt this book will provoke many interesting

discussions, among Confucians and liberals, regarding both these general questions and the specific issues mentioned previously. It is undeniable that his book is groundbreaking, for it opens up new spheres for normative philosophical debate in the East as well as the West.

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