Sages and Self-Restriction: A Response to Joseph Chan

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Many thanks to Joseph Chan for his insightful review, and to the editors for allowing me this brief response. By the time this exchange appears in print, Joseph’s important book *Confucian Perfectionism* will have been published, and readers will be able to see all the more clearly the many ways in which Joseph’s and my visions of broadly democratic Confucian political philosophy overlap and, I think, reinforce one another. Still, there are places where we see things differently, and so dialogue like the present exchange—and the prior workshop on my book that Joseph generously arranged at his university in April, 2013—are crucial to furthering the constructive development of progressive versions of Confucianism.

I am pleased that Joseph has focused on the self-restriction idea, which is indeed central to my book. By pointing out the structurally similar arguments made by rule utilitarians and by J. S. Mill, Joseph helps to demystify the idea of self-restriction. Even if the strongest proponents of Mou Zongsan’s full metaphysical theory might blanch at the ways in which we are applying this thinned-down version of self-restriction to various contexts, I believe it is a healthy kind of cross-cultural philosophical stimulation. In a forthcoming article, in fact, I argue that the virtue-politics of Aristotle and Hume could each be strengthened by embracing forms of self-restriction.¹

At its core, Joseph’s critique is that the self-restriction-based arguments that I use to defend “progressive Confucianism” are insecure foundations for democracy. As he argues in
detail in his new book, he believes that we find a satisfactory basis for Confucian democracy in two different forms of justification—an instrumental argument in terms of sanctions and an expressive argument in terms of trust. My goal here is to clarify the relation between self-restriction, sages, and politics; to argue on this basis that self-restriction may be a more powerful argument than Joseph has described; and to suggest that Confucians may in fact need something with the ambition of my self-restriction argument if we are to justify a political arrangement as adequate to the central goals of Confucianism.

Joseph says that the distinctive ambition of my book rests in part on my “taking seriously the existence of sages.” Several of his arguments that aim to show that the weaknesses or limited applicability of self-restriction-based arguments emerge from my commitment to sages. For example, what he calls the “sagehood argument” maintains that political democracy is necessary because it enables the full achievement of sagehood—which relies on the actual exercise of considerable political power—for anyone. To this, Joseph responds that sagehood is extremely rare at best, and high office is not equally possible for all. Confucians would be better with a “ren argument,” according to which all we must aim at is the less demanding, personal ideal of ren (humaneness). A second place in which my (putative) reliance on actual sages figures in Joseph’s arguments comes when he asks us to consider what political arrangement would make sense in a society with “just one or a few sages who are recognized and endorsed by a majority of subjects with limited moral capacity.” Based on my premises, he says, dictatorship should actually be preferred to democracy under these circumstances. For reasons like this, my self-restriction arguments are weak, and we should look elsewhere for better justifications of democracy.
Joseph is correct that I repeatedly insist that we Confucians should hold that the achievement of sagehood is, in principle, possible. However, both in the book under review and in *Sagehood*, I emphasize that Confucians view virtue as a continuum. The practical human task is to become more like a sage, not to actually become a sage. In this, Mou Zongsan agrees with me. As I say on p. 49 of *Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy*:

Despite the fact that sagehood is accessible in principle, there are few if any actual sages, and certainly none that can be confidently identified at any particular point in time. As Mou Zongsan puts it, achieving sagehood is an “endless process.”

This orientation toward sagehood informs the whole book, from my endorsement of Zhang Shizhao’s statement that “the absolute authority of virtue, no one but sages can attain, . . . [but] there never has been this kind of sage” (p. 63), to my claim that deference is valuable in part because it “expresses a recognition of one’s finite and fallible nature” (p. 130). So the idea that someone might be appropriately “recognized and endorsed” as a sage is not something that I can accept. Plenty of emperors claimed to be sages, but their ability to do so with comparative impunity rests precisely on the problematic political institutions that self-restriction critiques.

So my argument is not that we must take actual sages into account, but rather that Confucian political philosophy must be based around the promotion of ethical progress, up to and including the limit case of the sage. Among other things, this means that individuals must be enabled to participate in their societies, because such “outer” practice of virtues is essential to their nature of virtues. Virtues are not merely “inner,” nor is humaneness (*ren*) merely a personal ideal. In the limit case of the full attainment of *ren*, Confucius says, “the world will turn to *ren* along with him” (*Analects* 12:1). Now I find Joseph’s arguments that social participation is often more accessible and more valuable than political participation to be convincing. However, only
with a suitable system of laws and rights, suitably observed and enforced, will all these forms of participation be possible. In addition, as I argue in the book, to allow some levels of participation but to close off top political posts is to deny citizens opportunities that may be key to full moral maturity (see p. 115). I suspect it may also be possible borrow some of the apparatus from Joseph’s new book and argue that denying citizens access to top leadership roles is also expressively bad.

In short, once we recognize the dependency of multiple kinds of participation on laws and rights, and acknowledge the importance of engaging in multi-faceted participation in order to develop toward sagehood, the necessity of self-restriction for moral progress becomes clearer. I am happy to agree with Joseph that there are other Confucian, or Confucian-compatible, justifications that support constitutional democracy; I have learned much from his recent book on this score. I do worry, though, that the justifications he provides may undergird a form of perfectionism that is weaker than Confucians should desire. Joseph tends to put the goals of Confucian politics in terms of the promotion of the people’s well-being or good life. These categories are potentially quite open-ended, so perhaps they can include the moral development that I find to be so central to Confucianism. But this is not terribly clear, and I think Joseph would agree that his instrumental and expressive justifications for democracy are, at the very least, less directly connected to individual progress toward sagehood than is the self-restriction argument. So perhaps there is a role for all three kinds of arguments, as we seek to develop contemporary Confucianism in fruitful ways.

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