INTRODUCTION

Interplay between the Political Ideal and Reality

The Task

This book examines Confucian political thought from a perspective that explores the intricate interplay between political ideal and reality. This perspective is not unique to the study of Confucianism but common to much of the political theorizing carried out under the name of “political philosophy.” Political philosophy has a dual character: viewed as a philosophical field of study, it searches for an ideal social and political order that expresses the best aspects of humanity and our most deeply held values;1 viewed as a political field of study, it aims to illuminate our understanding of the real world and give principled guidance as to how we should act here and now. Any form of political theorizing that lacks an ideal is like a ship embarking on a voyage without destination, and political theorizing that is insensitive to the constraints of reality is like a ship on rough seas without competent navigation.

A political philosophy of comprehensive scope takes seriously this dual character, despite the almost irreconcilable demands of ideal and reality, and the fact that adapting an ideal vision to reality also necessitates lowering the sights and revising the content. To address both demands, a political philosophy needs to develop two tracks of theorizing—one track that explains or justifies an ideal conception of social and political order, bracketing off practical questions about feasibility and compliance, and another that develops a nonideal conception that addresses these practical questions. The challenge of such two-track theorizing is twofold: to demonstrate the attractiveness of the ideal even though it is unlikely to work in the real world, and to show that a feasible nonideal conception of order still tallies with the ideal conception, in the sense that people who live under the nonideal order are nonetheless aware of the ideal and regard it as an aspiration.

1 Admittedly this is a controversial statement. Political realists deny that it is the business of political theorizing to search for an ideal political order or ideal political morality. For a recent account of realism in political theory, see William A. Galston, “Realism in Political Theory,” European Journal of Political Theory 9, no. 4 (2010): 385–411. For a defense of the function of ideals, see Nicholas Rescher, Ethical Idealism: An Inquiry into the Nature and Function of Ideals (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), esp. chap. 6; and Adam Swift, “The Value of Philosophy in Nonideal Circumstances,” Social Theory and Practice 34, no. 3 (2008): 363–87.
Since its inception, Confucianism has always faced this challenge. Historically the strength of Confucianism lies in the long-lasting appeal of its ideal conception of ethical, social, and political order. I shall describe this ideal conception in detail later; for the purpose of illustrating the challenge, let me first give a loose description. It consists of some ideal ends and ideal means, although the two are tightly linked, as we shall see. The ideal ends include the flourishing of human virtues, of social relationships based on mutual trust and care, and of public-spiritedness in society, all of which form part of a grand ideal of social harmony. The ideal means to attain those ends include: governance by people who are virtuous and competent; moral edification by example and persuasion; rites as a method of socialization and governance; and benevolent rule to ensure material sufficiency for all people. A few words are needed to explain the notion of rites, as it plays an important role in the Confucian conception of society. The Chinese word for rites is li, a rich and elastic concept frequently used in Confucian texts. In its most basic meaning, li refers to rites or rituals (these two terms are used interchangeably in this book) that guide behavior in religious ceremony, the court, family, and many other social relationships and contexts. However, Confucian masters believe that rites are not just a form of social etiquette but also perform important social functions—they help moral cultivation by regulating unhealthy desires and refining feelings and attitudes (li jiao, ritual education); they express the basic principles of human relationships and roles (li yi, ritual principles) and help regulate society according to these principles (li zhi, ritual system); these functions in turn help achieve a harmonious, ethical society, which is the goal of Confucian governance (li zhi, ritual rule) that cannot be achieved by the use of penal law.  

No doubt the dominance of the Confucian ideal in traditional China owes much to the fact that many rulers and political elites used it to justify their power to rule, although in reality they often adopted the strategies of an opposing thought—Legalism—to cope with problems in the real world. Despite this, the Confucian conception of social order captured many Chinese people’s moral imagination and evoked their support for governance for more than two thousand years.

Today this ideal conception is subject to severe criticisms: some people argue that it fails to include important values such as individual rights and personal autonomy; many more regard the ends as utopian, the means as impractical, and the overall ideal—the fusion of the ethical and the political—as irrelevant to the real world at best or oppressive at worst. In reality, they argue, people are selfish, those in power are often corrupt or incompetent, and human behavior cannot be restrained by rites alone. The solution these critics offer is a fundamental separation of the ethical and the political, a replacement of the old ideal with liberal democracy as both a normative ideal and a set of feasible institutions.

Although the liberal democratic solution is relatively new in the history of Chinese political thought, the problem of how to address the ideal and the actual is not. As early as the third century BCE, the Legalists bitterly attacked Confucianism. Han Feizi (ca. 280–233 BCE), for example, argues that “people are submissive to power and few of them can be influenced by the doctrines of righteousness [yi]” because “few people value humanity [ren] and it is difficult to practice righteousness.” He ridicules Confucius (551–479 BCE) as someone who “cultivated his own character and elucidated his doctrines and traveled extensively within the Four Seas” and yet attracted only seventy people as his devoted pupils, while Duke Ai of Lu, whose moral character was obviously inferior to Confucius’s, was easily able to subdue people with his power as sovereign of the state—even Confucius had to subordinate himself to Duke Ai.

Similarly, in the famous Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) Salt and Iron Debate (Yan tie lun) in 81 BCE, government officials harshly criticized Confucian scholars for stubbornly holding on to ancient teachings that were perceived to be inadequate for the real business of the time.

All these criticisms, both ancient and modern, point toward a similar proposal, namely, to abandon the high-sounding Confucian ideal and replace it with goals that are workable and effective in the nonideal world. Ironically, the Confucian masters were themselves keenly aware of the fact that their ideal—the Way of politics and humanity—was unlikely to be realized in their times. In The Doctrine of the Mean (Zhong yong), Confucius is reported to have said that the Way (Dao) was not pursued. In The Analects, his student Zilu comments that “as for putting the Way into practice, the gentleman knows all along that it is hopeless” (18.7). Indeed Confucius is known to be the person “who keeps working toward a goal the realization of which he knows to be hopeless” (14.38).

5 Chap. 10, “Cifu” 刺復.
6 The Doctrine of the Mean 中庸 [Zhong yong], chaps. 4–5.
7 From D. C. Lau, trans., Confucius: The Analects, rev. bilingual ed. (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1992), bk. 18, sec. 7 (hereafter 18.7). Unless otherwise stated, all translations of The Analects 论语 are adapted from Lau’s. The system of notation of The Analects also follows Lau’s.
The masters know why their ideal is hopeless—its realization requires that sages or gentlemen be in power, but these people are rare in the real world. Confucius says he has "no hopes of meeting a sage" or "a good man" (7.26). Mencius (fourth century BCE) says a Sage King appears only once every five hundred years (Mencius 2B.13), and Xunzi (third century BCE) laments that "the rulers of men have never awakened to [the Way] in the last thousand years" (Xunzi 11.7d). Why, then, did the Confucian masters continue to hold fast to their ideal even though they were deeply pessimistic about its chance of success? What use is the ideal if it can never come into existence? Should the ethical norms of the ideal be followed even in unfavorable conditions, or should a different set of norms guide people's behavior? And how should the latter set of norms relate to those in the ideal conception? I shall show that these questions were as pertinent to the early masters as they are to anyone interested in the relevance of Confucianism in today's world, and that therefore, in this regard, there is continuity between traditional and contemporary Confucian political philosophy. To begin with, I will present a historical analysis of how early Confucians answered these questions. However, the main interest of this book is contemporary—namely, to construct a two-track approach to contemporary Confucianism and investigate whether a proper interplay between the Confucian ideal and the reality of modernity can be maintained. I will pursue this task by placing the interplay between the ideal and reality in the context of three sets of issues—political authority and democracy, human rights and civil liberties, and social justice and welfare.

This task does not involve developing any ideal theory, which, as John Rawls defines it, "assumes strict compliance and works out the principles that characterize a well-ordered society under favorable circumstances." The task of an ideal theory, for Rawls, is to choose and justify principles of justice that define a perfectly just society, and to determine their lexical ordering if they conflict,

8 From D. C. Lau, trans., *Mencius*, rev. bilingual ed. (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2003), bk. 2B, sec. 13 (hereafter 2B.13). Unless otherwise stated, all translations of *Mencius* are adapted from Lau's. The system of notation of *Mencius* also follows Lau's.


assuming that these principles “will be strictly complied with and followed by everyone.”11 In my view, the classical Confucian ideal, being a loose and abstract conception of society, does not admit the same kind of theorizing of principles as Rawls does for his ideal theory of justice. My interest is not to work out the details of the Confucian ideal, but to take it as a “regulative ideal” and develop a Confucian nonideal political theory that retains the spirit of that ideal. Here I use “regulative ideal” in the Kantian sense, namely that it sets the standard for judging existing practices and serves as an aspiration for our endeavors, even when the standard or aspiration is not achievable in its full sense.12 Kant speaks of the sage of the Stoics as an ideal that provides us “no other standard for our actions than the conduct of this divine human being, with which we can compare ourselves, judging ourselves and thereby improving ourselves, even though we can never reach the standard.”13 In the words of a contemporary commentator, a regulative ideal “is not so much a condition to be achieved . . . but rather a personal or institutional value to be always taken seriously in any practical deliberations.”14 My task, then, is to consider whether it is possible to connect practices in nonideal circumstances to the Confucian regulative ideal.

Two Ideals: The Grand Union and the Small Tranquility

In the early stages of its development, Confucian thought has already propounded different levels of ideal in response to the challenges of reality. For example, The Book of Rites (Liji) talks about two levels of ideal, and the Gongyang Commentary of The Annals of Spring and Autumn (Gongyang zhuan) talks about three. The best place to examine these ideals is the “Li yun” chapter in The Book of Rites. The chapter reports a dialogue between Confucius and his student Ziyou, in which Confucius first gives a description of the Golden Age—the Grand Union (da tong), an ideal society said to have existed in the

11 A Theory of Justice, 351.
12 I thank Jane Mansbridge for pointing me to this Kantian concept of a “regulative ideal.” For a definition and references to Kant and the contemporary literature on this notion, see Jane Mansbridge et al., “The Place of Self-interest and the Role of Power in Deliberative Democracy,” Journal of Political Philosophy 18, no. 1 (2010): 65. Mansbridge et al. define “a ‘regulative’ ideal, unachievable in its full state, as an ideal to which, all else equal, a practice should be judged as approaching more or less closely.”
14 Simmons, “Ideal and Nonideal Theory,” 27. Here Simmons describes one possible function of ideals, which he draws from Joel Feinberg, who has argued that many apparent claims of right (or justice) are in fact only applications of ‘right names’ to what are better understood as ‘ideal directives,’ addressed to those in appropriate positions to do their best for a particular kind of human value . . . ‘As such, the ideal at issue (in this version of ‘ideal theory’) has a more aspirational status, functioning in certain ways like a Kantian ‘regulative ideal.’”
distant past—and then describes a “lesser” ideal, the Small Tranquility (xiaokang) in the more recent past. The Confucian authenticity of this famous chapter has been disputed in the history of Chinese thought, for it contains ideas from not only Confucianism but also the Daoist yin-yang school that only became popular in the late Warring States (Zhanguo) period (475–221 BCE). However, the general consensus today is that, whether or not the dialogue ever took place, the paragraphs describing the Grand Union and Small Tranquility are basically no different from the early Confucian masters’ understanding of ideal politics and society, and so it would not be wrong to regard the ideal of the Grand Union and Small Tranquility as part of Confucian thought. The description of the ideal of the Grand Union is worth quoting in full:

Zhongni [Confucius] was once present as one of the guests at the Ji Sacrifice; when it was over, he went out and paced back and forth on the terrace over the Gate of Proclamations, looking sad and sighing. What made him sigh was the state of Lu. Yan Yan was by his side and asked him, “Master, why are you sighing?” Confucius replied, “I have never seen the practice of the Grand Dao and the eminent men of the Three Dynasties, but I aspire to follow them. When the Grand Dao was pursued, a public and common spirit ruled all under the sky [tian xia wei gong]; they chose men of talent, virtue, and ability for public service; they valued mutual trust and cultivated harmony. They did not treat only their own parents as parents, nor treat only their own sons as sons. Provision was secured for the aged till their death, employment for the able-bodied, and the means of growing up for the young. People showed kindness and compassion to widows, orphans, childless men, and those who were disabled by disease, so that they were all sufficiently provided for. Men had work and women had homes. Possessions were not wastefully discarded, nor were they greedily hoarded. People enjoyed laboring for others. In this way selfish schemings were discouraged and did not arise. Robbers, thieves, and rebellious traitors were unknown, and doors remained open and unlocked. Such was the Grand Union.”


A brief comparison shows the distinctiveness of the Confucian ideal described above. For example, Marx’s ideal society postulates a high degree of technological advancement and material abundance that makes possible the free development of individuality. Plato’s ideal postulates a philosopher-king who knows the truth and puts it into practice by building a just and efficient society based on a strict division of labor. The Confucian ideal, in contrast, is not based on superior technology, abundant material resources, or expert knowledge but postulates an ethic of public-spiritedness and mutual care that reigns throughout society: people conduct affairs in sincerity and faithfulness with the aim of cultivating harmony; the virtuous and competent are chosen to work for the common good; people look after not only their family members but also others outside their family; different needs are satisfied at different stages of life; the least advantaged receive care and support from society; adults labor for others as well as for themselves; goods are not kept merely for personal use; and wastage is frowned upon. In an ideal society there is no mention of the existence of laws or rites, and, even if they exist, they need not be enforced. In short, the Confucian ideal society is primarily ethical in nature. It does not assume the best possible conditions of human life and circumstances, nor does it assume favorable natural conditions or human control of nature. The ideal consists of nothing but a thriving ethical spirit and a set of flourishing social and political relationships that spring from this spirit.

The ideal of the Grand Union echoes many of the thoughts of the early Confucian masters, and for this reason it can be properly regarded as a Confucian ideal. Putting the virtuous and competent in office is an important principle of governance repeatedly mentioned in Mencius and Xunzi. Similarly, trustworthiness and harmony are common themes in The Analects, Mencius, and Xunzi. The idea of mutual care is also shared. Confucius says he longs to “bring peace to the old, to have trust in my friends, and to cherish the young” (Analects 5.26). In Xunzi’s ideal society, “the young grow to maturity, and the old are cared for” (Xunzi 10.6). And in a similar manner to the “Li yun” chapter, Mencius says, “Treat the aged of your own family in a manner befitting their venerable age and extend this treatment to the aged of other families; treat your own young in a manner befitting their tender age and extend this to the young of other families” (Mencius 1A.7). Lastly, both Mencius and Xunzi share the Grand Union ideal that the least advantaged people—those who have few to turn to for help—should be taken care of by society (Mencius 1B.5; Xunzi 9.1, 9.4)

In the next chapter I will discuss in greater detail the features of the perfect ideal, especially those related to politics, but first let us consider a lesser ideal, the Small Tranquility, and see how the two are related.

17 See, for example, Mencius 2A.5; Xunzi 9.15.
18 See, for example, Analects 17.6; Mencius 1A.5; Xunzi 11.6.
19 See, for example, Analects 1.12; Mencius 2A.1; Xunzi 4.12.
Now that the Grand Dao has fallen into disuse and obscurity, hereditary families rule over the whole land. People love only their own parents as parents, and cherish only their own sons as sons. Goods and labor serve self-interests. Noblemen believe in their right to hereditary power. They build city walls, trenches and moats for security. Rules of propriety and righteousness are used to enforce the relationship between ruler and minister; to ensure affection between father and son, harmony between brothers, and concord between husband and wife; to establish institutions and measurements; to organize farms and hamlets; to honor the brave and the wise; and to bring merit to oneself. Selfish schemes and enterprises multiply, and armed conflicts arise. And so it was that Emperor Yu, King Tang, King Wen, King Wu, King Cheng, and the Duke of Zhou obtained their distinction. Each of these six great men attended to the rules of propriety to manifest their righteousness and demonstrate their good faith. They defined what constituted excess, exemplified benevolence, and promoted the courtesy of concession, thus promoting good behavior by example. Rulers who did not act accordingly were driven out and condemned. Such was the Small Tranquility. ("Li yun," Book of Rites, italics added)\textsuperscript{20}

During times of the Small Tranquility, the spirit of impartiality and mutual care weakened. People were more concerned about the well-being of their own family members than the well-being of others. Political authority was passed on according to the principle of inheritance rather than the principle of abdication to the most virtuous and competent. As the desire to advance one’s own interests came to the forefront, tactical behavior and armed conflicts began to occur. In response to these nonideal conditions, people built walls and ditches to protect themselves and established rules of propriety to guide behavior and regulate basic human relationships.

Interestingly, the author of the “Li yun” chapter does not portray the Small Tranquility as a fallen state completely at odds with the past. One very important feature of the Small Tranquility is that its rules of propriety perform a dual function—they not only discourage and curb improper behavior but also express and promote the ethical values that characterize the Grand Union, such as “harmony,” “concord,” “good faith,” “benevolence,” “righteousness,” and “the courtesy of concession.” In this sense, the lesser ideal of tranquility still keeps alive the ethical spirit of the Grand Union. The major Qing dynasty (1644–1911) commentator of The Book of Rites, Sun Xidan, insightfully observes that there are important connections between the two ideals. In the Small Tranquility, he argues, although the establishment of institutions and distribution of farmland primarily serve people’s self-interests, it can enhance people’s strength and productivity to such an extent that it benefits and supports everyone; the

\textsuperscript{20} Author’s translation after consulting translations by Legge as well as Chai and Chai.
practice of benevolence and concession is conducive to the spirit of mutual
trust and harmony in the Grand Union; and even though authority and power
are hereditary, rulers act according to the rules of propriety and those who do
not are driven out, so that the resulting situation retains the Grand Union’s
spirit of choosing men of talent and virtue for public service.21

The discussion above aims not to show that the Small Tranquility as de-
scribed did actually exist in Chinese history, but that the author of the “Li yun”
chapter is of the opinion that rites can be used to tackle problems arising from
nonideal situations in a way that is compatible with the spirit of the Confucian
ideal. A fundamental aim of Confucius’s teaching in The Analects is also to help
people see the deeper ethical values of rites—values such as harmony, benevo-
lence, righteousness, and deference—which are very close to the spirit of the
Grand Union.

Of the things brought about by the rites, harmony is the most valuable.
(1.12)
What can a man who is not benevolent do with the rites? What can a man
who is not benevolent do with music? (3.3)
The gentleman has righteousness [yi] as his basic stuff and by observing
the rites puts it into practice, by being modest gives it expression, and by
being trustworthy in word [xin] brings it to completion. Such is a gen-
tleman indeed. (15.18)
For a man who is unable to govern a state by observing the rites and show-
ing deference [li rang], what good can the rites be to him? (4.13)

We have seen two ideals, namely, the Grand Union as the perfect ideal and the
Small Tranquility as the lesser ideal developed in response to unfavorable con-
ditions. But how can we best describe the relation between these two ideals?
The Small Tranquility is not a transitional stage toward the Grand Union, which
Confucius regards as a bygone. The Small Tranquility might be described as the second best and the Grand Union as the first best, but even that is not entirely
correct. Conceptually, the “second best” does not necessarily aim at the “first
best” or retain any important connection with it. (I may choose an orange if an
apple is not available, but nothing of the order of my selection suggests that the
two have anything important in common, except that they are both fruits.) The
Small Tranquility, however, does aim to keep alive the ethical spirit of the Grand
Union. In tackling problems arising from unfavorable conditions, the lesser
ideal adopts new measures and norms that still retain the ethical spirit of the
perfect ideal as its ultimate aspiration. Thus, the best description of the relation
between the Small Tranquility and the Grand Union is this: the Small Tranquil-
ity takes the Grand Union as its regulative ideal and partially achieves it.

21 Sun Xidan 孫希旦, Li ji ji ji 禮記集解 [Collected Commentaries on The Book of Rites]
(Beijing: Zhonghua, 1989), 584.
The Impasse

The “Li yun” chapter claims that the lesser ideal of the Small Tranquility was a reality in the Three Dynasties of Xia (ca. 2000–ca. 1600 BCE), Shang (ca. 1600–ca. 1100 BCE), and Western Zhou (ca. 1100–771 BCE). At the time of Confucius, however, things were much worse. The Zhou dynasty and its political setup had disintegrated, and its rituals had failed to control the behavior of both the people and the powerful feudal lords, many of whom had become corrupt and undisciplined. Even the notion of the Small Tranquility was an ideal far removed from reality. Confucius concludes that his mission to convince rulers of the necessity to implement the imperfect ideal has failed. And Mencius and Xunzi also remain pessimistic.

If this is the case, why were the early masters so reluctant to abandon their ideal? The ancient texts provide a few reasons that are also worth considering from a contemporary point of view. First, for the early masters, the fact that the rulers were not persuaded by the ideal does not imply that there are inherent problems with the ideal or that it should be dropped. Nor does it necessarily imply that the ideal is difficult to carry out. According to Mencius, the ideal is problematic only in that it fails to attract adherence from the political elite. When King Xuan of the state of Qi asks Mencius whether someone like Xuan himself can practice the Way of a true king and bring peace and protection to the people, Mencius replies that since the king cannot bear to see an ox trembling on the way to a religious sacrifice, his benevolence can also be extended to care for the people. Although Xuan still doubts that he can be a true king and practice the Way, Mencius's response has much implication for our discussion about ideal and reality: “That the people have not been tended is because you fail to practice kindness. Hence your failure to become a true king is due to a refusal to act, not to an inability to act” (Mencius 1A.7). When King Xuan then asks, “What is the difference in form between the refusal to act and the inability to act?” Mencius says,

If you say to someone, “I am unable to do it,” when the task is one of striding over the North Sea with Mount Tai under your arm, then this is a genuine case of inability to act. But if you say, “I am unable to do it,” when it is one of breaking a twig for an elder, then this is a case of refusal to act, not of inability. Hence your failure to become a true king is not the same in kind as “striding over the North Sea with Mount Tai under your arm,” but the same as “breaking a twig for an elder.” (1A.7)

Mencius here distinguishes between what is physically impossible and what is physically easy to do. If someone fails to do what is physically easy, it is only because he or she refuses to do so. Mencius is of the opinion that the blueprint for his ideal—the Way of a true king—is not difficult to implement, and that what a ruler ought to do to protect and care for his people is to distribute sufficient land to each household so that they can maintain a decent standard of
living; educate them about the five basic social relationships; consult their opinions in important matters; impose light taxes; prevent market monopoly; ensure the sustainability of common-pool resources; and share his joy with them. He maintains that as these policies had been successfully implemented by the early Sage Kings, there can be no question regarding their feasibility. If King Xuan failed to bring peace to the people, it would not be because the ideal and its policies were impossibly difficult for any ruler to carry out, but because Xuan himself was unwilling to do so. In other words, there is no reason to discard an ideal or relax what is demanded of rulers simply because some may refuse to act as good rulers. Although ways may need to be found to deal with weak, immoral, or selfish rulers, the solution should not be to abandon altogether the ideal standards of rulers.

Effective governance based on benevolence is only one aspect of the Confucian ideal. Another is the moral development of the common people, namely, that they should be encouraged to act virtuously in the spirit of harmony, righteousness, benevolence, and deference. However, the Confucian masters are not optimistic about the ability of the people to attain a high degree of moral understanding and development. For example, Confucius says, “Supreme indeed is the Mean as a moral virtue. It has long been rare among the common people” (Analects 6.29). And Mencius thinks that “the multitude can be said never to understand what they practice, to notice what they repeatedly do, or to be aware of the path they follow all their lives” (Mencius 7A.5). He also says that ordinary people “make the effort only when there is a [Sage King like] King Wen”, while “outstanding men make the effort even without a King Wen” (7A.10). Xunzi is even more pessimistic. For him the common people are weak in their moral strength and unlovely in their feelings (Xunzi 23.6A).

Despite their pessimism, the masters attribute the inability of ordinary people to achieve advanced moral development to a lack of willpower and commitment, rather than to any inherent impossibility of the ideal of moral development. According to Mencius, everyone—common people and rulers alike—has the potential to become someone like Emperor Yao or Shun if they are willing to make the necessary effort: “The trouble with a man is surely not his lack of sufficient strength, but his refusal to make the effort”; “The Way of Yao and Shun is simply to be a good son and a good younger brother”; “The Way is like a wide road. It is not at all difficult to find. The trouble with people is simply that they do not look for it” (Mencius 6B.2). Xunzi also holds the view that it is possible for everyone to become a gentleman, but that not everyone is willing to do so. A sage can reach a high state of moral development through accumulated effort; common people, however, are “unwilling to do so” and “cannot be induced to do so” (Xunzi 23.5b).

Although we may agree with Mencius and Xunzi that it is empirically possible for everyone to become a Yao or Shun, it is certainly not as easy as “breaking a twig for an elder.” The Way of Yao and Shun requires an utmost degree of filial piety and selfless devotion to the well-being of others—one’s willpower has
to be exceptionally strong and one’s effort exceptionally strenuous. However, the fact that a moral ideal is demanding should not mean that we abandon it as an ideal. There are two reasons for this. First, Confucian thinkers never advocate the use of drastic measures to enforce people to be good, recognizing that such strategies are not only unworkable but also counterproductive. Second, it is unclear whether the masters ever expected ordinary people to reach the level of Sage Kings, and in any case, the political vision of a true king does not require common people to attain this level. So, unlike the Way of the true king, the high moral ideal for ordinary people remains, on the whole, an aspiration rather than an enforceable blueprint.

Even if the Confucian ideal is not impossible to attain or unreasonably harsh, it nevertheless remains “hopeless” in the sense that it has only a slight chance of ever being realized. If this is the case, would it be more logical to abandon two-track theorizing and adopt a single vision that is normatively attractive and has a good chance of success? The masters’ answer seems to be no. To abandon the ideal—the greater one or the lesser one—is to abandon the Way of humanity. For the masters, people’s ability to understand and practice benevolence, righteousness, and rituals marks the difference between humans and animals, and it is such ability that gives human beings worth (Mencius 4B.19, Xunzi 9.16a). To abandon an ideal that aspires to develop human potential is equivalent to abandoning humanity. Even if the Way of humanity is beyond the full reach of many people because of their weak willpower, it should not be compromised. In a conversation with Gongsun Chou, Mencius clarifies this point as follows:

Gongsun Chou says, “The Way is indeed lofty and beautiful, but to attempt it is like trying to climb up to Heaven which seems beyond one's reach. Why not substitute for it something which men have some hopes of attaining so as to encourage them constantly to make the effort?”

“A great craftsman,” says Mencius, “does not put aside the plumb-line for the benefit of the clumsy carpenter. Yi did not compromise on his standards of drawing the bow for the sake of the clumsy archer. A gentleman is full of eagerness when he has drawn his bow, but before he lets fly the arrow, he stands in the middle of the path, and those who are able to do so follow him.” (Mencius 7A.41)

According to Mencius, the standards of an art should not be lowered for the sake of clumsy learners. Similarly, the standards of the Way should not be lowered for the sake of the common people. Mencius emphasizes that the standards of benevolence and righteousness are not impossible to attain, but that people fail to live up to the standards in their full sense because they are weak-willed. As contemporary theorist David Estlund has said, “People could be good, they just aren’t.” Similarly, the masters believe that if the ideal fails to be

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realized, it is due to the limitations of the people rather than problems with the ideal itself.

As we have seen, the lesser Confucian ideal of the Small Tranquility, though adapted to deal with nonideal conditions, still retains the Grand Union as its aspiration. However, if the nonideal conditions worsen so that even the lesser ideal becomes unachievable, what remains for Confucians to hold on to? Although there are aspirational reasons for maintaining the ideals, Confucians nonetheless need to find more feasible solutions to problems in reality. The question, then, becomes whether there is an alternative that retains benevolence and righteousness as an aspiration and yet effectively tackles problems in the nonideal world. The alternative advocated by the Legalists—namely, a complete reliance on rewards and, more especially, punishments administered through the instrument of law to shape people’s behavior and strengthen the state—is categorically rejected by later Confucians. They argue that such a strategy would not only fail to ensure peace and stability but make people become “shameless” and hence move them farther away from moral development. As Confucius says, “Guide them by edicts, keep them in line with punishments, and the common people will stay out of trouble but will have no sense of shame. Guide them by virtue, keep them in line with the rites, and they will, besides having a sense of shame, reform themselves” (Analects 2.3). It is not difficult to understand this view. Moral character or virtue has to come from within, as it were. To be a virtuous agent, the agent must act with the right motivation and for the right reasons. People whose acts are motivated by the desire to conform to social pressure, to win praise, or to avoid punishment lack proper moral motivation and do not act virtuously. Confucians call these people “small men” or “village worthy” (Analects 17.12–13). In a similar vein, Mencius says that in order to be true kings, state rulers should be motivated by benevolence and righteousness rather than their own profit (Mencius 6B.4).

It should be noted that Confucius’s position does not imply that he would never agree to the use of force or punishment. As will be discussed below, it is clear that Confucian masters treat punishment and litigation as a last resort, something to fall back on only when rituals, education, or mediation fail to regulate people’s behavior. The primary aim for Confucians is always moral cultivation. Although different masters characterize the interplay between ideal means (such as education and rituals) and nonideal means (such as punishment, litigation, and military defense) in slightly different ways, they all affirm the primacy of the ideal means.23 So the difference between Legalism and Confucianism is not that one allows the use of punishment as a means of social

23 Confucius says, “In hearing litigation, I am no different from any other man. But if you insist on a difference, it is, perhaps, that I try to get the parties not to resort to litigation in the first place” (Analects 12.13). Mencius says, “Good government does not win the people as does good education. He who practices good government is feared by the people; he who gives the people good education is loved by them” (Mencius 7A.14). Xunzi says, “If one only reproves and does not instruct, then punishments will be numerous but evil will still not be overcome. If one instructs but does not reprove, then dissolve people will not be chastened” (Xunzi 10.10).
control and the other does not. It is rather that Legalism adopts a single vision in which punishment plays the chief role, while Confucianism adopts a two-track vision in which punishment is always secondary to moral cultivation by means of rites and education.

Confucians thus face a difficult situation. On the one hand, they cannot agree with the Legalist strategy because it abandons the aim and means of moral cultivation. On the other, they acknowledge that their preferred means—the rites, the Kingly Way of governance, and virtues—have failed to control the behavior of the rulers and the common people. They are unable to envision a viable alternative that can simultaneously retain the spirit of the ideal and deal with the problems arising from nonideal situations, and they insist that the ideal can be realized without much difficulty if enough good people are in office—despite there being no way of ensuring that the good people will be put in power or that there are any to begin with. At the end of the day, without an acceptable nonideal alternative to their ideal, Confucian masters can only resign themselves to fate, or Heaven’s will, over the chance of success of their ideal. For this reason Confucius says, “It is Destiny if the Way prevails; it is equally Destiny if the Way falls into disuse” (Analects 14.36). Similarly Mencius says that the Way’s success is a matter of Heaven’s will: “Confucius went forward in accordance with the rites and withdrew in accordance with what was right, and in matters of success or failure said, ‘There is the Decree’” (Mencius 5A.8). For the masters, if the Way is destined not to prevail, there is nothing that humans can do. Confucians cannot lower the standard of the Way to adapt to reality, for it represents the Truth or Humanity. If they cannot move the fallen world closer to the Way, the only choice is to withdraw from it or sacrifice their lives for it. “When the Way prevails in the empire, it goes where one’s person goes; when the Way is eclipsed, one’s person goes where the Way has gone. I have never heard of making the Way go where other people are going” (Mencius 7A.42).

Breaking the Impasse

This, then, is the predicament facing early Confucianism. And it may not be too far off the mark to say that this predicament has not changed much in the past two thousand years or so. Today any attempt to revitalize Confucianism in the context of modern society faces the same task as that faced by the early masters, that is, how to develop a nonideal approach to society and politics that keeps alive the ideal as an aspiration while effectively dealing with problems that arise in nonideal conditions. The early thinkers became mired in their lesser ideal of the Small Tranquility and found no other way out. Can we do better today? And how should we set about doing so? In what follows I shall outline three general considerations that may serve to guide this process of constructing a Confucian political philosophy for a modern society. The first has to do with the importance of correctly capturing the spirit of the Confucian ideal. The second con-
cerns Confucian attitudes in tackling the problems of reality. The third is about the proper relation of ideal and nonideal concerns.

Let me begin with the first consideration, the importance of correctly capturing the spirit of the Confucian ideal. It is not easy to pin down the elements that constitute the Confucian ideal (if we intend to go beyond the Grand Union and Small Tranquility), for Confucianism is a complex tradition of thought that evolved in response to changing historical circumstances. In this long process it has developed many views that were pitched at different levels, ranging from the most down-to-earth guidelines or recommendations for tackling changing circumstances (for example, behavioral prescriptions of rituals and the making of context-specific choices) to the highest-level ideals (for example, the spirit of benevolence and public-spiritedness). Many of these views fall somewhere between these two extremes, such as certain views about political institutions and economic policies, and it is not always easy to tell whether such views belong to the level of ideal (that is, those whose spirit needs to be kept) or the level of nonideal (that is, those whose contents and challenges vary with changing circumstances). For example, in politics, while the principle of selecting the virtuous and competent to work for public interest seems to be a part of the Confucian ideal, it is unclear whether the Confucian idea of having one Sage King to exercise supreme authority is necessarily a part of this ideal or merely a product of adaptation to nonideal conditions. Similarly, it is unclear whether Confucian distributive and retributive justice is on a par with benevolence in the ideal scheme of things, or merely a remedial virtue of less value than benevolence. Because of the multilevel character of Confucian views, it is easy to make unfair assessments of Confucian thought. In later chapters I shall attempt to answer some of these questions.

Second, despite the fact that Confucians hold tightly to their ideal conception of society and politics, they are relatively flexible when dealing with problems in the nonideal world. They know that although it is one thing to aspire to an ideal, it is another to practice it without regard to actual circumstances. When dealing with unfavorable conditions, the three Confucian masters all counsel people on the importance of acting flexibly and timely, even to the extent as to act contrary to rites and principles in order to prevent harm. Confucius says that “the gentleman is steadfast in purpose but he is not inflexible” (Analects 15.37). He also praises Guan Zhong, who helped save innocent lives by assisting Duke Huan, who, to gain power, killed his own brother Prince Jiu, whom Guan Zhong served, and was thus able to forge deals among conflicting feudal lords and successfully avoid interstate wars and bloodshed. Confucius’s disciples question the integrity of Guan Zhong for willingly serving someone who had killed his lord. But Confucius insists on recognizing him as a benevolent man because of his contribution to peace and stability, the larger goals that a gentleman should pursue (Analects 14.16–17). Mencius also writes much about the necessity of discretion when facing conflicting demands. In a situation where a rite of lesser importance (for example, that a man should not
touch a woman) conflicts with a more important goal (for example, that of saving a life), Mencius says that the more important goal should be pursued even if a lesser rite is violated (Mencius 4A.17). More generally, in making a choice between competing demands, we should not look abstractly at the nature of those demands, but rather at the concrete circumstances in which they are pertinent. We should also consider their trade-offs in terms of quantity, weight, or seriousness in the particular circumstances (Mencius 6B.1). Similarly, in praising a great ru (Confucian gentleman), Xunzi says, “He handles dangerous situations, responding, changing, and adapting as is suitable; he modifies and adjusts at the proper time and initiates or desists with the proper season; through a thousand affairs and ten thousand changes, his Way is one” (Xunzi 8.9). In modern terms, we could say that the Confucian Way, functioning as a regulative ideal, signifies not so much a rigid hierarchy of values and principles that can be mechanistically applied as a clarity of purpose and a firm grasp of what is truly significant and important. The rest is contextual thinking and judgment.

The third general consideration to guide the process of working out a Confucian political philosophy for modern times has to do with the relation between ideal and nonideal concerns. We have seen that early Confucianism displays a good degree of realism and flexibility toward the nonideal world. However, this realism and flexibility are not unprincipled but appropriately linked to ideal aspirations. To illustrate how early Confucians deal with these dual demands of flexibility and ideal aspirations, I will give two examples, both related to the use of force in nonideal conditions. The first example is taken not directly from Confucian classics but from the traditional Chinese discourse on martial virtue (wu de), which was heavily influenced by Confucian thought. The very term of “martial virtue” suggests a striking reconciliation of idealist and realistic demands, an interplay of the ideal and nonideal. Martial arts and the use of force are supposed to be the very antithesis of the Confucian ideal of benevolence and harmony, yet they are necessary in the nonideal world and can, and should, be practiced with a view to the ideal. The idea of martial virtue is that martial arts must be guided by virtue, in the sense both that the person practicing martial arts must possess virtue in order to attain the highest level of the arts and gain due respect from others, and that the use of force is permitted only in achieving ethical ends, such as saving lives and maintaining peace and justice.24 According to traditional Chinese views, the martial arts are not merely a set of practices involving certain skills or techniques, they are also practices involving virtue and an ethical purpose.

24 See Liu Shujun 劉樹軍, “Chuan tong wu de si xiang de ji ben nei rong” 傳統武德思想的基本內容 [The Basic Content of Traditional Wu De Thought], in Chuan tong wu de ji qi jia zhi chong jian 傳統武德及其價值重建 [The Reconstruction of Traditional Wu De and Its Values] (Changsha: Central South University Press, 2007), 87–96. I thank Jeffrey Martin for mentioning wu de when I explained to him the theme of this chapter.
My second example is criminal punishment. In Confucian vocabulary, there is a range of words to describe different types of social means to guide behavior. As *The Book of Rites* says, rituals (li) should cultivate moral character and manifest morality; music (yue) should achieve harmony among people; government directives and decrees (zheng) should coordinate collective action; and penal law and punishment (xing) should guard against people’s tendency to do evil (“Yue ji,” *Book of Rites*). The preferred means of achieving the Confucian ideal of society are rituals and music, as it is only through these that people can acquire genuine moral attitudes and character. But punishment becomes necessary when these means fail to prevent wrongdoing. What, then, should be the proper interplay between the ideal and the nonideal means? As Confucius says, “When rites and music do not flourish, punishments will not be exactly right; when punishments are not exactly right, the common people will not know where to put hand and foot” (*Analects* 13.3). Traditional commentaries on the meaning of “punishments will not be exactly right” suggest two readings that are not mutually inconsistent but rather complementary. The first reading maintains that without the flourishing of rites and music, no proper standard of right and wrong conduct will be readily available to determine the right level of sentencing and punishment. The second reading says that without effective rites and music, rulers will tend to overly rely on severe punishments to prevent wrongdoing or maintain social stability. So the use of punishment must be guided by the rites and applied only when the preferred means of rites, music, and education have been tried.

The Argument of This Book

From its inception to modern times, Confucianism has always faced the problem of the serious gap between its social and political ideal and reality. This book argues that the problem is not the regulative ideal itself, but how to develop a viable method of governance that retains the spirit of the Confucian ideal and at the same time effectively addresses the problems of nonideal contemporary situations. Without a doubt, modern society and its institutions present new opportunities and challenges for dealing with the nonideal world. Liberal democratic institutions, human rights apparatus and civil liberties, and measures to promote social justice are new means of coping with social problems both old and new. When considering these methods of tackling social problems, we should exercise the same flexibility and adaptability as early Confucian masters counsel. I shall argue that Confucians should embrace modern

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25 A third example may be the use of force in military action. For an instructive analysis of early Confucian views on just war from the perspective of ideal vs. nonideal, see Daniel A. Bell, “Just War and Confucianism: Implications for the Contemporary World,” in *Confucian Political Ethics*, ed. Daniel A. Bell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 226–56.
institutions and measures if they are effective and tie them to the Confucian ideal in the same way early masters deal with the use of force in the above examples. It may be argued that many modern institutions and measures, having often originated in the West, necessarily carry normative and philosophical ideas and values that run counter to the Confucian ideal. However, such an argument makes controversial interpretations of both Western practices and the nature of Confucianism. I shall critically examine such interpretations and show how modern institutions and measures can promote a number of Confucian goals and how such institutions can be modified to keep alive the spirit of the Confucian ideal.

The main strategy that I shall use to tie modern institutions with the Confucian ideal is to develop what I call a Confucian perfectionist approach to politics. Political perfectionism is the philosophical view that the social and political order—including political rights and duties—are to be judged by their contribution to the human good life.26 Confucian perfectionism, then, assesses social and political institutions with reference to the Confucian conception of the good. The best way for Confucians today to meet the challenge, I argue, is to adopt some liberal democratic institutions but justify them with the Confucian perfectionist approach, that is, to ground and shape these institutions in terms of the Confucian conception of the good rather than the liberal conception of the right. This approach decouples liberal democratic institutions from those popular liberal philosophical packages that base liberal democratic institutions on fundamental moral rights or principles, such as popular sovereignty, political equality, human rights, and individual sovereignty.

I will adopt this approach to examine issues of political authority and democracy, human rights and civil liberties, and social justice and welfare. In doing so, I aim to reconstruct both Confucianism and liberal democratic institutions, blending them to form an outline of a new Confucian political philosophy, which I call Confucian political perfectionism. This philosophy incorporates a number of basic institutions of liberal democracy, grounds them on Confucian perfectionism, and redefines their roles and functions. It mixes Confucian values with liberal democratic institutions in a way that hopefully strengthens both.

This book is divided into two parts. The first part discusses issues of political authority and institutions. The second examines issues to do with relations between the state and the people—human rights, civil liberties, social justice, and social welfare. The scope and method of the book are discussed in appendix 1.

In chapter 1 I examine early Confucian views on the nature, purposes, and justifications of authority. I first reject an interpretation of Confucianism that treats authority as an ownership right to be possessed by the monarch or the people. (Appendix 2 evaluates this interpretation in detail.) I then develop a

Confucian perfectionist perspective that takes the well-being of the people and their willing acceptance of political rule as fundamental to the legitimacy of political authority. According to this perspective, political authority exists for the people and is partly justified by its ability to protect and promote the people's well-being. But the authoritative relationship between the governed and those who govern is also constituted by mutual commitment on both sides—those who govern are committed to serve the people, and the governed willingly and gladly accept and support the governance. The Confucian perfectionist perspective therefore makes two connections between authority and the good life. First, authority instrumentally serves the well-being of the people. Second, the constitutive mutual commitment of the governing and governed is an ethically valuable and satisfying relationship that contributes to the good life. This perfectionist perspective differs importantly from Lockean liberalism—authority is not derived from the consent of people who possess political rights that are naturally given or morally basic but is part and parcel of a good political relationship that contributes to the good life of the people.

Chapter 2 explores a paradox—although early Confucianism endorses the idea that authority exists to serve the people and that authority cannot be based on the arbitrary will of the one who holds the authority, it implicitly or explicitly embraces the notion that authority must be monist and supreme and not be subject to any higher legal constraints. In other words, early Confucianism would not accept the modern ideas of limited government and the separation of powers. The chapter reconstructs certain early Confucian arguments for authority and the importance of a monist and supreme conception of authority. I propose that these arguments cannot reject limited government and the separation of power, and that the notion of monist and supreme authority must be given up if Confucian political thought is to have any potential today. Instead of hoping for the appearance of a godlike figure to assume a position of utmost prestige and power, we should lower our sights and adopt a political system that brings together people with flawed but above-average levels of virtue and intelligence in positions of power, allowing them to cooperate, check among themselves, and also be checked by the people.

While chapters 1 and 2 are studies of Confucian conceptions of authority on the ideal level, chapters 3 and 4 deal with problems of authority on the nonideal level. Chapter 3 puts forward the argument that although the Confucian ideal of the authoritative ruler-ruled relationship, one marked by mutual commitment and trust, is an insightful and attractive ideal that would appear to be relevant even in contemporary democratic societies, in reality not all officials are trustworthy and genuinely care for the people. Here the challenge of how to properly handle the interplay between the ideal and reality arises—on the one hand, we must find a social device that helps prevent officials from abusing power and removes bad officials from office; on the other hand, such a device must be able to express the Confucian ideal relationship and hopefully also promote it. The solution, I argue, lies in the nature of institutions, which are
devices that at once perform socially useful tasks to tackle real-life problems and uphold standards of normative appropriateness that express ideal aspirations. I argue that one kind of political institution, namely, democratic elections, can perform this dual function. Drawing on the work of contemporary political scientists, I argue that democratic elections can perform both as a device to select virtuous and competent politicians for the common good (the selection function) and as a mechanism to reward and sanction them (the sanction function). While the sanction function of elections addresses nonideal problems, the selection function expresses the spirit of the Confucian ideal of political relationship.

Chapter 4 examines more comprehensively the relationship between Confucian political perfectionism and democracy. I argue that the two are complementary and can strengthen each other. On the one hand, democracy instrumentally promotes Confucian political ends such as the improvement of people's well-being and directly expresses the Confucian ideal political relationship—in this sense democracy can be instrumentally and expressively justified in Confucian terms. On the other hand, the Confucian perfectionist approach to ethics and politics provides a robust ethical foundation for a well-functioning democracy. In ideal situations, democratic elections will be conducted in a civil and respectful manner consistent with the spirit of the selection model. In real, nonideal situations, however, democratic elections may breed and reinforce hostile antagonism, and the democratic political process may become a trading of narrow interests at the expense of the common good. Although Western theorists have long pointed out the importance of civic virtues or civility as an essential condition for democracy, contemporary theorists have tended to adopt a liberal, knowledge-based approach to civic education, the effectiveness of which is questionable. I argue that Confucian moral education, which is humanity-based rather than citizen-based, provides a stronger incentive for citizens to cultivate civility than liberal civic education, as well as a more comprehensive foundation of virtues. Lastly, I argue that Confucian political perfectionism can also offer some reflection on how to select virtuous and competent people to serve in politics. I suggest, by way of example, a second chamber of legislature whose members would be selected by colleagues. If suitably formed, this chamber would not only be a governing institution in its own right but also play an important part in the moral education of the society at large.

The second part of the book reconstructs and develops a Confucian perfectionist perspective on the issues of human rights, civil liberties, social justice, and social welfare. In chapter 5 I adopt a two-track approach to human rights. I argue that the idea of human rights is compatible with the Confucian understanding of ethics and society, but that in the ideal society people will be guided by precepts of benevolence and virtues rather than by considerations of human rights. Thus human rights do not play an important practical role in ideal society, for the same reason that rites are not important in the Grand Union. In
nonideal situations, where virtuous relationships break down and mediation fails to reconcile conflicts, human rights can become a powerful fallback apparatus for the vulnerable to protect their legitimate interests against exploitation and harm by powerful actors, especially the state. The importance of human rights thus lies in its instrumental function. But unlike liberalism, Confucian ethics would not take human rights as constitutive of human worth or dignity. Furthermore, just as early Confucianism states that the use of penal law must be governed by considerations of virtue and ethical propriety, the practice of human rights must not eclipse the moral vocabularies of the common good, virtues, and duties. To avoid the rise of “rights talk” and a rights-centered culture, I argue that Confucian perfectionism should keep the list of human rights short and restrict it to civil and political rights—not because social and economic rights are less important but because civil and political rights are more suitable for legal implementation and because they redress a strong tendency within traditional Confucianism to place too much power in the hands of political leaders.

Chapter 6 develops a new Confucian perfectionist approach to individual autonomy and civil liberties. Confucianism has often been criticized for failing to recognize individual autonomy. I argue, however, that Confucian ethics does promote individual moral autonomy, in the sense that the moral agent must voluntarily accept the demands of morality and reflectively engage in the moral life. To a considerable extent, this notion supports toleration and freedom, since a highly restrictive or oppressive moral environment is harmful to the development of a genuine moral life. However, traditional Confucian moral autonomy is compatible with only a narrow range of life choices. To cope with the demands of a fast-changing, pluralistic society, Confucian ethics should incorporate a moderate notion of personal autonomy in the wider sense that people should have the freedom to form life goals and chart a personal path of life. This should not be a moral right or, in liberal terms, an individual sovereignty, but a valuable aspect of the good life. A Confucian perfectionist ethics that incorporates this notion is receptive of the pluralism of values and ways of life in modern society. A Confucian perfectionist political theory sees civil liberties as instrumentally useful for the promotion of the good and expressive of the ideal of personal autonomy and attempts to balance the two when they conflict. This perfectionist perspective, however, rejects the strong liberal view that gives sovereign protection to the individual insofar as his or her personal life is concerned.

Chapters 7 and 8 develop a Confucian perfectionist perspective on justice and welfare. In chapter 7 I argue that the principles of resource distribution in Mencius can be conceived as principles of justice, which I call principles of sufficiency. The aim of social justice, according to this perfectionist view, is to enable every member of a community to live a good life. What is morally significant is whether each person has sufficient resources to lead a good life, not whether each has the same amount. The Confucian conception of the good life
sets a rough standard for sufficiency—namely, the amount a person generally needs to live a decent material life and feel materially secure enough to pursue the higher, ethical life. On the matter of distribution of resources, Confucian justice is not of an egalitarian but a *sufficientarian* view, to use the jargon of contemporary political philosophy. Justice as sufficiency for all, however, is only part of the larger Confucian conception of the social ideal. In chapter 8 I argue that Mencius envisages a multilevel social system of provision in which the family, the village or commune, as well as the government all have specific roles to play—social justice is the foundation of this social system; the family and commune (or social relationships and networks) provide familial care and mutual aid; and when they are not sufficient, the government steps in to provide direct welfare assistance. This Confucian social ideal integrates justice and care, recognizing both individual merit and personal responsibility.

The conclusion summarizes the arguments of the book and integrates them into the political philosophy described in previous chapters, namely, Confucian political perfectionism. It explains how perfectionism runs through the reconstruction of this philosophy. Taken as a whole, Confucian political perfectionism makes a radical departure from European and American liberal democratic theory, although it makes use of certain liberal democratic institutions to cope with nonideal problems. It differs most noticeably from a rights-based approach to politics. In the rights-based approach, democracy is understood as an embodiment of the idea that the people are sovereign—it not only means rule by the people but is also justified by that idea. In Confucian political perfectionism, the concept of democracy still means rule by the people, but it is not justified by the idea that people are sovereign. Rather, it is justified by its service to the people and by a perfectionist view of a political relationship of mutual commitment and trust between the people and those they have elected to govern. According to Confucian perfectionism, morality based on integrity and virtue is essential to the health of democratic politics and has important implications for the duties of both citizens and representatives. In the rights-based approach, human rights and civil liberties are both similarly justified by the fundamental idea that people have sovereign rights over their bodies and actions. In Confucian political perfectionism, however, human rights and civil liberties are important insofar as they protect or promote fundamental individual interests, in particular the interest in leading an ethical life and a non-Confucian ideal of moderate personal autonomy. Rights and liberties must be exercised with a balanced consideration of these two interests. Lastly, in the rights-based approach, social justice is premised either on the self-ownership right (as in libertarianism) or on the right to equal respect and concern (as in egalitarianism). In Confucian political perfectionism, however, social justice is justified by its contribution to the good life—it provides resources sufficient for all people to live an ethical life, while allowing economic inequality to arise from merit and contribution.
The conclusion also discusses appropriate ways of promoting Confucianism in the context of a modern pluralistic society. I argue that in public political discourse, one should not present Confucianism as a comprehensive and packaged doctrine and ask people to accept policy proposals as implications of that package. Promoting Confucianism in this way undermines the ability of a liberal democratic society to function well and is not in accord with the spirit of Confucian civility. Rather, the Confucian perfectionism in political philosophy and politics that I develop takes the form of moderate perfectionism. In political philosophy, Confucian perfectionism develops its arguments and institutional proposals through a bottom-up process of examining the specific Confucian values and principles relevant to each political issue under discussion, rather than a top-down application of a comprehensive doctrine to the issue. In politics and public policy making, Confucian perfectionism asks citizens and officials to appeal to individual and specific values and principles in Confucian thought and justify them in terms that do not require prior acceptance of Confucianism. It fashions not a winner-take-all politics but a piecemeal politics in which both the gains of winners and losses of losers are limited and their positions can reverse in different policy domains.

The philosophy and politics of Confucian political perfectionism that this book espouses, I hope, are a viable approach for dealing with the quandary of Confucian political thought, a desirable way to refashion both Confucian values and liberal democratic institutions in modern society, and an attractive philosophical alternative to liberal democratic theory.