

In Confucian society, a strict social hierarchy is followed in which only the most morally exemplar individuals are given power. Everyone in the tiers below these individuals are to defer to them. Deference is “respect and esteem due a superior or an elder.” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary) Deference is an extremely important concept to Confucians. You can see examples of deference and hierarchy in all relationships of Confucian life. For example, a son must defer to his father the same way a citizen must defer to his ruler. Confucius’ followers used this idea of hierarchy and deference to justify political inequality. An advocate of democracy might argue that deference leaves room for misinterpretation of what the common people want if they are discouraged to speak up about it. Mencius or Xunzi might critique modern day democratic societies by arguing that equality and lack of deference lead to disorder. Even though Confucian political thought and democracy are vastly different, there are still valuable lessons from Confucianism that democracy can benefit from.

Confucius’ followers justified political power and political inequality. To become a moral person, Confucians believed that you must follow the way. They believed that there were only a few people that were moral exemplars, and those few people should be the rulers of society. Everyone else should defer to these rulers. Mencius and Xunzi, two followers of Confucius, both agreed on this. However, they disagreed on how deference was justified. Mencius believed that “No man is devoid of a heart sensitive to the suffering of others. Such a sensitive heart was possessed by the Former Kings and this manifested itself in compassionate government. With such a sensitive heart behind a compassionate government, it was easy to rule the empire as rolling it on your palm.” (Lau, 1970, p. 38) This means that Mencius believed that all humans in their right mind had a natural ‘moral floor’ in which they are able to use characteristics, such as empathy, to make decisions about how to be a moral person. This innate ‘moral floor’ also came

with a “natural inclination to Círàng 辭讓, ‘defer and yield.’” (Stalnaker, 2013, p. 5) Xunzi did not agree that deference was innate. Xunzi believed that “Those things that are not immediate responses to simulation, that must await being worked at before they are so, they are said to be produced from deliberate effort.” (Hutton, 2014, p. 38) In other words, deference is something that must be worked on. It takes deliberate effort to defer and it will make society orderly.

Democracy is a system of government by the whole population or all eligible members of a state, typically through elected representatives. (Merriam-Webster Dictionary) In Confucianism, there is a hierarchy in which each tier should be of a higher moral standard than the previous one. Only the ones of the highest moral standards were given power to make decisions, and everyone else should defer to these moral exemplars. In a democratic society, the egalitarian attitude opens the door for criticism to even the individuals in the highest positions of power. Democratic societies embrace this freedom of speech and encourage it. They believe that having an open mind to criticism makes them grow and improve in order to become a better government. An advocate of democracy would say that deference as a social norm leaves no room for this kind of criticism. Confucians believe that those who are on the lower tiers of society should defer to the higher tiers of society, since they are of a higher moral status and must know better. This can hurt society in two ways: those in power do not know what the lower tiers want since they are discouraged to speak up and a person in a position of power can become corrupt. Speaking to the first point, the lower tiers of society are discouraged from speaking up to the higher tiers. The higher tiers are supposed to take care of the lower tiers. They cannot do this properly if the lower tiers do not express what they want and how to take care of them. Since people in positions of power in a Confucian society were rarely people who worked their way up from the bottom tiers, how were they supposed to know what life is like for the lower tiers to

effectively care for them? To the second point, sometimes people in power go corrupt. No human is perfect, so it would be reasonable to assume that someone in power will one day go corrupt. In Confucianism, it is encouraged to overthrow a ruler once they are no longer taking good care of the people. However, the leader of this rebellion shouldn't be a commoner, rather a noble who has worked under the ruler being overthrown. However, if you grow up in a society that preaches deference, you will naturally defer to rulers that do not deserve your deference. This makes it harder to rebel in the face of a poor leader. An advocate of democracy might argue that constant criticism from the people promotes the flow of ideas between everyone regardless of social status, which allows for all needs to be voiced. In democratic societies, there are often systems to constantly check that the ruler is not given too much power and that he or she is effectively taking care of the people.

Mencius and Xunzi might critique the institutions or political culture of the democratic societies of our time. In Confucian society, the goal of the Way is to make the world a better place. Wealth, life, and social order are intrinsic goods that will come about if everyone were to follow the Way. The government is responsible for social order. As members of society, we know how hard it can be to have social order. Mencius and Xunzi might argue that Confucian society has more social order than democratic society due to deference. In a democratic society, the encouragement of speaking up for what you believe in and criticizing people in power can sometimes lead to chaos. Even a simple disagreement on a law may lead to a violent protest. However, in a society with deference as a social norm, these violent protests are much less likely to happen. In addition, the hierarchy of a Confucian society tells you exactly how to act and who to listen to. It leaves little room for interpretation, but also little room for confusion. No matter what tier of society you are in, you know exactly who you are, who you should listen to, and who

you are obligated to take care of. This creates a much more organized society than one where everyone is equal. When everyone is equal, you are less likely to understand who you are obligated to take care of or who you should listen to. Mencius or Xunzi might also say that “the needs of everyone cannot be fulfilled without this social hierarchy.” (Stalnaker, 2013)

When Confucian philosophers criticize democracy, they often teach us valuable lessons to face problems that we deal with today. Some of these lessons include how to play the social game and specialization of labor in government.

Confucian political thought “constrains the behavior of rulers and governmental agents.” (Stalnaker, 2013) Ritual and the social hierarchy provide criteria that political actors must follow, similar to that of a constitution. Ritual also offers a means for people to rise to power. If people follow ritual and show that they are moral, they can become a moral exemplar and be given a position of power. This is similar to a concept called the social game. The social game is a concept where you disagree with how things are currently being run. Rather than completely rebel against those in charge, you play by their rules to gain their respect. Once you have their respect and are in a position of power, you can then change how things are run to how you see fit and even change the rules of the game itself. This is an extremely valuable lesson from Confucian philosophy. The social game requires a delicate balance of deference and rebelliousness. The deference in the social game is required to play by the party in power’s rules. You have to play by the rules of the party in power and refrain from making your own rules until you are in power. The rebelliousness is needed to spark the idea that change is needed and motivates the party choosing to play to want to continue playing the social game. In Confucian political thought, rebellions are encouraged if the person in power is not taking proper care of the people. However, the leader of this rebellion should be a noble who has worked under the ruler,

not a commoner. This can be seen as an example of the social game. The noble who is leading the rebellion has earned his right to stay in the position that he is currently in. He has done this by gaining respect from his superiors and inferiors by following ritual and deferring to his superiors when necessary. Without this level of deference, those above him would not let him rise to enough power to lead the rebellion.

Another valuable lesson Confucian philosophy teaches us is specialization of labor in government. Confucians believe that “people who are morally excellent are more valuable than those who are only basically moral, and should be treated as such.” (Stalnaker, 2013) These morally excellent people should be the ones in power. This concept can be connected to specialization of labor. Specialization of labor is the idea that different people are good at different things. They should specialize in the skills they are good at in order to maximize productivity in an economy. For example, if I am really good at baking, I will become a baker and sell bread to people. If I wanted to make a sandwich, I can use the money made from selling bread to buy meat from the butcher and cheese from a farmer instead of slaughtering a pig and milking a cow myself. Using specialization of labor, the economy is more productive and people get what they want for cheaper prices and less work. To understand how specialization of labor relates to government, you must view being moral as a skill. All humans are considered to have a basic moral understanding, or ‘moral floor’ which is the most basic level of the skill. However, just because someone has a ‘moral floor’ doesn't mean they are fit for government. Many people know how to bake a loaf of bread, but this does not mean that they should become a baker. In Confucian society, the people who should be given positions of power are those who have reached an expert level of morality by following the Way. If I am better at baking than being moral, I should become a baker rather than a government official. However, if I possessed high

moral standards, it would be a waste if I were to not share that skill with society and instead bake bread all day. Therefore, those who possess high moral standards should be given power and responsibility since it would be beneficial to society.

My personal opinion lies somewhere in between Confucianism and democracy. I don't believe that common people should have much of a say in government. However, I do believe that an effective morally exemplifying ruler would encourage common people to speak up for what they need and want and discourage complete deference. Common people should not have much of a say in government. I believe this because I also believe that people don't know what is good for them or for other people that they are trying to help. For example, most people in the world would like to help people in poverty. Many people who want to help those in poverty think that increasing the minimum wage is a good thing since those working minimum wage jobs are often the ones in poverty. However, what these people don't know is that an increase in minimum wage will lead to people who work minimum wage jobs to be fired due to demand for labor going down. Now, some people in poverty will be making \$0 per hour whereas they were making \$13 before. The increase in minimum wage ends up hurting the very same people it was intended to help. Most people are not aware of the consequences of reforms like this. Therefore, they should not have a say in it. Most people don't have the time, energy, or resources to properly educate themselves on what they are voting for and often make detrimental decisions. In a society where a moral exemplar is the ruler, I would feel much more comfortable giving political power to them instead of letting common people make the decisions. While I don't think common people should have a say in reforms and laws, I do believe that the ruler should encourage the common people to speak up about what they want. A true morally exemplar leader would understand that he or she must know the needs and wants of the people they are ruling

over. They would understand that their job as the leader is to make sure that the people feel comfortable giving power to them and if the people completely defer to the ruler that it leaves room for misinterpretation between what the people want and what the ruler implements.

Epistocracy is a political system in which only citizens that are properly informed about politics have the right to vote. In an interview with Vox, Jason Brennan, author of *Against Democracy*, said “A right to participate in politics seems fundamentally different because it involves imposing your will upon other people. So I’m not sure that any of us should have that kind of right, at least not without any responsibilities.” (Illing, 2018) This is talking about how the freedoms that we use every day, such as choosing what outfit to wear or what food to eat, are ways of exerting power over ourselves. However, when we vote we are exerting power over others. When you can affect someone’s life by voting, you should have to make an informed decision about it. I believe that a political system like this is a more efficient alternative to democracy.

# **Bibliography**

(n.d.). *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. Merriam-Webster.com/Dictionary.

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/deference>

Lau, D.C. (1970). *Mencius* (p. 38). Penguin Books.

Stalnaker, A. (2013). Confucianism, Democracy, and the Virtue of Deference. *Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht*, 4, 8, 9.

Hutton, E. L. (2014). *Xunzi: The Complete Text* (p. 251). Princeton University Press.

Merriam-Webster Dictionary (n.d.). *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*.

Merriam-Webster.com/Dictionary. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/democracy>

Illing, S. (2018, November 9). *Epistocracy: A political theorist's case for letting only the informed vote*. Vox.

<https://www.vox.com/2018/7/23/17581394/against-democracy-book-epistocracy-jason-brennan>