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**Perfectionism, Political Justification, and Confucianism**

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*Abstract*:

Broadly understood, perfectionism is the view that the state may, or should, promote valuable conceptions of the good life and discourage conceptions that are bad or worthless. This paper distinguishes between two types of perfectionist theory: *comprehensive* perfectionism and *moderate* perfectionism. Comprehensive perfectionism claims that perfectionism should be grounded in some comprehensive moral doctrine, while moderate perfectionism claims that perfectionism does not have to be based upon any comprehensive moral doctrine. Moderate perfectionism also contends that in justifying the use of political power, citizens and state officials may appeal to judgments about the good life that are piecemeal, convincing, widely accepted, and not highly controversial. This paper provides some reasons for favoring moderate perfectionism and defends it against criticisms made by Steven Wall and by Collis Tahzib. In addition, this paper clarifies the nature and limits of moderate perfectionism through a discussion of Joseph Chan’s Confucian perfectionism.

Keywords: Perfectionism; moderate perfectionism; Confucianism; political justification; John Rawls; the good life

1. **Perfectionism and Anti-perfectionism**

In Anglo-American political philosophy, perfectionism is the view that the state may, or should, promote valuable conceptions of the good life and discourage conceptions that are bad or worthless. A conception of the good life is a more or less systematic view of what constitutes “the good life” and how those elements pertain to a person’s well-being, quality of life, moral character, etc. Note that contemporary perfectionists rarely, if ever, assert that citizens ought to become perfect human beings. They only argue that the state is permitted to make a wide range of policies with the aim of helping citizens to lead flourishing lives. These policies, commonly found in modern liberal societies, may include the following: preserving cultural heritage, subsidizing art galleries and museums, conserving nature and biodiversity, providing free access to reading materials, encouraging athletic excellence, and educating citizens about the harm of recreational drugs.

But many political philosophers think that perfectionism is unjustified. One of the sustaining antiperfectionist arguments concerns the fact that reasonable people can disagree deeply about what constitutes the good life. John Rawls has famously claimed that human beings are subject to the burdens of judgment, and so they can have reasonable disagreements over a broad range of ethical, religious, and political issues.[[1]](#footnote-1) These burdens, Rawls says, are “the many hazards involved in the correct (and conscientious) exercise of our powers of reason and judgment in the ordinary course of political life.”[[2]](#footnote-2) He states that there are at least six burdens of judgment: (1) the evidence bearing on the case is conflicting and complex; (2) even where we agree fully about the kinds of considerations that are relevant, we may disagree about their weight; (3) moral and political concepts are vague and subject to hard cases—cases in which it is particularly difficult to make a judgment; (4) in complex modern societies, our total experience, which shapes how we assess evidence and weigh values, is likely to differ widely from person to person; (5) different kinds of normative considerations are involved on both sides of an issue, making overall assessment difficult; and (6) being forced to select among cherished values, we face great difficulty in setting priorities.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Many liberal philosophers endorse Rawls’s account of reasonable disagreement, and have argued against perfectionism.[[4]](#footnote-4) Their arguments usually go something like this: (P1) people can have reasonable disagreements about the good life; (P2) the state (or citizens and state officials) should give due respect to each citizen in public political discussions when the justification of the exercise of political power is at issue—i.e., when political justification is at issue; (P3) the state is not permitted to appeal to any conception of the good life when political justification is at issue, at least when constitutional essentials or basic matters of justice are at stake (by P1 and P2); (P4) perfectionist policymaking inevitably appeals to some conception(s) of the good life; and (C) therefore, the state is not permitted to make perfectionist policies, at least when constitutional essentials or basic matters of justice are at stake (by P3 and P4).

1. **Two Types of Perfectionist Theory**

We have just seen a common line of antiperfectionist argument. Perfectionists have resisted this line in many ways. Basically, they think that it is not necessarily disrespectful or otherwise morally wrong for the state to appeal to some conception of the good life in the process of political justification. In resisting the antiperfectionist argument, a perfectionist can endorse either comprehensive or moderate perfectionism. Let us distinguish them in the following.

Comprehensive perfectionism as a type of perfectionist theory maintains that perfectionism should be grounded in some comprehensive moral doctrine or conception. As such, a comprehensive perfectionism is grounded in a particular comprehensive moral doctrine. Such moral doctrine is comprehensive in the sense that “it includes conceptions of what is of value in human life, and ideals of personal character, as well as ideals of friendship and of familial and associational relationships, and much else that is to inform our conduct, and in the limit to our life as a whole.”[[5]](#footnote-5) To comprehensive perfectionists, it is not necessarily disrespectful for the state to promote a comprehensive moral doctrine if the doctrine is sound or true.[[6]](#footnote-6) Some political philosophers can be properly regarded as comprehensive perfectionists. For example, Thomas Hurka bases his perfectionism in a particular Aristotelian doctrine of human nature; Joseph Raz bases his perfectionism in a particular ethical doctrine of autonomy; and Jiang Qing bases his perfectionism in a particular Confucian doctrine of morality.[[7]](#footnote-7)

By contrast, moderate perfectionism as a type of perfectionist theory claims that it is unnecessary to base perfectionism upon any comprehensive moral doctrine.[[8]](#footnote-8) A moderate perfectionism, therefore, is not based upon any comprehensive moral doctrine but appeals to piecemeal and noncomprehensive judgments about the good life. To moderate perfectionists, the state has strong reasons not to promote any *comprehensive* moral doctrine. One reason is that state pursuit of any comprehensive moral doctrine will easily damage civility, which is the attitude of fellow citizens toward each other that shows a concern for the common bond despite differing opinions or conflicts of interest.[[9]](#footnote-9) Given that citizens can reasonably disagree over many ethical, political, and religious issues, civility requires citizens to care for each other’s sense of self-worth and to justify their views in a way that one can reasonably expect others to accept.[[10]](#footnote-10)

From the standpoint of moderate perfectionists, citizens and officials may, in the process of political justification, appeal to judgments about the good life that are piecemeal, widely accepted, and not highly controversial. Call these judgments *moderate perfectionist judgments*. Consider the following judgments: “deep personal relations contribute to a person’s good life”; “aesthetic experience contributes to a person’s good life”; and “courage contributes to a person’s good life.” These judgments are piecemeal as they do not cover the major religious, philosophical, and moral aspects of human life in a systematic way, so they are freestanding from comprehensive moral doctrines. In addition, they do not seem to be highly controversial; it appears, in fact, that peopleliving in modern liberal societies widely endorse them. Furthermore, many of them seem to be epistemically sound. For instance, it seems very difficult to deny that aesthetic experience contributes to a person’s good life, that deep personal relations contribute to a person’s good life, and that courage contributes to a person’s good life. The same can be said about the values of understanding, practical reason, moral integrity, perseverance, leisure, etc.

For example, the following two judgments about the good life are not associated with any particular comprehensive moral doctrine. But they seem convincing and widely accepted:

*Human relationships (at least the mutually respectful ones) contribute to the good life*: We humans occasionally feel bored, lonely, stressed, pessimistic, or even depressed. Spending time with our intimates and friends is one of the best ways of resisting these unpleasant states. More positively, in most cases when we feel happy about something, we feel even happier if we can share our joy with our intimates and friends. In fact, those who have deep personal relations with us are generally willing to offer material and spiritual support when we want to accomplish things that we consider important. Without their help, we would have to fight very hard for the good life, and our lives would be much more difficult. In addition, human relationships are usually valuable in and of themselves, as we like and care about certain people. Based on all of the above considerations, it is plausible to say that a life with no deep relationship with any other person is very likely lonely, boring, and inauthentic.

*Hard-drug addiction is seriously harmful*: Hard-drug addicts generally have serious health problems, which include mania, paranoia, depression, schizophrenia, and decreased organ function.[[11]](#footnote-11) Overdoses of any kind of hard drug can cause death. If the addict chooses to quit the drugs after prolonged addiction, he or she would suffer a series of painful withdrawal symptoms, such as malaise, severe muscle aches, diarrhea, and so forth. On cession of using hard drugs, the addict usually cannot reason in a normal manner. Due to serious health problems and emotional problems, many hard-drug addicts are alienated from normal personal relations.[[12]](#footnote-12)

In short, because moderate perfectionist judgments are not tied to any comprehensive moral doctrine and because citizens holding divergent comprehensive religious and moral doctrines can widely share them, it seems that citizens and officials can preserve civility and need not cause hostility in appealing to these judgments in the process of legislation and public policymaking.[[13]](#footnote-13) Let us turn to consider some criticisms of moderate perfectionism.

1. **In Defense of Moderate Perfectionism**

Steven Wall has defended comprehensive perfectionism in some of his writings,[[14]](#footnote-14) and, more recently, he has argued that comprehensive perfectionism “need not be rigid, uncivil, hostile to compromise and averse to pluralism.”[[15]](#footnote-15) He is puzzled as to why Joseph Chan claims that perfectionism should take the moderate form.[[16]](#footnote-16) To Wall, one can present (for example) comprehensive Confucianism in a favorable light as a comprehensive perfectionist doctrine that takes civility seriously and refrains from pursuing the whole truth and the attendant uncivil policies. So, in Wall’s view, no significant difference may exist between comprehensive and moderate perfectionism since a comprehensive perfectionism can spell out why civility matters and why it is inappropriate for citizens and officials to use political power to impose a comprehensive moral doctrine on the whole citizenry. If Wall is right, it would seem unnecessary to propose moderate perfectionism.

As an initial response, note that there is a crucial difference between comprehensive and moderate perfectionism: while comprehensive perfectionists claim that perfectionism should be grounded in some comprehensive moral doctrine, moderate perfectionists deny that it should be. A comprehensive perfectionist might raise the following challenge: Should moderate perfectionism not rest on some comprehensive moral doctrine in order to be fully justified? Consider civility. To moderate perfectionists, civility’s great value per se explains why citizens should appeal to moderate perfectionist judgments rather than to any comprehensive moral doctrine in political justification. However, if moderate perfectionists are to provide a complete philosophical justification—through addressing fundamental questions in ethics, metaphysics, and epistemology—for the value of civility, then they must appeal to some comprehensive moral doctrine, such as an Aristotelian doctrine of ethics.

In response, moderate perfectionists can clarify that they refrain from giving complete philosophical justifications for the value of civility and for moderate perfectionist judgments. For, as long as there are sufficient freestanding reasons—i.e., reasons that are not based upon the truth of any particular comprehensive moral doctrine—that show that moderate perfectionist judgments are convincing and that civility is crucial for mutually respectful social cooperation, it is unnecessary for moderate perfectionists (and, as well, for citizens in political justification) to give complete philosophical justifications for moderate perfectionist judgments and for the value of civility. Moderate perfectionists believe that there are enough freestanding reasons showing that moderate perfectionist judgments are sound and that civility is a crucial value.[[17]](#footnote-17)

That being said, it is not necessarily mistaken for a perfectionist to base perfectionism upon a particular comprehensive moral doctrine; after all, a perfectionist can sensibly argue about what sort of life is best for human beings and what laws and public policies are most capable of promoting human flourishing. In this connection, Aristotle is an eminent comprehensive perfectionist, and his work will almost certainly continue to inspire future political and legal philosophers. However, in considering what sort of life is best for all people in view of a certain comprehensive moral doctrine, one is not concerned with how citizens of modern liberal societies should justify the use of political power to each other in a civil and respectful manner, given that citizens do not agree on any comprehensive moral doctrine in the first place.

But hasn’t Wall already pointed out that comprehensive perfectionism can take civility seriously? Perhaps what comprehensive perfectionists need is only a sophisticated comprehensive perfectionism that takes civility seriously and, accordingly, gives a plausible account of citizens’ mutual political justifications. For argument’s sake, let us agree that such a sophisticated comprehensive perfectionism could exist. Nevertheless, it seems unreasonable to expect that citizens would generally agree on such a comprehensive doctrine and that they would justify their political stances to one another in terms of it. Note that the problem here is not concerning what a particular citizen or politician or group of people should do in a specific social or political situation—but, rather, what public and shared moral norms there should be with regard to how citizens justify the use of political power to one another. Moderate perfectionism is attractive: it does not expect citizens to agree on any particular comprehensive moral doctrine, and it only expects them to accept those judgments about the good life that are piecemeal, plausible, widely shared, and not highly controversial.

To defend comprehensive perfectionism, one might argue that citizens do not have to agree on the complete philosophical justifications of the value of civility and of the values pertaining to human flourishing. For perfectionism to work, citizens need only to accept, and know each other to accept, the much less controversial parts of the doctrine; namely, the crucial importance of civility and the relevance of certain general perfectionist values, such as moral, intellectual, and artistic excellence. But, to the best of my knowledge, no prominent perfectionist has pursued this line of argument. After all, it is totally unclear how political authorities could manage to inform citizens only of the presumably less controversial parts of a sophisticated comprehensive perfectionism and expect citizens to agree on them—while not informing citizens of the highly controversial parts of it and not expecting citizens to agree on them.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Still, comprehensive perfectionists might make this challenge: if civility is all that matters, then all citizens have to do in political justification is to appeal to beliefs that are widely shared and not highly controversial, regardless of the truth or soundness of these beliefs. And if they do so, then moderate perfectionists are more like politicians or pragmatists of some kind than philosophers who are concerned with the soundness of ideas of the good life.

In my view, moderate perfectionists should make it clear that, in political justification, the soundness of beliefs certainly matters; accordingly, for example, state officials fail to respect citizens as rational moral persons if they intentionally appeal to widely shared yet morally wrong beliefs, such as racially discriminatory ones, in legislation or policymaking.[[19]](#footnote-19) To moderate perfectionists, both the soundness and wide acceptability of moderate perfectionist judgments are important for citizens’ political justification, because both respect for rational moral persons and the value of civility are essential for political morality.

Let us turn to a different criticism of moderate perfectionism. Collis Tahzib has argued that while he largely agrees with the general moderate perfectionist approach—in particular, the idea that one does not have to base perfectionism upon any comprehensive moral doctrine—he thinks that moderate perfectionists need to respond to the challenge from antiperfectionists by stipulating that there are some noncomprehensive perfectionist judgments that cannot be reasonably rejected.[[20]](#footnote-20) In his view, moderate perfectionists have not said clearly what they mean when they claim that reasonable people cannot reject some piecemeal judgments about the good life or that all reasonable people are expected to accept them. One can sensibly argue, Tahzib says, that any of the judgments about the good life that moderate perfectionists rely on is an object of reasonable rejection, and it would be a very daunting task to carry out empirical research to confirm that all reasonable people in the real world accept these judgments about the good life.[[21]](#footnote-21)

To defend perfectionism, Tahzib proposes what can be called the *perfectionist idealization of citizens*. According to this view, just as one can see freedom, fairness, and equality as core liberal axioms in Rawls’s political liberalism, one can see moral, intellectual, and artistic excellence as perfectionist axioms—which citizens must endorse in order to be regarded as reasonable.[[22]](#footnote-22) Consequently, we would expect perfectionist policies such as state subsidies for art galleries to pass the test of public political justification—that is, all reasonable citizens would accept these policies—because “a person who rejects the intrinsic value of artistic excellence would count as unreasonable” and as one whose objection to any of these policies can be dismissed.[[23]](#footnote-23)

I think that moderate perfectionists have used the “reasonable” concept in various ways to talk about the epistemic and moral reasonableness of citizens and of beliefs.[[24]](#footnote-24) However, they have not adopted the perfectionist idealization of citizens that Tahzib proposes, and I think that they should not. The most serious problem with Tahzib’s proposal is that it runs the risk of making a circular argument: by stipulating that reasonable citizens must endorse certain perfectionist views, Tahzib seems to be preaching to the converted. If perfectionism is justified, then perfectionists should provide some reasons for the judgments about the good life that they rely on and should also explain the practical relevance of these judgments. These things cannot be done through the perfectionist idealization of citizens.[[25]](#footnote-25)

As a matter of fact, Tahzib has given some reasons for the view that artistic, moral, and intellectual excellence is essential for human flourishing.[[26]](#footnote-26) The question, then, would be the following: are all judgments regarding the importance of artistic, moral, and intellectual excellence highly controversial to the degree that citizens’ appeals to them in political justification must damage civility? I believe that Tahzib would say “no.” And, as I have argued, some of the judgments about the good life are widely accepted and convincing, so they can form the basis of perfectionist legislation and policymaking.

In short, for a perfectionist to take political justification seriously, they do not have to maintain that some perfectionist judgments cannot be reasonably rejected.[[27]](#footnote-27) A moderate perfectionist can argue that, in political justification, citizens ought to do their best to justify their political stance in terms of reasons that are sound or true, provided that the force of these reasons is not dependent upon the truth of any comprehensive moral doctrine. Moderate perfectionists, as I have said, think that there exist judgments about the good life that are convincing, widely accepted by people, not highly controversial, and, importantly, not closely associated with any particular comprehensive moral doctrine. Citizens may appeal to such judgments in political justification.[[28]](#footnote-28)

1. **Is Confucian Perfectionism a Moderate Perfectionism?**

Joseph Chan has sought to combine moderate perfectionism with Confucianism.[[29]](#footnote-29) In this part, I examine briefly his theory of Confucian perfectionism, thus clarifying the nature and limits of moderate perfectionism.

Let us start with how Confucianism is related to perfectionism. Confucianism is an ethico-political doctrine that began life in China more than 2,500 years ago and has deeply influenced the development of East Asia. Confucians do not hold the same view on ethics and politics (so one may prefer to speak of *Confucianisms* instead of *Confucianism*); however, Confucians invariably think that political leaders and authorities are morally obligated to promote people’s material welfare and help them cultivate virtue. As such, Confucianism is a perfectionist doctrine. Moreover, Confucians (ancient Confucians, at least) generally hold systematic views of—to borrow Rawls’s words again—“what is of value in human life, and ideals of personal character, as well as ideals of friendship and of familial and associational relationships, and much else that is to inform our conduct, and in the limit to our life as a whole.”[[30]](#footnote-30) Thus, it is proper to say that Confucianism is a comprehensive perfectionism consisting of a particular comprehensive moral doctrine.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Few contemporary Confucians have argued that the state should seek to promote Confucianism as a comprehensive moral doctrine.[[32]](#footnote-32) Contemporary Confucians generally think that Confucianism has valuable insights into ethics and politics, but that it would be inappropriate for any modern state to promote Confucianism in its entirety, given that people living in modern societies hold divergent moral views.[[33]](#footnote-33) They believe that if Confucianism is to make positive contributions to modern politics and political discourse, then those aspects of Confucianism that are unsuitable for the modern world need to be revised, rectified, or abandoned.[[34]](#footnote-34)

It is against such a background that Chan’s Confucian perfectionism makes original theoretical contributions. Chan describes Confucian perfectionism as “an unusual project” because it is “a critical reconstruction of certain Confucian political ideas of the classical period for modern times.”[[35]](#footnote-35) In fact, Chan’s project is not only unusual but also ambitious: it seeks to explore the implications of Confucianism for a variety of fundamental issues in politics, including political authority, democracy, human rights, civil liberties, and social and economic justice.[[36]](#footnote-36) The ultimate goal is to provide “an attractive philosophical alternative to liberal democratic theory.”[[37]](#footnote-37)

There is a basic question about Chan’s project: how should Confucian perfectionism shape the legislation and public policymaking of a modern liberal state? To Chan, Confucian perfectionism can take either the form of moderate perfectionism or that of extreme perfectionism, and he intends Confucian perfectionism to take the form of moderate perfectionism.[[38]](#footnote-38) Importantly, he argues: “Confucianism can be actively and publicly promoted” in the form of moderate perfectionism despite his view that, in public political discourse, citizens and state officials “should not present Confucianism as a complete and packaged conception and ask citizens to accept policy proposals as implications of that package.”[[39]](#footnote-39) By contrast, extreme perfectionism is the view that the state ought to adopt a certain comprehensive moral doctrine as the basis of state policy. To Chan, extreme perfectionism is deeply problematic and unsuitable for the construction of Confucian perfectionism.[[40]](#footnote-40)

So, how should Confucianism be promoted in the form of moderate perfectionism? Chan has given the following example: one should not argue that filial piety (*xiao*) should be promoted by the state *because* it is a central element in Confucianism; to argue in such a way is to expect other people to accept the authority of Confucianism as a comprehensive moral doctrine.[[41]](#footnote-41) According to moderate perfectionism, people who want to appeal to Confucian values in public policymaking need to justify these values in terms of reasons that do not require the acceptance of Confucianism as a comprehensive moral doctrine. In addition, Chan has provided some compelling reasons for preferring moderate perfectionism over extreme perfectionism.[[42]](#footnote-42) One reason is the great importance of civility for politics and social cooperation, as we discussed earlier.

However, I think that he has not shown clearly how moderate perfectionism supports the “active and public promotion of Confucianism.” In my view, moderate perfectionism simply cannot support state promotion of Confucianism. I will explain in the following.[[43]](#footnote-43)

State promotion of Confucianism could mean either (a) state promotion of Confucianism as a comprehensive moral doctrine, or (b) state promotion of certain Confucian values. Moderate perfectionism is evidently incompatible with (a), and, as a matter of fact, Chan has argued against state promotion of *any* comprehensive moral doctrine. This leaves Chan with only (b).

It is not clear, though, how moderate perfectionism supports state promotion of values that are distinctively Confucian. To illustrate, compare two perfectionist judgments: (1) that deep personal relations contribute to a person’s good life; and (2) that filial piety (*xiao*) contributes to a person’s good life. The first one is an instance of moderate perfectionist judgment; it is not tied to any particular comprehensive moral doctrine, and people seem to widely share it. The second one is an instance of Confucian perfectionist judgment; it is a judgment about the value of filial piety, which is a canonical Confucian value. Now, the key question is: can the perfectionist judgment about the value of filial piety be regarded as an instance of moderate perfectionist judgment? I think that it cannot. Chan says, as mentioned, we should not claim that “filial piety should be promoted *because* it is a central element in Confucianism.” However, it is not clear why any person should endorse filial piety if he or she is not in favor of Confucianism as a comprehensive moral doctrine in the first place. After all, filial piety is one particular kind of human relationship, and its value, as Confucians generally understand it, is not the same as the value of mutual respect, parental care, and other human goods understood in a general way.[[44]](#footnote-44) And, as a matter of fact, many people in the West endorse the value of mutual respect, parental care, and some combination of these two values but do not endorse the value of filial piety in the way that many Asian people do.[[45]](#footnote-45)

Since filial piety (*xiao*) is closely connected to Confucianism as a comprehensive moral doctrine, it would be implausible to claim that filial piety and other distinctively Confucian values, including benevolence (*ren*) and righteousness (*yi*), are as general and freestanding as the perfectionist values of deep personal relations, aesthetic experience, understanding, mutual respect, and so on. Thus, it is implausible for Chan to maintain that the moderate perfectionist state may promote filial piety and other distinctive Confucian values just as it may promote general perfectionist values and goods.

To Chan, my argument above does not show clearly that moderate perfectionism is incompatible with state promotion of Confucian values.[[46]](#footnote-46) In Chan’s view, people from different social and cultural backgrounds may adopt what he calls the “participant approach” to Confucian values. According to this approach, people discuss and debate the significance and content of Confucian values; thus, they can modify and improve these values. Even if a certain traditional Confucian value is unacceptable to many people living in modern societies, it is still possible that it can be transformed through the participant approach so that people can recognize its importance and relevance to modern politics and social development. And if a Confucian value can be transformed in such a way, then a moderate perfectionist state may promote it without appealing to Confucianism as a comprehensive moral doctrine.

The participant approach is appealing and has the potential to provide a nuanced view of how different Confucian values can make positive contributions to political discourse and policymaking in our times. Nevertheless, it can hardly vindicate state promotion of Confucian values. Note that the participant approach is a procedural approach that encourages people to discuss, debate, modify, and improve different Confucian values. As such, it would be premature for anyone to claim that traditional Confucian values can be transformed into contemporary moral values, and that these contemporary moral values (if one can still regard them as Confucian) can be widely shared by people living in modern societies, and—ultimately—that they are appropriate objects of a modern state’s support and promotion.

Finally, given that the participant approach cannot vindicate state promotion of Confucian values, one might propose that in order to be fair to citizens who hold divergent moral and religious views, the state may promote a wide range of values closely associated with different comprehensive doctrines. Thus, rather than promoting only Confucian values, the state may seek to promote Taoist values, Buddhist values, Christian values, Islamic values, Hindu values, Judaic values, and many other cultural and religious values at different periods of time or in different policy domains. However, I think that there are limits as to what kinds of values a moderate perfectionist state may promote. In my view, the state need not be unfair and disrespectful in promoting a wide range of general perfectionist values, such as deep personal relations and understanding.[[47]](#footnote-47) But if the state promotes a broad range of cultural or religious values closely associated with conflicting doctrines, then, instead of making all citizens satisfied, it will most likely offend all of them. For, in that case, anyone can reasonably complain that the state shows a terrible lack of consistency of principle—conflicting religious or moral beliefs cannot be all true, and it is doubtful that they are equally deserving of state support.

In short, the state will easily overstep the limits of moderate perfectionism if it seeks to promote Confucianism. I think that the same problem would arise with state promotion of any comprehensive moral doctrine and of values closely associated with any such doctrine.[[48]](#footnote-48)

1. **Conclusion**

To summarize, I distinguish between two types of perfectionist theory: namely, comprehensive perfectionism and moderate perfectionism. Comprehensive perfectionism has wide appeal among contemporary perfectionists, but I here point out that it has certain theoretical limitations that moderate perfectionism does not have. Moreover, I provide some reasons for favoring moderate perfectionism, and defend it against the criticisms made by Wall and by Tahzib. To clarify the limits of moderate perfectionism, I discuss Chan’s Confucian perfectionism, arguing that moderate perfectionism cannot support state promotion of values bound up with any comprehensive moral doctrine, such as Confucian values.

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1. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rawls, *Political Liberalism,* 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Rawls, *Political Liberalism,* 56–57. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. E.g., Charles Larmore, *The Morals of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), chs. 6–7 ; Thomas Nagel, *Equality and Partiality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), ch. 14; Jonathan Quong, *Liberalism Without Perfection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Rawls, *Political Liberalism,* 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Richard Arneson, “Liberal Neutrality on the Good: An Autopsy,” in *Perfectionism and Neutrality: Essays in Liberal Theory*, ed. Steven Wall and George Klosko (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 191–218; Joseph Raz, “Disagreement in Politics,” *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 43, no. 1 (1998): 25–42. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Thomas Hurka, *Perfectionism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986); Qing Jiang, *A Confucian Constitutional Order: How China’s Ancient Past Can Shape Its Political Future*, ed. Daniel A. Bell and Ruiping Fan, trans. Edmund Ryden (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Simon Caney, “Impartiality and Liberal Neutrality,” *Utilitas* 8, no. 3 (1996): 273–93; Simon Caney, “Liberal Legitimacy, Reasonable Disagreement, and Justice,” *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 1, no. 3 (1998): 19–36; Joseph Chan, “Legitimacy, Unanimity, and Perfectionism,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 29, no. 1 (2000): 5–42; Joseph Chan, *Confucian Perfectionism: A Political Philosophy for Modern Times* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 191–204; Franz Mang, “Liberal Neutrality and Moderate Perfectionism,” *Res Publica* 19, no. 4 (2013): 297–315; Franz Mang, “State Perfectionism and the Importance of Confucianism for East Asia,” *Philosophical Forum* 52, no. 1 (2021): 5–16. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Chan, *Confucian Perfectionism,* 201. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The idea of civility being discussed here differs from Rawls’s *duty of civility*. To Rawls, all citizens living in liberal democracies are under a moral duty of civility to explain to their fellow citizens how the political stances that “they advocate and vote for can be supported by the political values of public reason”; *Political Liberalism,* 217. The political values of public reason are not perfectionist values, and citizens are not expected to accept any perfectionist value in the process of political justification. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Peter Staals, *Drug Abuse and Division: A Practice Guide for Clinicians* (London: McGraw-Hill, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. My discussion of these two judgments about the good life is drawn, with minor changes, from Mang, “Liberal Neutrality and Moderate Perfectionism,” 302–3. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. To moderate perfectionists, there are other moderate aspects of moderate perfectionism: in particular, it does not seek to promote the good life through coercing or forcing citizens to live their lives in any particular way. In this paper, my focus is on the feature that it does not ground perfectionism in any comprehensive moral doctrine. For discussion of other moderate aspects of it, see Chan, “Legitimacy, Unanimity, and Perfectionism”; and Mang, “Liberal Neutrality and Moderate Perfectionism.” [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See, especially, Steven Wall, *Liberalism, Perfectionism, and Restraint* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Steven Wall, review of Joseph Chan, “Confucian Perfectionism: A Political Philosophy for Modern Times,” *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* (online, 2014), https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/confucian-perfectionism-a-political-philosophy-for-modern-times/. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Chan, *Confucian Perfectionism.* [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. For further discussion, see Mang, “Liberal Neutrality and Moderate Perfectionism,” 301–4. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. It may be of interest to note that Rawls would reject this kind of partial concealment of the justification of political principles from the public. See Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 66–71. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See Raz, “Disagreement in Politics,” 40–43. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Collis Tahzib, “Perfectionism: Political, Not Metaphysical,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 47, no. 2 (2019): 144–78; Collis Tahzib, *A Perfectionist Theory of Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 205–13. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Tahzib, *A Perfectionist Theory of Justice,* 206–7. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Tahzib, “Perfectionism,” 166–67. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Tahzib, “Perfectionism,” 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. E.g., Caney, “Liberal Legitimacy, Reasonable Disagreement, and Justice”; Chan, “Legitimacy, Unanimity, and Perfectionism”; Mang, “Liberal Neutrality and Moderate Perfectionism.” [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See Franz Mang, “Perfectionism, Public Reason, and Excellences,” *Analysis* (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Tahzib, “Perfectionism,” 169–70. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. In this respect, I depart from my view expressed in Mang, “Liberal Neutrality and Moderate Perfectionism,” 301–4. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Quong has argued that many disagreements about the good life are reasonable and foundational, while many disagreement about justice are reasonable but not foundational given that citizens must accept certain ideas of justice in order to be reasonable. See Quong, *Liberalism Without Perfection,* ch. 7. This argument raises complex issues that I cannot enter into in this paper. I have discussed Quong’s argument in Mang, “Liberal Neutrality and Moderate Perfectionism”; Franz Mang, “Public Reason Can Be Reasonably Rejected,” *Social Theory and Practice* 43, no. 2 (2017): 343–67; and Mang and Chan, “Perfectionism.” [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Chan, *Confucian Perfectionism.* [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Rawls, *Political Liberalism,* 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Considering that various Confucian scholars hold similar yet different views of the good life and of politics, we can also say: *any* Confucianism is a comprehensive perfectionism consisting of a particular Confucian comprehensive moral doctrine. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. For an exception, though, see Jiang, *A Confucian Constitutional Order*. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. E.g.,Chan, *Confucian Perfectionism*; Sungmoon Kim, *Public Reason Confucianism: Democratic Perfectionism and Constitutionalism in East Asia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Sor-hoon Tan, *Confucian Democracy: A Deweyan Reconstruction* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. For relevant discussion, see also Yutang Jin, “Confucian Leadership Democracy: A Roadmap,” *Comparative Philosophy* 12, no. 2 (2021): 79–102, in which Yutang Jin explores the idea of leadership democracy that is expressive of classic Confucian values. Additionally, some scholars (e.g., Zhuoyao Li, *Political Liberalism, Confucianism, and the Future of Democracy in East Asia*(New York:Springer Cham, 2020); Baldwin Wong, “Junzi Living in Liberal Democracy: What Role Could Confucianism Play in Political Liberalism?,” *Philosophical Forum* 52, no. 1 [2021]: 17–28) have argued that while modern states should not adopt perfectionism and seek to promote Confucianism, Confucianism can make certain positive contributions to modern political discourse and social development. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Chan, *Confucian Perfectionism,* xi. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Chan, *Confucian Perfectionism,* xi. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Chan, *Confucian Perfectionism,* 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Chan, *Confucian Perfectionism,* 14, 23, 203. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Chan, *Confucian Perfectionism,* 200, 203. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Chan, *Confucian Perfectionism,* 200–204. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Chan, *Confucian Perfectionism,* 203–4; italics in original. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. See mainly: Chan, *Confucian Perfectionism,* 200–204. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. My discussion will draw on my essay “Confucianism, Perfectionism, and Liberal Society.” *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, 17, no. 1 (2018): 29–49. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Philip J. Ivanhoe, “Filial Piety as a Virtue,” in *Filial Piety in Chinese Thought and History*, ed. Alan K. L. Chan and Sor-hoon Tan (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 189–202. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. For relevant discussion, see Qingping Liu, “Filiality versus Sociality and Individuality: On Confucianism as ‘Consanguinitism,’” *Philosophy East and West* 53, no. 2 (2003): 234–50. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. I thank Chan for discussing my argument with me. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Mang, “Liberal Neutrality and Moderate Perfectionism,” 307–8. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. However, I have argued that citizens may deliberate whether and how Confucianism, among other reasonable moral doctrines, can make positive contributions to their social and political thinking and public policymaking, provided that certain conditions are met. See Franz Mang, “Confucianism and Public Political Discussion,” *Comparative Political Theory* (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-48)