

The First Draft Journal, Issue 3, 2020



The First Draft
Journal

of Philosophy, Religion,
Science, and Art

(The personal journal dedicated to publish a
short essay written suddenly within some
minutes by the way of handwriting)



Issue 3, August, 2020

Liberalism, Conservatism, and Confucianism



Confucianism can be best viewed as a social philosophy. To understand Confucianism we need to start with two ideas concerning the relation of the individual life and the society. The first idea is called *liberalism*, and the second one is called *conservatism*. In this paper, we should consider only the best version of these two social ideas.

I would like to use the examples. We

have two families, A and B. In the family A, the father and the mother think that their sons and daughters just *come from* them. The sons and the daughters are not the properties of the father and the mother. From this basic idea, the next thing that the father and the mother must accept as the moral rule is that they cannot do anything to their children without the permission of the sons and the daughters. Suppose the father and the mother believe that something done by their sons and their daughters might be the bad things for the sons and the daughters themselves, the thing that the father and the mother can do is to talk to the sons and the daughters that they think this thing is bad for the sons and the daughters. Note that the thing that the father and the mother can do is just talking. The sons and the daughters

only are the persons who would do or not do something to their life.

It could be possible that this idea can cause the bad things to the family in case their children do not have knowledge and moral responsibility enough to take care of themselves. But we are talking about the best version of liberalism. So, our assumption is that everyone in the family is the one who knows how to think rationally and how to be the responsible father, mother, son, and daughter.

Under this perfect assumption, we would find that liberalism is not bad. The thing that I would like to suggest is that if we look at the human life as an individual being in the world, good liberalism seems to best fit the cultivation of the individual life. I think every social philosophy must be

the tool for the cultivation of the human life. Liberalism is a social philosophy which believes that there is no one in the world to deeply know the life of the person more than the owner of the life themselves. The father and the mother are external things. Even though they are the good and responsible parents, finally the thing that we must accept is that they are other persons from the sons and the daughters. I think there is a deep part in the human consciousness that I would like to call the human *soul*. I do not mean the metaphysical soul. I mean the deepest consciousness of human beings. This thing is unique in each person. The son or the daughter only knows what is this thing in their life. The good parents are not able to know this thing even though they are the good and responsible parents.

One thing that we should not forget when we talk about any theory to be applied to the human life is that finally one of the most important things in the life of human beings is *happiness*. The good parents in the world usually have the good will to their children. They need their sons and daughters to have the good wife and husband. Liberalism says that such a good will is the good thing. The parents can talk with their children to let them know that what is the thing which the parents concern about in the life of their beloved children. But finally, everything has to be judged and chosen by the sons and the daughters. This is the only way to give the happiness of life to the sons and the daughters. It could be possible that the wife and the husband chosen by the parents are the good persons, but these good wife and

husband do not necessarily cause the happiness in the life of the sons and the daughters because they do not have the freedom to choose their wife and their husband by themselves.

Conservatism looks at the family and the society (including the country) from another perspective. The main question posed by conservatism is that which is the best way between thinking alone and thinking with the help of other persons in the world. I think if we start with this question, we would see that this might be the strength of conservatism. Writing the paper or the thesis in university is an activity which the student needs to work with other people especially the people who have more experiences than the students. Normally, these people are the learned professors. It is not possible for the student to write the paper or the thesis

alone. In the university where some professors have clearly declared that they prefer liberalism, the thing that we have said above has been applied including in the work of these liberalist professors. In doing thesis with the liberalist professors, the students need to listen to other (the professors and the academic committee) and in case other persons as said think that there is so much imperfection in the writing of the students, there is no way for the student to do except changing the contents and the style of the thesis as recommended by other persons.

In reading Confucianism, we would find that the philosophy given by Confucius belongs to the conservative tradition. To understand and appreciate Confucianism, we need to understand what is the good spirit of conservatism.

As we have said above, the main spirit of conservatism lies in the principle that the society should be understood as one single organism. Look at a thing that we call a man. The man is composed of head, hands, arms, feet, eyes, ears, mouth, and so on. The parts that compose a thing called man should be considered as the things that have the meaning less than the whole. The parts of the whole body cannot work individually. They have to work as part of the whole body, and everything required for each part is that the thing that it has to do must be the good thing for the whole body. It could be possible that the thing that happens to the parts is not happiness, but suffering from doing the hard work. But finally, the parts have to understand that suffering of the part would lead to the happiness of the whole. And when the whole is happy, that

happiness would be shared by each part in the end.

Confucius believes that people in the country can be compared with parts of the body, and the country is nothing but the body. Parts have to be given the proper duties, and doing their own duties of parts would lead to the happiness and stability of the country as a whole. In the conservative family, everyone knows what is the duty of mine. The father has his own duty as the father. The mother has her own responsibility as the mother. This applies well to the sons and the daughters. The thing that people in the conservative family would not think of is personal freedom. In some political philosophy such as Marxism, the concept of personal freedom in the sense that the society has no right over personal ability to do or not to do the things

that they need might not be found. In the communist countries such as China, people are not given personal freedom as found in the liberalist countries such as the USA. In some sense, it might not be wrong to say that Marxism is a kind of conservatism in the sense that in the Marxist community, the whole society is more important than the individual persons. In China, Marxism and Confucianism seem to go together well without the conflict because both of these theories are conservative in the sense that the whole must be important more than the parts.

Normally we understand that democracy is based on liberalism. I think this understanding needs the very serious examination. I think if we say that democracy needs personal freedom, there might not be a person to deny this claim. But there are other

important things that we have to discuss when we talk about democracy. For example, can democracy be applied to education in the university and in the living together in the family. The things that the students are given as the things that they have to know if they need a paper which is called the certificate do not come from their choice at all. The contents of education in the country come from some few learned persons. And this is the thing that we understand as the necessity. Conservatism believes that we need some few learned persons to lead the unlearned young generation. Confucius strongly believes this thing. One day in the future the unlearned young persons at the present would become the learned persons, and these old learned persons would lead the unlearned young generation over and over. This is the

necessary system for having the happy and firm community.

The weak point in liberalism lies in that it highly endorses personal freedom. But this weak point can be solved with the understanding that the good state in liberalist view must give personal freedom to people as much as possible. This statement has been given to the state as the mission statement. But from the perspective of people in the country, I would think that it is good that the state gives me the highest freedom which is possible. *But how to deal with this freedom is my own responsibility.* Liberalism never says that when personal freedom has been given to you, the thing that you should do is to think and act *alone*. We can imagine that some children in the family where the parents have allowed the children to have personal freedom

could think that the personal freedom which the parents give me is the great thing, but this does not mean that I should live, think, and act alone. The children in the liberalist family could be the persons who think about the duties as the sons or the daughters of the family, and when they have something which needs carefully thinking in their life (such as educational plan in their life, the persons to be their lovers, and so on) they feel that this kind of thing should be the thing that the parents should know. Certainly, they know that finally the thing that the parents would give them is just the opinion of the father and the mother, and the final decision totally belongs to themselves, but some thought from the mother and the father could bring some light for making their decision best as much as

possible. I think this has nothing against the spirit of liberalism at all.

On the contrary, the use of personal freedom permitted by liberalist community alone without the thinking of other people in the world might not be the thing intended by good liberalism.

I write this paper to encourage the students of Chinese philosophy to think that what is the thing that we can benefit from Confucianism. Some students of philosophy in the world (especially the Western students who live in the liberalist community) feel that Confucianism might be the dead philosophy that cannot be used in the modern world anymore. I would like to encourage those who have this kind of feeling to think again about the things given by Confucius. Personally, I can

accept both liberalism and conservatism on the condition that they must be the good versions of liberalism and conservatism. As we know, there is the bad version of every social and political philosophy in the world. The bad version of social and political philosophy is mainly determined by the bad important qualities of things that play the role in that system. The low-quality people who have given personal freedom and do not know how to use this thing are the main conditions that make liberalism the bad one. In the same way, the leaders of the community (the king, the prime minister, the father, and so on) who do not allow people under the rule to talk what is the thing that they think are the main conditions that would make conservatism the bad one. I think the good professors in the good university might be used as an example

of the good version of conservatism. These professors know that their duties are to create the learned members of the community. We need the learned doctors, the learned politicians, the learned prime ministers, and so on. To have these things is not possible if we do not have some few persons in the community who are the learned persons. The thing that we should know is that every learned person in the community becomes the learned person with the help and training by other learned persons. Learned persons in the community cannot be produced from the political vote. But the good political vote can be the good way for the community to find this kind of person to play the role as the learned resources of the community. In my opinion, Confucianism has the rich resource to tell us that if we need to train our young generation to be the

learned citizens of the community, what are the things that we must have in the community. And this is the benefit of the study of Confucianism in my view.

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6 August, 2020