

Rescuing Democracy on the Path to Meritocracy

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Tongdong Bai proposes a novel design of the basic structures of a society, one that is vastly different from the liberal democratic model adopted by many countries in both the East and the West: Confucian meritocracy. Confucian meritocracy, accordingly, has certain advantages over liberal democracies as they currently are, and all the feasible internal improvements they can make. For Bai, a key advantage of the Confucian meritocracy is that it combines the best of both worlds: the liberal part of liberal democracies, ‘in particular, rights and the rule of law’ (Bai 2019: xvii), and the rule of the wise from the Confucian tradition. Through entrusting political decisions to a minority of knowledgeable and compassionate elites, a Confucian meritocratic state can reliably produce superior policies in the service of the people. Such a state can, theoretically, effectively serve the people better than liberal democracies by safeguarding and promoting the material and moral interests of the people. In the following, I aim to put some pressure on the supposed advantage of Confucian meritocracy over liberal democracy. I argue that in fulfilling a crucial and highly plausible necessary condition for a legitimate Confucian meritocratic state, many of the problems haunting actual liberal democracies will be dissolved.

A highly virtuous and appealing feature of Bai’s Confucian meritocratic account is its unyielding stance against obscurantism, the attempt to justify withholding political liberty from the general public through withholding opportunities and resources necessary for the non-ruling class to make qualified political decisions. In contrast, Bai’s system incorporates what I shall label an *anti-obscurantism clause* as a necessary condition for a legitimate Confucian Meritocratic state: ‘the lack of capacities of making sound political decisions by the masses cannot result from the failure of the state to secure basic goods, education, and other necessary conditions for people to make sound political decisions (Bai 2019: 50).

This requirement springs from a reasonable reconstruction of Confucianism: the role of the government is not merely to uphold law and order, and not even merely to provide conditions necessary for the masses to secure basic material needs. Instead, the government is to provide the conditions necessary for each to secure their material and moral interests, to pursue excellence in their own (and not restricted to a Confucian) way. Among the many legitimate interests citizens may pursue is the interest in political participation. While Bai, as a Confucian, is deeply skeptical of the masses’ actual ability to make sound political decisions, and furthermore attributes the incompetence of many to the inequality of natural endowments, the Confucian meritocratic state is committed to provide all the material and educational resources for each to fairly compete to become part of the ruling class. Thus, while Bai is skeptical of equal political liberty, he is committed to a fair equality of opportunities in relation to political participation.

I am deeply sympathetic to Bai's firm stance against obscurantism. However, while Bai's *anti-obscurantism clause* may indeed prevent the deeply objectionable disenfranchisement based on race, gender, class, or wealth, the idealization needed to prevent arbitrary exclusion may in turn undermine the advantage of the Confucian meritocratic model over democracy.

Here, it is necessary to say something about the comparison of different models of government. There is a need to hold fixed the degree of idealization (in terms of the success of social, educational, and political reform), in order to allow comparisons to be meaningful. It is rather pointless to compare the pros and cons of perfectly idealized models against anything else. A dictatorship ruled by an infinite series of omnibenevolent and omniscient leaders or a republic of angels would indeed produce better political decisions than most other forms of government, but these mere possibilities give us no reason to favor dictatorships or republics, as they are utterly infeasible. There are, however, also severe difficulties to pinpointing where exactly we should draw the line between the feasible and the infeasible. Thus, for the sake of meaningful comparison, I propose that we should compare different models on the same degree of idealization allowed to each other: if certain idealizations are granted to one model, comparable idealizations should also be granted to the competing model(s). This would put all parties on an equal footing in terms of feasibility.

Now, Bai correctly points out that contemporary democracies are highly frustrating. They suffer from four substantial problems: the mistrust in authorities and a high degree of anti-intellectualism (Bai 2020: 54), the neglect of the rights and interests of nonvoters, especially noncitizens (Bai 2020: 55), vocal elites enjoying oversized influence over silenced and powerless minorities (Bai 2020: 55–56), citizens being generally ill-informed about their own preferences and which policies serve their interests (Bai 2020: 56). Bai's proposed solution is 'a Confucian/Mencian form of ideal government' as 'this regime can address the four problems of democracy...better than the current democratic regimes with all their possible internal, nonmeritocratic revisions can' (Bai 2020: 67). Under the governance of a compassionate, knowledgeable, and wise class of ruling elites, an idealized Confucian meritocratic regime can gain respect from the people due to consistently making correct political decisions and thus satisfying the people, can properly care for the rights and interests of noncitizens and powerless minorities due to the compassion of the ruling elite, and can properly identify the interests of the people and furthermore strike a balance between the interests of current and future generations. Most crucially, since politicians will be free from the pressure of constant re-election, they will not be motivated to serve the short-term interests of their own electorate, which often conflicts with the greater good.

However, regardless of the quality of political decisions produced by the ruling elite, a Confucian meritocratic state is illegitimate (in the sense of lacking the right to rule) insofar as it fails to meet the *anti-obscurantism clause*. Thus, in pursuit of a legitimate rule, the Confucian meritocratic state must provide sufficient moral and intellectual education to all, and furthermore secure certain material conditions such as adequate care for the most vulnerable. It is beyond emphasis how demanding this must be: the Confucian meritocracy requires radical reform such that the inability to join the ruling elite can only be attributed to the lack of interest or poor natural endowments. Here, we need to be extremely cautious against being too ready to appeal to the inequality of natural endowments.

Indeed, when it comes to evaluating the success of education, asking why students fail school may be asking the wrong question. The better question is how schools are designed to fail students. At least in the American system, education is not designed to cultivate democratic citizenship (Tampio 2017). Furthermore, school designs often fail to motivate otherwise

talented students (Robinson and Aronica 2016). Gendered social expectations also hinder the success of people of certain gender(s) in certain fields (Fine 2010). Misogyny keeps women away from certain careers (Manne 2017). The use of standardized tests also further disadvantage the already disadvantaged (Lomax et al. 1995). Income inequality strongly predicts the future achievements of children (Reardon 2011). The failure to develop certain moral qualities can also be attributed to structural obstacles. Extreme poverty may render a criminal way of life rational to those who are stuck in extreme poverty (Shelby 2007), which in turn reproduces the conditions under which future generations are trapped in extreme poverty, the constant lacking of at least one parent, and the school-to-prison pipeline (Mallett 2015). If left unresolved, any of these will annihilate the prospects of meeting the *anti-obscurantism clause*.

I'm unsure whether these problems are resolvable, but for the sake of granting the possibility of a legitimate Confucian meritocratic state, let's say they are. But now, however, for the sake of fair comparison, it is essential to spell out the implications for liberal democracies in resolving these problems. I contend that in resolving these problems, we will have also rescued liberal democracy from the so-called unavoidable problems. These problems will be significantly mitigated, if not completely resolved, as through education and social reforms requisite for Confucian meritocracy, we significantly increase the competency of citizens.

We can use the climate crisis – identified by Bai as the ‘perfect storm’ created by the four problems haunting democracy – as a test case. The climate crisis, and our current inaction towards it, is undeniably the manifestation of democratic failures. There is an unhealthy mistrust of (trustworthy) authorities and intellectuals which takes the form of climate change denialism. The global poor and future generations, who are currently nonvoters, are expected to bear the heavier burden. The fossil fuel industries, among others, have a disproportionate say. Citizens may not even know that action on the climate crisis is in the long run consistent with their interests.

All these concerns are legitimate, not to mention urgent. However, it is also too rash to dismiss the impact educational and structural reform can have on these issues. First, education is the key to tackling disinformation and propaganda (Stanley 2018), and with disinformation and propaganda out of the picture, citizens can more easily come to have a vigilant but respectful attitude towards respectable intellectuals and politicians. Second, social reform that enables citizens to develop a minimum sense of morality is crucial, and to incorporate into the education system certain measures to cultivate the compassion of each citizen may also have strongly desirable effects. Through education, citizens need not emerge as *homo economici*, and the collective action problems that presuppose that enough players are purely self-interested atomic individuals need not arise. Third, certain parties continue to enjoy oversized influence over climate policies so they could continue to profit (Brulle 2014). A crucial part of educational reform is to allow citizens to recognize this imbalance, which serves as the first step to properly safeguard against it. Fourth, ‘educational attainment is the single strongest predictor of climate change awareness’ (Lee et al. 2015: 1014). Moreover, ‘most environmental conflict pits a minority of short-term “extractors” against a majority of “sustainers,” or people with medium-term interests in the sustainable provision of things like clean air and water’ (Ellis 2016: 514). Well educated citizens can more easily come to see that their own mid and long-term interests can be better served by environmentally friendly policies. Therefore, it is a simple mistake to hold that democracy, with sufficient educational and structural reform, is hopeless in tackling the climate crisis.

It should be emphasized that we need not require that all or most citizens become *Junzis* to solve the problems haunting democracy. The threshold of a minimally competent citizen, after all, should be vastly lower than a Confucian elite. A reasonable threshold of a well-functioning democracy, I believe, should be roughly around citizens having a slightly better than random chance of voting correctly. We need not be overly troubled by whether the assumptions of the Condorcet Jury Theorem are strictly met (Goodin and Spiekermann 2018). This threshold may or may not be feasible. However, if Confucian meritocracy can be realized, the requisite idealization may very well first rescue liberal democracy.

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