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An epistemic case for confucian democracy

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relationship between democratic participation and the well-being of the people – a fundamental aim of Confucian government. It argues that although the value of democratic participation for people's moral cultivation may be dubious (as suggested recently by Sungmoon Kim), democratic participation is key to meeting other salient aspects of people's well-being. Drawing on developments in Western epistemic analyses of democracy, this paper shows that the complexity of political issues in developed countries makes democracy an important decision-making process to enhance the well-being of most of the members of society.

KEYWORDS Confucianism; epistemic democracy; well-being; political participation; democratic participation; confucian political meritocracy

The rise of East Asian Confucian heritage societies (China, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Vietnam and Singapore) has inspired an enormous amount of new empirical research. At the political level, one pressing question is what institutional framework can meet the needs of these modern industrialized societies while being attuned to their unique cultural aspects. Yet, these issues have hardly been discussed by 'Western' democratic theorists, whose engagements with Confucian theories remain sporadic, although it is the latter that are driving the debates about political institutions in East Asia.

In the last twenty years, the question of whether Confucianism can support democratic legislative institutions has become the focus of several debates in Confucian political theory. One original contribution to the debate is the conception of 'political meritocracy'. In line with the Confucian idea that political leadership should be based on *de* (virtue, 德), Confucian meritocrats maintain that political leaders selected on the basis of their political competence and moral character should have a greater than or equal influence to that of democratically elected leaders in the decision-making process (Bai, 2008, 2013, 2019; Bell, 2006, 2015; Chan, 2013a, 2013b; Fan, 2013; Qing, 2012).

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This, they argue, can provide better chances of allocating superior political power to the *junzi* (the gentleman in the ethical sense, 君子) and not to the *xiao ren* (petty persons, 小人).¹ Such a view is opposed by the Confucian democrats, who defend the instrumental value of democracy beyond the material well-being of the people (Angle, 2012; Tan, 2003, 2016). Democratic participation, Confucian democrats maintain, is required to provide citizens with the opportunity to cultivate the Confucian virtues, such as *ren* (benevolence, 仁) and *yi* (righteousness, 義).²

However, reservations about the moral value of democratic participation have been expressed by Confucian democracy adherents as much as by its detractors. Joseph Chan, for example, suggests that ‘participation can take place in many social contexts, and it is not clear that participation in the political context is necessary for moral growth. What is important to our moral growth is that we participate in a common life and are given certain tasks and responsibilities in a social group and institution’ (Chan, 2014, p. 790). Also Sungmoon Kim – one of the leading voices of Confucian democracy – argues that Confucian democrats should come to terms with the possibility that ‘moral growth can be attained most effectively through active participation in nonpolitical social institutions or associations, leaving important political decisions to few political elites’ (Kim 2018: 35).

In light of these considerations, Kim suggests that Confucian democrats should move away from the concept of moral well-being and offer new justifications for democratic participation. For Kim, the Confucian meritocrats’ objection can be rejected by considering democratic participation as “required in

the first place for authoritative coordination, if not perfect resolution, of social, economic, and political interactions among members of a political community whose individual and associational diversity perpetually places them in moral disagreement and social conflict” (Kim 2018: 37). This offers Confucian democrats a new instrumental justification of democratic participation since ‘[t]he good consequences here refer to *primarily* democracy’s institutional efficacy in coordinating various kinds of social conflict under the societal fact of pluralism’ (Kim 2018: 38).³

Kim’s ground-breaking attempt to rescue the Confucian democratic project from the Confucian meritocrats’ objection raises a series of questions. If democracy is not instrumentally valuable for people’s moral well-being, what is the position of Confucian democrats on the relationship between democratic participation and the Confucian commitment to defend and promote people’s well-being? Under the circumstances of modern politics, can democracy be valuable for safeguard relevant aspects of the Confucian well-being that are not directly related to morality, or should Confucian democrats reject any positive relationship between democratic participation and the promotion of people’s well-being? These are important questions that Confucian

democrats need to address. While it is true that desirable outcomes are not the only things that matter, the idea of effective government seems to be a precondition for any theory of government that does not want to appear fetishistic.

This paper examines the relationship of democracy with the Confucian notion of well-being. I argue that although Confucian democrats should go 'beyond' virtue – as Kim suggests – democratic participation can still be relevant for realizing key aspects of the Confucian fundamental well-being principle. Drawing on discussions on epistemic democracy, I show that forms of democratic governments are crucial to reach the correct decisions in post-industrialized societies. So, democracy may not be necessary for the moral growth of a large part of the population, but it is required to identify and solve important problems affecting society.

The opening section of this essay discusses the Confucian notion of well-being and clarifies the instrumental approach to political systems that derives from this notion. The second section connects this instrumental approach to works in contemporary epistemic democracy and establishes the instrumental value of democratic participation for people's well-being, from an epistemic perspective. An assessment of the epistemic limitations of Confucian theories of political meritocracy is offered in the third section. I conclude by discussing some of the main contributions of the epistemic Confucian justification of democracy to Confucian democratic theory.

The confucian notion of well-being

The idea that the welfare of the people is the main objective of a government can be traced back to the early Confucians. For the early Confucians, people's well-being comprised their material and moral well-being and a good government should aim to fulfil people's material needs as well as to nurture their 'right' character traits. According to the early Confucians, the moral transformation of the people (*huamin*, 化民) was intrinsically valuable and must be the ultimate aim of government. Yet, because sufficient material welfare is a precondition for engaging in moral cultivations, providing people with sufficient material welfare is also a paramount aim of government.⁴

Mencius made this view explicit: '[t]he way of the people is this: that when they have a constant livelihood, they will have constant minds, but when they lack a constant livelihood, they will lack constant minds. When they lack constant minds, there is no dissoluteness, depravity, deviance, or excess to which they will not succumb' (Bloom, 2009, p. 51, 3A3). Xunzi expressed the duty of government to provide for the moral and material welfare of the people in the following terms: "What is the Way? I say: it is the way of a true lord. Who is a true lord? I say: it is one who is able to create community. Who

is able to create community? I say: it is one who is good at keeping people alive and nurturing them, good at organizing and ordering people, good at elevating and employing people, and good at beautifying and ornamenting people” (Hutton, 2014. p. 123, 12.204-209).

It appears that Confucius held a similar view. Accompanied by Ran Qiu, Confucius arrived in the state of Wei. After Confucius came to know that the state of Wei was populous, “Ran Qiu asked, 'Being already numerous, what can be done to further improve them?' The Master replied, 'Make them wealthy.' 'Once they are wealthy, what else can be done to improve them?' 'Instruct them'”. (Slingerland, 2003. p. 143. 13.9). This Confucian fundamental political idea is, what I call, ‘the well-being principle’.

The well-being principle demands that the state cares for the population as well as protects and enhances the welfare of future generations. This obligation is derived from the Confucian conception of the state as a community comprising present, past and future generations, and where social relationships connect members of the community through both a spatial axis and a temporal axis. Such an idea of community entails that the living must care for the welfare of the members of the community that constitute future and past generations. Since, at the minimum, the survival of future generations depends on whether they will have at their disposal sufficient material resources and a peaceful environment, the government must ensure that these conditions will be met. As for the past generations, an environment conducive to remembering and memorialising the ancestors is in order.

Whether the well-being principle is the main Confucian criterion to evaluate a government is a matter of contention. On this matter, Loubna El Amine argues that political order is the ultimate goal of a Confucian government (El Amine 2015). Political order requires governments to provide for the material well-being of the people at least up to a certain point, since people will likely go along with a certain political order if their material needs are fulfilled. But such a view does not support the government’s concern for the people’s moral cultivation; after all, whether the people are offered the chance to cultivate the right moral dispositions or not seems to be irrelevant to the perpetuation of a political order.

However, the well-being principle finds support among most of the contemporary Confucian meritocrats and Confucian democrats. In his perfectionist account of Confucianism, Joseph Chan claims that ‘political authority exists for the benefit of the governed and is justified by its ability to protect and promote the people’s well-being’ and ‘the good life of people, according to Confucian thought, consists of not only material well-being (the desire for which is perfectly reasonable) but also moral cultivation and virtuous social relationships’ (Chan 2013a: 30). Like Chan, Tongdong Bai points out that ‘the

government is considered to be responsible for the material and moral well-being of the people. It is responsible for making it possible that average citizens have their basic material and social relationship, moral and political, and educational needs met' (Bai 2008: 65).

Many Confucian democrats contend that democracy rather than meritocracy can better promote the welfare of the people. For example, in her Deweyan reconstruction of Confucian democracy, Sor-hoon Tan claims that '[t]he answer to the question "Who governs?" as well as the question of which political forms to adopt, will depend on who and what best serves the purpose of the people's material well-being and ethical growth' (Tan 2003: 142). In conclusion, its widespread acceptance makes the well-being principle the ideal premise for an argument on what political institutions are acceptable from a Confucian standpoint.

The foregoing quotes also reveal that many contemporary Confucian political theorists believe that the well-being principle is linked to an instrumental approach to political institutions. This approach deems a form of government as justified to the extent that it defends and promotes the welfare of the people better than other forms of government. The ultimate aim of politics is, therefore, to create positive change to the human world. As Confucius explains: '[i]f the Way were realized in the world, then I would not need to change anything' (Slingerland, 2003. p. 217. 18.6).

Importantly, an instrumental approach to political institutions opens Confucianism to political institutional experimentations for the overall good of the people. This idea finds resonance with the actions of many Confucians who, in the course of history, have engaged in debates about institutional innovations that could decentralize power for the overall good, without challenging the monarchical principle. One example is the long-standing debates on the *fengjian* (feudalism, 封建), the ancient feudal structure characterized by power delegation of political authority from the ruler to lord-vassals over strategic territories. During the Tang period (618--907), scholars like Han Yu (768--824) argued for re-establishing the *fengjian* system in opposition to a more centralized administrative system (Wechsler, 1979, pp. 210--211). This view was opposed by some scholars like Liu Zongyuan (773--819) who, in his famous discourse 'On Feudalism' (*Feng-chien lu*), argued that the *fengjian* was not the product of sage-kings' design (Chen, 1992, p. 96).

Another example is the debate that emerged from the issue of *pengdang* (factions, 朋黨) during the Northern Song dynasty (960--1127). Against the idea that alliances among the imperial bureaucrats were a threat to the Imperial authority, some Confucians contended that forms of partisanship could conduce a positive change under the right conditions. In his emblematic 'Discourse on Factions' (*Pengdang lun*, 朋黨論), Ouyang Xiu (1007--1072) anticipated Edmund Burke by a few centuries arguing that the

partisanship of ministers who shared a common set of moral values would be valuable for the realization of the 'public good' (gong, 公).⁵

In contemporary Confucian political theory, the openness of Confucianism to institutional experimentations to incorporate new values like democracy, political meritocracy, and individual rights will entail maintaining the fundamental Confucian values. If the realization of these new values can promote people's welfare, they can be practised together with the Confucian fundamental values although they will remain theoretically distinct from the Confucian fundamental values. So, democratic

institutions or meritocratic selection mechanisms must be the focus of contemporary Confucian theorizing if they aim to bring about the desired political outcomes.

From a comparative perspective, the above discussion reveals Confucianism's unique contribution to debates on the justification of forms of government. The idea that the value of a form of government depends on its ability to enhance people's well-being distinguishes Confucianism from any instrumental justification of government currently advocated by Western political theorists who tend to focus on other criteria. For example, Richard Arneson's claim that a decisional procedure should be assessed primarily on its ability to guarantee people the greatest fulfilment of their fundamental rights over a long-term period (Arneson 2003). Other examples are Philippe Van Parijs' view that social justice must be the primary aim of government and Amartya Sen's belief that the ultimate criterion to assess forms of government must be the higher chances of obtaining basic rights (Sen, 1999; Van Parijs, 1996, 2009). From this perspective, Confucianism is a compelling alternative to Western perspectives on government.

An epistemic confucian justification of democratic participation

So far, I have established that an instrumental approach to government is a distinctive and fundamental characteristic of the Confucian view of politics. But what are the practical implications of this approach to political institutions in contemporary Confucians' debates on democracy? A strong reason in favour of democracy at the national political level is that well-functioning democratic institutions are instrumentally valuable to reach the right political decisions on important problems affecting modern industrialized societies. If successful, this argument would lay down the basis for an instrumental relationship between democracy and the well-being principle. Such an argument, I shall demonstrate, can be developed from some ideas that have recently emerged in debates on the epistemic value of democracy.

Epistemic democrats defend democracy based on the quality of its outcomes. In their view, the political systems of modern political societies should solve complex political problems and reach the right decisions 'according to

criteria that are (partially) external to the decision-making process' (Anderson, 2006, p. 10). Such criteria can refer 'from objective truth of the matter (about facts or morality) to a more intersubjective, culturally-dependent, and temporary construct (about more socially constructed facts or moral questions)' (Estlund & Landemore, 2018, p. 113).

A democratic decision making is more likely to reach the right decisions than other regimes because it takes advantage of the epistemic diversity of members of society. When it comes to complex political questions, 'the variety of potentially relevant considerations, and the relevant points that arise for each consideration in turn, is always vast. More minds will tend to bring more relevant reasons into play, and this (other things equal) has epistemic value' (Estlund, 2007, p. 181). By involving citizens in decision making, democratic institutions can poll different kinds of information and knowledge that are widely and asymmetrically dispersed across society to better define and solve problems of public interest.

Yet, some may argue, this does not explain why democratic participation is so important for epistemic democrats. Would not public hearings and surveys be sufficient to poll citizens' epistemic inputs and to increase the cognitive diversity of the decisional procedure? To answer these questions, a few normative considerations are in order.

Although political participation and democracy often go together, they are normatively different. 'Political participation' is politically oriented actions that can influence decision making. Fundamental to the realization of political participation are rights like 'freedom of speech' and the 'right to protest'. Demonstrations, public hearings, deliberative pools, can be examples of political participation. By contrast, 'democratic participation' is a form of political participation through which citizens can collectively exercise decisional power. What is distinctive of democratic participation is, therefore, its aim to empower a large part of the citizens through institutional means to collectively share decisional power

so that they can exercise control over the decisional process. The 'right to vote' and the 'right to run for office' are two institutional conditions for democratic participation.

A distinction between political participation and democratic one in terms of control over the decisional procedure is suggested by several political experiments in the politics of non-democratic countries. As Baogonag He and Mark Warren have shown, non-democratic regimes in Asia (especially China) have increasingly experimented with several participatory practices, including public consultation and deliberation within controlled venues (He & Warren, 2011, p. 155). One particular feature of these forms of political participation concerns the distribution of decisional power that is attached to them. While 'experiments with public deliberation in China appear to be

increasingly genuine, substantive, inclusive, and often impressive', '[t]he CCP continues to control these processes. Political elites typically define permissible spaces by issue, scope, and level of jurisdiction' (He & Warren, 2011, p. 159).

For epistemic democrats, forms of democratic participation are required to reach the right decisions. Whereas political participation can open the decision-making to the influence of citizens' different epistemic inputs, democratic participation can ensure that political representatives take seriously the interests of the public. Institutional means, such as periodic elections, could be used to ensure that the decision making responds to the preferences of a large part of the population.

The epistemic democrats' view on democratic participation marks, therefore, a clear difference with procedural justifications of democracy. For epistemic democrats, the point of democratic participation 'is not that citizens be heard or exercise oversight exclusively for its own sake; the goal is that citizens be heard because and to the extent that doing so will create policies that fairly respect the interests of all' (Fuerstein, *forthcoming*, p. 17).

Despite substantial agreements on the main principles of epistemic democracy, epistemic democrats hold different conceptions of democracy. For example, H el ene Landemore defines democracy in terms of 'rule by the many' and develops a defence of democracy in comparison to 'the rule of one'

and 'the rule of the few' (Landemore 2013). For Landemore, what makes 'the rule of the many' epistemically superior to alternative forms of government is that democratic decisions are the results of the deliberation of many members of the community who exercise a direct say on the final decision. This increases the cognitive diversity of democratic decision making, ensuring it better chances of reaching the right decisions.

Landemore's epistemic view of democracy has given epistemic democracy unprecedented traction in debates in democratic theory, but her idealized notion of democracy has been subjected to strong criticisms. One of them is Jason Brennan's claim that the idea that 'rule of the many' is wiser than the 'rule of one' or the 'rule of a few' has no bearing on the epistemic power of real democracies (Brennan, 2014). Similarly, other epistemic democrats argue that Landemore disregards the key epistemic function of political agencies (like experts) in democratic decision making (Moore, 2014).

Partly because of these concerns, several epistemic democrats adopt a more 'systemic' conception of democracy than Landemore. According to this conception, citizens are 'participants in a collective, systemic process, rather than as direct authors of outcomes' (Fuerstein, *forthcoming*, p. 17). Democratic institutional systems integrate and coordinate at different stages of the decision making the epistemic inputs of different political agencies for determining and solving problems of public interests (Fuerstein, *forthcoming*,

p. 17. Also see Anderson, 2006; Christiano, 2012; Fuerstein, 2008; Holst & Molander, 2019; Moore, 2017).

For these epistemic democrats, the widely and asymmetric distribution of information in society have several institutional implications. Public discussions and a free press must be in place to determine what problems are of public concern. Experts offer reliable information for public discussion, but they also play a preemptive function by filtering the possible political decisions that have 'truth sensitivity' (Christiano 2012). General elections and other forms of democratic participation bring debates to an end and ensure that political representatives take seriously the public interests.

This epistemic conception of democracy has the strengths of Confucian theories of government as it supports a form of government that aims at good political outcomes. Unlike Confucian theories of government, the epistemic justification of democracy is based on the concepts of 'right' or 'correct' political decisions, not on the notion of 'well-being'. However, the ability of the decision making to pool widely and asymmetrically dispersed epistemic inputs is important also in relation to political issues concerning people's material conditions. Ordinary people who are affected by political decisions can offer valuable insights on whether and how things could be improved at both the local and national political level and their democratic participation ensures them better chances for their voices to be heard.

Even complex political issues such as effective immigration political reforms cannot be developed without carefully considering public beliefs and attitudes towards foreigners. If the right solution to the immigration issue allows immigrants to be ultimately integrated with society, then to reach such a solution, the policymaking needs to be sensitive to public considered judgments on how peaceful and mutually beneficial coexistence can be achieved. The decision-making process should take into account public judgments, expectations, and also people's fears if a workable solution is to be found. By contrast, an immigration plan that neglects the public views on the issue risks being sub-optimal and creating negative consequences for both the present and future generations.

One obstacle to democracy's epistemic power is the assumption that many voters have access to reliable information to develop informed choices. This assumption is problematic because several real-world voters are politically ignorant and make systematic errors (Brennan, 2011, 2016; López-Guerra, 2014; Mulligan, 2015, 2017). As a consequence, many voters adopt and publicly endorse unreliable and even detrimental theories about society. Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels even argue that many American voters base their preferences on their own identity and not on reliable information (Achen and Bartels 2016). Under these conditions, how can democratic participation be instrumental to reach the right political decisions?

Epistemic democrats answer this challenge by pointing out that the average voter may not be responsible for her political ignorance (Christiano, 2015). Voters compensate for their little time or inability to acquire political information by their access to newspapers, radio programs or television broadcasts. The beliefs and statements of persons (e.g., opinion leaders) and other organizations are also crucial for many voters to develop an opinion on the matters they do not know or understand well. Besides, a good education system affordable to the many, a vigilant press, public discussions, and social fora to share opinions and information are constitutive, not accidental features of democracy. This suggests that the average voter's ignorance can be the effect of the disruption of the epistemic shortcuts through which she acquires information and develops her opinions. When these epistemic channels do not fulfil their functions, they contribute to producing voters' uninformed preferences which, in turn, can affect the decisional outcome (Christiano, 2015).

On the face of information failures and voters' ignorance in real democracies, epistemic democrats suggest enhancing the quality of the information channels from which voters acquire information and discuss among themselves. 'When democracy is epistemically inadequate, however, the solution is not to seek out and anoint a class of elite political knowers. It is to harness socially dispersed knowledge in a more effective way' (Fuerstein, 2008, p. 89). As technological communication has become the main channel of interactions among people in democratic societies, new regulatory paradigms are in order to shape the epistemic power of new information communication technologies and ensure that they work for democracy, not against it.⁶

Besides the average voter's political ignorance, critics of democracy often point out that in today's democracies, many citizens are also politically apathetic. Many citizens have little interest in becoming politically informed and participating in politics because they believe that their vote cannot affect the outcome of a general election (Caplan, 2007). In response to these claims, recent evidence suggests that citizens' political apathy is the result of the 'undemocratic' aspects of their political systems. Citizens'

desire to be politically involved grows once the opportunity for participation in meaningful political deliberation is presented and 'those most willing to deliberate are precisely those turned off by standard partisan and interest group politics' (Neblo et al., 2010, p. 582). Furthermore, many citizens in democracies 'would participate more if they believed that the system were less corrupt and would be further demobilized if it became even more corrupt' (Neblo et al., 2010, p. 570). From an epistemic perspective, these considerations indicate that one way to solve the problems of today's democracies is to design more inclusive and accountable democratic institutions, not limit democratic participation.

Leaving aside Western scholars' criticisms of epistemic democracy for a moment, an interesting set of questions on the epistemic Confucian justification of democracy arises from debates on Confucian democracy. Confucian meritocrats often question the relevance of citizens' inputs to national politics as they maintain that laypersons are unable to positively contribute to making sound decisions for public interests at the national political level.⁷ Based on such a view, democratic participation should be limited to local political affairs:

'[A] Mencian who takes into account the fact of reality may suggest the following model: all people are allowed to participate fully only in local affairs, because, in spite of their specialized jobs, they know better than officials in the distant central government which local policies and which local officials benefit them the most; the local officials – free from specialized jobs and exposed to policymaking on a local level that is itself often connected with policies on a higher level – are then likely to be capable of participating in higher-level affairs that are beyond the grasp of the common people and are thus allowed to do so' (Bai, 2008, p. 28).

From an epistemic perspective, the ordinary citizens' inability to identify the right decision at the national

political level is not the issue. What makes ordinary people's political participation valuable is precisely

their different perspectives on issues from those of professional politicians or experts, such as scientists, bureaucratic policymakers, and scholars. It is in virtue of the ordinary people's contributions in the decision-making process that the policymakers can acquire a more holistic view of issues to come to the right decisions.

One potential obstacle to the epistemic Confucian justification of democracy is that an epistemic approach supports a collective conception of political leadership, while traditionally the sage-king paradigm is at the centre of the Confucian idea of political decision-making. In response to this objection, we should note that Confucian leadership is not intended to be exercised in isolation. Confucius emphasised that the *junzi* must exercise his power in cooperation with virtuous superiors and colleagues (Slingerland, 2003, p. 178. 15.10).

In this passage of the *Analects*, there is no mention of the possibility for the *junzi* to expand their cooperation to ordinary people, but this is not an insurmountable problem for a Confucian claim for political participation. As discussed in the first section, the instrumental approach to political institutions at the basis of Confucianism opens the latter to the experimentation of different forms of political leadership for the overall good of the people. Thus, the opening of the decision-making process to members of the public must be the focus of contemporary Confucian theorizing if it aims to contribute to bringing about the desired political outcomes.

The final reason for Confucians to doubt the compatibility of epistemic democracy with the Confucian fundamental political values is their concern for the well-being of future generations. A Confucian political system must provide for the well-being of future generations as members of the historical community, yet an epistemic justification of democracy empowers the present generations to have the ultimate say on decisions that influence the future generations' well-being. This, some Confucians argue, is problematic because it might lead to giving more weight to the needs of the present

generations while the interests of the future generations may be under-represented (Qing, 2012, pp. 35–36). From this perspective, the epistemic Confucian democrat risks being not Confucian at all.

This objection presumes that the present generations would necessarily use their superior influence on the lawmakers to foster their private interests and neglect the ones of the future generations. But this assumption requires further justifications to be accepted. Recent events suggest that many voters can develop concern for the future generations if they know what the real long-term effects of their socio-economic systems are and they will exercise their political rights to demand more ambitious environmental policies.

While I am writing this paper, millions of people are taking to the streets in 185 countries around the globe to urge their governments to change their environmental policies.⁸ The face and the initiators of climate strikes are citizens below the voting age but members of the older generations (such as parents, teachers, journalists, activists, intellectuals, and also ordinary adult citizens) have not only played a major role in organizing the children's climate strikes, coordinating their public gathering in squares and public places, but also expressed their concern for the growing climate crisis. In 2019, Mothers Climate Marches took place in several cities around the world, and 200 activist groups of parents from Europe to Asia, Africa and the Americas signed a petition to urge negotiators at the 2019 UN Madrid Summit to curb climate change for the sake of future generations (BBC, 2019; Rowling, 2019).

These events suggest that one of the main obstacles to intergenerational responsibility in contemporary democracies may be the average voter's ignorance of the general long-term consequences of her way of life, not her lack of responsibility to future generations' welfare. Such a problem can be addressed by providing adult citizens with reliable information about the topic, not by limiting their political participation in decisions with long-term effects.

In summary, Confucians have strong reasons to value cognitive diversity in decision making and support political institutions that are grounded on a conception of democratic participation, where adult citizens from different

social backgrounds have equal opportunity to access reliable information, reflect on it and influence the decision-making process. Having investigated the potential for an epistemic Confucian justification of democracy, the way is now open to assess the limitations of Confucian meritocrats' proposals from an epistemic standpoint.

The epistemic limitations of confucian political meritocracy

One of the main goals of Confucian theories of political meritocracy is to show that elections and other democratic institutions may not be a precondition for good government at the national political level (Bell, 2015, p. 19). According to Confucian meritocrats, the state has greater chances to promote people's well-being if able and moral persons are in charge of the government so that they can determine what ends society as a whole should pursue and how it can effectively reach them (Bai, 2013, p. 67). So, the best way to promote the well-being of the people is to exclude or significantly limit the influence of citizens in national political decisions and establish meritocratic objective selections to choose the able and virtuous.

Confucian meritocrats' trust in political leaders' epistemic abilities traces back to the early Confucians. Distinctive of the early Confucians is the belief in the ability of society to nurture a group of exceptionally virtuous persons that can know what is good for others and how to realize such good. Thomas Metzger calls this view 'epistemic optimism' (Metzger 2005). According to this view, effective governance can be achieved through a 'division of labor between who, through demonstrated moral and intellectual excellence are qualified to deliberate and rule for the public good, and those who are not qualified, and who are ruled' (O'Dwyer, 2015, p. 36).

The early Confucians' trust in political leaders' extraordinary abilities reveals that concerns about the epistemic quality of the decision making are not foreign to the Confucian tradition. From this perspective, bringing contemporary epistemic considerations to bear on debates on Confucian political theory is not so much an attempt to assimilate Western sources into indigenous Confucian tradition but rather to answer some of the most fundamental questions in Confucianism.

The early Confucians' idea that the 'rule of the able and virtuous' is the best form of government has been strongly criticized by contemporary Confucian scholars. For Theodore de Bary, Classical Confucianism 'put upon him [the virtuous leader] all the burden of responsibility that the prophets of Israel had laid on the whole people' (de Bary 1991, p. 12), while 'the people's responsibility to Heaven as "a people"' is lacking in the *Analects* (de Bary, 1991, pp. 22–23). This is problematic because it is unlikely that morally and competent deliberators could reach the right decisions without much informational input from other members of society (O'Dwyer, 2015, p. 36).

Furthermore, today's East Asian societies are larger and far more heterogeneous than rural societies in ancient China. Consequently, today's East Asian societies are affected by far more complex problems whose solution are beyond the abilities of a small group of people. Thus, by embracing the epistemic optimism of the ancient masters for the leaders' epistemic abilities, Confucian meritocrats fail to appreciate the 'social character of political knowledge'(Fuerstein, 2008). By excluding or significantly limiting the influence of a large part of the public in national political decisions, Confucian meritocrats underestimate the complexity and the variety of knowledge and information that is required to reach right political decisions for the well-being of the people.

Confucian meritocrats might respond that such an objection misses the point. What they question is not whether capable and virtuous leaders can *know* all relevant information to reach the right decisions, but whether there are greater chances to achieve optimal outcomes for the common good when the able

and virtuous *coordinate* the relevant knowledge that is dispersed in society and have the final say on what information is more relevant to reach the right decisions.

From Confucian meritocrats, political meritocracy is irreconcilable with full democratic participation at the national political level but it is nevertheless compatible with political participation, and this suffices to rehabilitate the epistemic power of political meritocracy. Truly meritocratic leaders would listen to different experts, local politicians, and members of minority groups to reach the right decisions. To ensure their access to the largest amount of information, meritocratic leaders may encourage public discussions including members of disadvantaged groups and deliberations among citizens and experts.

This view is compelling, but it has two flaws. Epistemic democrats are concerned that citizens' inputs risk not being taken seriously in non-ideal conditions if citizens lack the final say on the decision making. Confucian meritocrats go a long way towards showing the possibility to assess leaders' emotional intelligence and personal character to ensure that virtuous persons get into power (Bell, 2015, pp. 63–150; Chan, 2013a, pp. 100–108; Bai, 2019, pp. 83–88). However, periodic elections can also be a powerful way to ensure that leaders listen to the public. Periodic elections can function as feedback mechanisms to enhance the epistemic power of the decision making by rectifying sub-optimal decisions (Anderson, 2006, p. 12).

Another concern about political leaders' ability to coordinate different epistemic inputs can be attributed to Udit Bhatia's criticism of epistocracy. According to Bhatia, one of the main problems of epistocratic rule is that it is vulnerable to 'epistemic avoidance'. Epistocracy ends up allocating more

political power to privileged social groups who are less suitable than the members of disadvantaged groups to decide what the interests of the latter are. The reason is that '[c]onfronting privilege, then, involves exposing oneself to a great deal of cognitive dissonance, which individuals tend to avoid'. Empirical studies suggest that "we avoid acquiring information that could compromise our view of

ourselves as moral actors" (Bhatia, 2018, p. 13). So, implicit biases can induce leaders to ignore certain information that is nevertheless useful to reach the right decisions. Confucian political meritocracy is also vulnerable to Bhatia's objection if leaders have the final say on what information and knowledge are crucial to decision making.

The epistemic problem raised by Bathia cannot be solved by guaranteeing members of disadvantaged groups equal opportunities for developing the relevant abilities and expertise to be selected in the meritocratic system.⁹ Empirical evidence shows that lower-socioeconomic status individuals who climb the social ladder tend to adopt different lifestyles and political perspectives from those of their original social groups. Complete behavioural shifts require years but chances in social classes that happen for very brief periods are sufficient to generate instant changes in class-based patterns of behavior (Kraus & Mendes, 2014; Kraus et al., 2012). From this perspective, empowering members of disadvantaged groups to represent their interest in the decision process may be the best way to give voice to their interests.

In conclusion, political meritocracy fails to make maximal use of citizens' situated knowledge and accommodate the intrinsic epistemic limitations of political leaders. Modern societies are affected by complex problems which require pooling different kinds of information and coordinating their integration. These tasks are beyond the abilities of a small group. While democracy shifts the burden on the decision-making system, that allows different agents to interact at different stages of the decision making, political meritocracy places too much responsibility on the leaders' shoulder. For this reason, meritocratic political systems are less equipped than democratic institutions to produce epistemically optimal decisions on issues relating to people's well-being.

This does not entail that real democratic institutions make perfect use of widely dispersed knowledge. My point is that since the character of the knowledge and the information required to reach

right decisions in modern societies for the overall well-being of the people is ultimately social, the best epistemic perspective to defend the people's well-being is democratic. A decision-making system that distributes decision power across members of society and integrates different epistemic inputs at different stages of the decision-making may have greater chances to effectively reach the right decisions for the overall people's well-being.

Before moving to the next section, one final point about Confucians' epistemic optimism is worth considering. Granted that such optimism in leaders' extraordinary abilities rests on shaky grounds, it is still at the centre of several ancient and contemporary Confucian views of governance. This makes it appear as a 'fundamental' aspect for any political theory that aspires to be 'Confucian'. If this is correct, are not the Confucian credentials of the epistemic Confucian justification of democracy defended in this paper in doubt? After all, one of its main aims is precisely to go beyond such epistemic optimism.¹⁰

This objection overstates the centrality of epistemic optimism in the Confucian thought-system. As we have seen in [Section I](#), a more fundamental principle than the optimism on leaders' epistemic abilities in Confucianism is the instrumental value of government for people's well-being. So, it is possible that the early masters defended the rule of the able and virtuous because they thought that having virtuous persons in charge of government was instrumental for the well-being of their people. If this is correct, contemporary Confucians do not risk being 'less Confucian' than the early masters by advocating a more horizontal distribution of epistemic labour among members of society (provided that the new distribution is epistemically superior). On the contrary, such a risk would occur if contemporary Confucians persisted in supporting a political order that is conspicuously inadequate for contemporary societies.

This and the last Section have argued that democracy is instrumental to relevant aspects of the Confucian well-being that are not directly related to morality. Such a claim contributes to advancing the debate between Confucian meritocrats and Confucian democrats by rejecting one of Confucian

meritocrats' main arguments against Confucian democrats. Yet, little has been said on the relationship of the epistemic Confucian justification of democracy with contemporary Confucian theories of democracy and important issues remain open to questions. For example, should Confucian democrats welcome the epistemic Confucian justification of democracy only as a claim against Confucian political meritocracy? Or does the epistemic Confucian justification of democracy have the potential to change Confucian democrats' understanding of the role of democratic institutions? These questions are addressed in the next and final Section.

Epistemic possibilities for confucian democracy

One important contribution of the epistemic Confucian justification of democracy to Confucian democratic theories is the rejection of a theoretical distinction between different political issues or political decisions. Such

a distinction is often presupposed by both Confucian and Western theories of democracy. Following Ronald Dworkin, Tan argues that the government of a pluralistic society must solve two main kinds of problems, 'choice-insensitive' and 'choice-sensitive' issues (Tan, 2009, pp. 537–53; Dworkin, 2000, p. 204). The solutions of choice-sensitive issues depend essentially on the distribution of preferences of the people within the political community, while the solutions of choice-insensitive matters are independent of the citizens' preferences and the people have little chance of making the right decisions.

According to this view, the space for meritocratic selections in a democratic political system is within the political institutions that are supposed to solve choice-insensitive issues on behalf of the public (Tan, 2009, p. 548). Such institutions, in Tan's view, already exist in many liberal democracies, where their function is to limit the power of the majority in certain specific matters. 'Confucian societies could choose different areas for this kind of "protection," and the institutions would function less as "legal restraints" and more as 'conscientious stewards' (Tan, 2009, p. 548).

The epistemic take on the problem is different. From an epistemic standpoint, there is no clear demarcation between choice-insensitive issues and choice-sensitive issues as these categories, more often than not, appear rather arbitrary. The reason for a decision-making process that is permeable to different epistemic inputs at the different stages in the process is that the solution to most of the political issues affecting advanced societies requires epistemic inputs from both experts and ordinary citizens.

Consider again the issues related to immigration policies. An effective solution to immigration issues indeed depends on the public considered judgments but it also depends on several empirical facts concerning the relations between the country's economy, its growth projections, its geographical, cultural, political and urban characteristics, and the international political context. These empirical facts are independent of the beliefs and attitudes of the citizens of the country receiving the immigrants and many citizens lack such knowledge.

In another example, many believe that climate change is a choice-insensitive issue and it is an issue that society must deal with. But how much resources are needed to fight climate change can still be partly a choice-sensitive issue. The same considerations apply to other policy issues at both the national political level and the local one, such as how the government should distribute resources to particular recipients (farm subsidies, cultural heritage sites and local infrastructures such as roads or highways), and how much resources should be redistributed to one societal group as opposed to another (progressive taxation, welfare, land reforms). So, in an advanced society, an effective solution to several political issues depends on

the collective beliefs or attitudes as well as empirically verifiable facts that are accessible only to individuals with certain expertise.

This makes a distinction between choice-sensitive issues and choice-insensitive issues less theoretically relevant, but it also suggests combining the influence of ordinary citizens with the one of experts on the decision making differently from how it has been proposed by Confucian democrats so far.

If Confucian democracy is the paradigm for future Confucian studies on institutional systems, a more holistic approach to governance is required and a collective decision making that is receptive to both ordinary citizens' perspectives, as well as experts' inputs, is in order.

Besides a more systemic view of the democratic decision making, another advantage of the argument offered in this paper over the other Confucian justifications of democracy is that it is not based on the instrumental value of democracy for the moral well-being of the people. This claim, which I have discussed in the introduction, has been challenged by both Confucian meritocrats and Kim. The epistemic Confucian argument pivots on the ability of the democratic decision-making process to reach the right decisions to meet the needs of the many. This allows Confucian democrats to hold on to the concern for people' material well-being, the main justification of Confucian political meritocracy.

Yet, the epistemic Confucian justification of democracy is compatible with other Confucian claims to democracy. As Western epistemic theories of democracy do not claim to offer the 'whole story' about democracy (remaining therefore compatible with procedural defences of democracy) (Landmore 2017, p. 289), the epistemic Confucian justification of democracy is open to the possibilities that other reasons could motivate Confucians to support democratic participation. In this regard, the epistemic Confucian justification of democracy can be reconciled with Kim's justification of democratic participation – as he maintains that the value of democracy lies in its capacity to coordinate social conflicts and establish peaceful societal relations in an environment of pluralism and moral disagreement.

Conclusion

This paper has rehabilitated democracy's instrumental value to the well-being of the people, a fundamental principle of Confucian political thought. Together with Kim's coordination-based argument, this paper offers Confucian political theorists a new reason for the importance of democratic participation and points to a way forward for Confucian theories of democracy.

What is new in this approach to Confucian theories of government is the observation that the average citizens' democratic participation is

epistemically valuable, to reach the right decisions for the people' material well-being. This is an important point to make since the concern for people' material well-being is currently the main reason for Confucian political meritocracy. Another important conclusion of this paper is that, from an epistemic standpoint, Confucian theories of political meritocracy are sub-optimal solutions since they limit the cognitive diversity in decision making at the national political level.

While the relationship between democratic participation and the Confucian well-being principle has been my primary focus, the discussion on democracy has also indicated the future trajectory for studies in Confucian democratic theory. If technological communication, which can be controlled by the unscrupulous, is the main form of interaction among members of the society, further studies on how substantive political inclusion can be realized in societies with a Confucian heritage are in order.

This paper also advances debates in 'Western' democratic theory. It shows that Confucian theories of democracy deserve more attention because most of them are based on an original instrumental approach to government, which differs from any justification of democracy currently advocated by Western democratic theorists. Lastly, the argument on the implication of different kinds of political truths for the solution of the political issues affecting a political community is new both in Western and Chinese philosophy and it can be a powerful tool for theorizing new models of democracy in these two spheres.

Notes

1. For Confucian meritocrats, a good political leader must have some essential skills (like superior social and communication skills, political know-how, and intellectual abilities) besides the right moral character. For a discussion of the relevant skills for political leadership, see Bell (2015), Chapter 2.
2. For example, drawing on Mou Zongsan's Confucian philosophy, Angle argues that 'political (and social) institutional forms do matter to moral development, and often matter enormously. This is why Confucians must advocate participatory politics and must critique oppression' (Angle 2012: 32).
3. Furthermore, Kim argues, political participation becomes an important civic virtue when democracy is understood as 'a way of life'.
4. The exception to this rule is a small section of people, the *junzi*, whose engagement in moral cultivation is independent of their material conditions. One example is Yan Hui, Confucius' favourite disciple, who took pleasure in exercising virtues even under harsh economic conditions (Slingerland, 2003. p. 56. 6.11). See also *Analects* 7.16 (Slingerland, 2003. p. 69).
5. For a discussion of the problem of partisanship during the Northern Song dynasty, see Levine (2008).
6. Christiano's rebuttal to the average voter's ignorance critique of democracy is important for Confucian political theorists not only because it rehabilitates the

epistemic approach to democracy, but also because contemporary Confucian meritocrats often rely on this critique to explain the limits of democracy (Ziliotti, 2020, pp. 6–10).”

7. A similar claim is defended by Ilya Somin (2013).
8. In 2019, students around the world went for the third time on ‘climate strike’ with the help of their teachers and families, to demand that their politicians urgently address what they consider a climate emergency. The action was coordinated via social media by volunteers and spread under the banner of ‘Fridays for Future’.
9. I advanced this proposal to improve the fairness of a meritocratic selection system (Ziliotti, 2017, pp. 246–270).
10. Shaun O’Dwyer raises a similar point against Deweyan reconstructions of Confucian democracy (O’Dwyer, 2015, p. 46).

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