



# Democratic equality or Confucian hierarchy?

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# Hierarchy and equality

- Hierarchy and equality *per se* are neither problematic nor praiseworthy.
- They are good or bad, right or wrong, only insofar as they are structured and operated in ways that affect people's wellbeing and virtue and express certain kinds of relationship.

# Social equality

- Social equality or social egalitarianism:  
Various goods are to be distributed in order to secure a society in which people *are related as equals*.
- Elizabeth Anderson, David Miller, Samuel Scheffler, and others

# Social equality

- Social egalitarians have aimed their critiques at many different types of social hierarchy.
- Elizabeth Anderson

# Social hierarchies

- Hierarchies of *domination or command*
  - “those occupying inferior positions are subject to the **arbitrary, unaccountable** authority of social superiors and thereby made powerless.”
  - E.g. slavery, monarchy, patriarchal marriage, and capitalist wage relations

# Social hierarchies

- Hierarchies of *esteem*,
  - “those occupying inferior positions are **stigmatized**,”
  - being treated as “objects of dishonor, contempt, disgust, fear, or hatred”

# Social hierarchies

- Hierarchies of *standing*
  - give **special weight** to the interests of those occupying superior social positions in decision-making.
  - the superiors enjoy greater rights, privileges, opportunities, or benefits than their marginalized inferiors

# Social hierarchies

- Social hierarchies are unjust by definition – based on **ascriptive** group identities.
- But there is no reason why hierarchy must be so narrowly and pejoratively defined.
- A neutral definition: “ a social relationship that ranks its participants with respect to their relative possession of a valued feature.”



# Social hierarchies

- Features:
  - informal or formal group
  - durable interaction among the participants
  - ranking of participants may be implicit or explicit
  - the valued feature refers to certain competence or excellence desired by the social relationship
  - The higher-ranked have more power or status

# Social hierarchies

- An unequal distribution of esteem as such is *not* yet a hierarchy of esteem
- A benevolent esteem hierarchy:
  - those in the higher ranks are committed to the betterment of those in the lower ranks.
  - *reciprocity and mutual commitment* to excellences as common goods
- Confucian hierarchies presuppose two elements

# Confucian perfectionism

- Society and politics exist for the good life of people
- Each person has worth, because each the potential to become fully human
- Each person's life matters and each person should have opportunities to learn and pursue his or her good life.

# Society as a community of learners

- The pursuit of the good life requires intelligent learning, which is a life-long process.
- In reality, it is inevitable that some people are ahead of others in learning.
- The correct response to this fact is to *not to celebrate or condemn it, but make good use of it* for the common pursuit of the good life.
- Society is viewed as a community of learners who take part in the collective pursuit of the good life.

# Confucian hierarchies of learning

- marked by *reciprocity* and *mutual concern*
  - the more advanced care for (*ai*) the less advanced, help them learn, and show appreciation of the less advanced's talents and efforts
  - the less advanced respect and admire (*jing*) the more advanced and learn from them
  - A hierarchical relationship based on this mutual commitment can be *deeply satisfying* and conducive to each participant's good life

# Confucian hierarchies of learning

- Internal elements that prevent Confucian hierarchies from degeneration
- (1) Virtue – the virtuous will not seek to oppress or humiliate others
- (2) Learning is active, dynamic, both way, emphasis on enlightenment ; changing, non-compounded hierarchies

# Confucian difference principle

- (3) Upward Inequalities:
- Inequalities of status and power integral to these hierarchies are acceptable to the extent that they are
  - (1) embedded in relationships of reciprocity, mutual concern, and virtue
  - (2) conducive to the less advanced's learning and the continuous developments of human excellences and virtues.

# Confucian difference principle

- Rawls: economic equality is the normative default and inequality is acceptable to the extent that it benefits the worst off.
- Confucianism, when it comes to learning, equality is not the default and inequality is not to bring about equality.
- A Confucian mentor doesn't simply want his mentee to grow and become his equal, but wants his mentee to *surpass* him.



# Confucian difference principle

- *stagnant equality and inequality* in learning are both bad
- *upward inequality* (i.e. progress that upsets initial equality) is good
- That the student surpasses his teacher is not only good for the student but also deeply satisfying to the teacher.

# Confucian conception of learning

- In reality, not all of the more advanced in a hierarchy are virtuous, there should be mechanisms to protect the less advanced.
- Formal hierarchy with checks and balances
  - Exit rights
  - Complaints rights
  - External checks
  - Example: graduate students – supervisors relationships

# Confucian difference principle

- These measures need not be motivated by *egalitarian impulses*
  - not aim to provide equal powers, equal status, or equal voices to the less advanced.

# Democratic equality

- Social egalitarians: Confucian hierarchies of learning confined to civil society may be okay.
- But would surely object if you extend them to the sphere of *politics*
  - democratic equality is the only acceptable relationship in that sphere.

## Democratic equality: the right

- “Democratic equality denotes a kind of standing in civil society to make claims on others”
- “Each adult actively recognizes everyone’s *equal authority* to make claims concerning the rules under which all shall live and cooperate”
- Claims as power
  - Elizabeth Anderson

# Confucian political authority

- Political power or rights as attached to this authority are justified by two conditions:
  - Service condition
  - Expressive condition

# Confucian political authority

- A corollary of the service condition:
  - all political rights and offices must meet the service condition.
- No citizen is entitled to any “self-originating” right to make claims as power or a say in collective decision-making.
- For Confucians, political right is a first and foremost a responsibility, not a privilege.

- To see the special nature of political rights, compare them with personal rights of a non-political kind (e.g. right not to be tortured)
  - A *personal* right projects the right-holder's fundamental interests against harm from others
  - A *political* right gives the right-holder the power to direct the lives of others.
- Personal rights: protective
- Political rights: directive



# Democratic equality – the right

- Confucianism rejects democratic equality as a principle of *moral rightness*
- A democratic regime under favorable conditions can be justified by the two conditions
- The right to vote as part of this overall political arrangement
- Is a non-democratic, hierarchical political system necessarily wrong or unacceptable?

# An ideal case of monarchy

- Competent and fully virtuous and trustworthy monarch
- Freedom of expression + conflicts of interest
- People trust that the monarch will listen, consult, and deliberate carefully and do his best to make impartial and fair judgments for everyone
- The monarch welcomes feedback from his people, and is committed to continuously improving his rule

# Democratic equality: the good

- The good, according to Anderson, can be seen in two ways
- 1. Democratic equality avoids the evils in undemocratic societies.
  - the cruelty, abuse of others, humiliation
  - These evils are avoided by effective standing as an equal

# Democratic equality: the good

- 2. Democratic equality promotes people's sympathy and solidarity, 'feeling of unity with others'
  - Which is possible only in a society of equals
- Not true: possible in military unit, a work team within a business firm, a sport team, a clan, a student association's executive committee
  - Common participation

# Democratic equality: the good

- Social egalitarians typically respond by pointing out the defects and vices of unhealthy hierarchical relationships in reality.
- But if they are fair, they should also acknowledge the defects and vices of unhealthy equal relationships in reality.

# Democratic equality: the good

- There is a tendency in social egalitarianism to play down the costs or bad consequences of political equality
- Participation does not necessarily breed civility and virtues but rather presupposes them.

# Conclusion

- Political relationships, whether equal or hierarchical, need virtues to function well.
- When there is no virtue, democratic equality or Confucian hierarchy will lose their attraction, degenerate into highly undesirable relationships, and produce bad outcomes.

# Conclusion

- Confucianism and republicanism understand this point well.
- Confucianism emphasizes the need for *leaders* to have virtue:
  - without virtue, leaders will fail to govern and people will not obey.
- *The Analects*, 13.6



# Conclusion

- Republicanism stresses the need for *citizens* to have virtue:
  - if people have no virtue, no republican or any other form government can render us secure.
    - James Madison
- We must combine the insights of C and R.

# Conclusion

- Social equality or hierarchy is not good or bad, right or wrong, in itself.
- It is good and right to the extent that it expresses a satisfying relationship of mutual commitment and trust, and it promotes the wellbeing of the participants.
- If there is no virtue in the participants, to suppose that any *equality* or *hierarchy* will secure the right or supply the good is a chimerical idea.