

Book Review:

Just Hierarchy: Why Social Hierarchies Matter in China and the Rest of the World

Just Hierarchy: Why Social Hierarchies Matter in China and the Rest of the World

by Daniel A. Bell and Pei Wang. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020, 288 pages. \$29.95. Hardcover. ISBN: 9780691200897.

Nalei Chen*

This book's title may make the authors sound like time-travelers from the dark ages when hierarchy was widely accepted. Readers who form that impression severely misunderstand them. The authors do not consider all forms of hierarchy justified. In their view, most traditional hierarchies should be rejected in modern societies, despite being commonly endorsed in the past. For instance, we can no longer defend hierarchies based on racism, sexism, and the caste system. As they clarify, "we are all egalitarians who endorse the principle of equality of basic moral and legal status for citizens" (p. 12). If so, what do they intend to argue? Let us start with their negative argument. The authors target the view that "all social relations should be equal" (p. 14). They claim the target view is not feasible, because according to empirical science and history, some forms of hierarchy are inevitable for organizing large-scale communities. Neither is it desirable because eliminating all social hierarchies is utopian and will lead to moral disasters, as history proves (e.g., China's Cultural Revolution).

After rejecting the target view, the authors argue that some hierarchies can be morally justified. Put simply, their overall position can be labeled "progressive conservatism." In acknowledging the value of equality in our modern societies, they are progressive. In regarding some traditional hierarchies as still valuable, they are conservative.

* Nalei Chen is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Utah, Salt Lake City. E-mail: nalei.chen@utah.edu

Thus, they aim mainly to identify which hierarchies are justified and why. When searching for moral justification, the authors do not hope to justify these hierarchies universally. Instead, they argue that if hierarchical relations are justified, they are justified by different hierarchical principles varying by time and place. Therefore, they claim that we should analyze and evaluate different hierarchical relations concerning different contexts. Accordingly, the five chapters of the book each study a different type of hierarchical relation. Hereafter, I will briefly summarize what these relations are and why the authors consider them morally justified.

Chapter 1 discusses hierarchy between intimates. According to the authors, relations among friends operate on the basis that friends have roughly equal status. While friendship is an exception, it is intuitive to think that many other relations with intimates should not follow such a model, and need to include some degree of hierarchy. The authors offer three such cases: relations with lovers, relations with family members, and relations with housekeepers. A degree of hierarchy in these relations can bring many good effects, respectively. Based on the ancient Indian classic, *Kamasutra*, the authors argue that “shifting hierarchies” in sexual activities can help maintain passionate relationships between lovers. Adapting a Confucian perspective, they argue that age-based hierarchy between family members is also justified for various benefits it generates. Likewise, hierarchical relations between employers and housekeepers can be good because they provide householders a positive obligation to treat their housekeepers like family members, which eventually promotes the housekeepers’ well-being. Despite these salutary effects, these relations would be morally unpalatable if the hierarchies involved are permanently fixed and lead to ossification of power. The authors realize this problem and argue that these three hierarchies should be shifting. While the shifting can happen more frequently and easily in sexual activities, it takes time or is maybe less likely in the other cases, although the authors believe it can also happen. If so, the problem of ossification can be avoided.

Chapter 2 considers hierarchical political rule. The authors argue that hierarchy between rulers and ruled needs to be justified. In par-

ticular, the authors ask whether political hierarchy can be morally justified without democratic elections in a large community like China. They answer this question affirmatively. Inspired by the ideal of political meritocracy that has influenced Chinese politics for over two thousand years, they argue that “hierarchies between rulers and ruled in such communities are justified if the political system selects and promotes public officials with above-average ability and a willingness to serve the public community over and above their own private and family interests” (p. 18). Nevertheless, they do not think this ideal can be universal, and argue that it might work only in China, which has a strong tradition of elitism. Nor do they argue that political meritocracy is perfect. Political meritocracy may spur many problems, including corruption and ossification. In the rest of the chapter, the authors offer ideas for addressing these problems.

Chapter 3 discusses relations between states. Since the Treaties of Westphalia in 1648, the principle of sovereign equality has become the cornerstone of international order and peace. Although this principle is enshrined internationally, the authors argue that it hardly captures the unequal realities of state relations. Moreover, this principle has its limits when applied. The authors agree that we certainly should still pay lip service to sovereign equality. However, they argue that this is inadequate and we should adopt the ideal of hierarchical global order. In their view, global hierarchy is morally justifiable if it benefits both strong and weak states. However, the authors do not advocate establishing a single world-wide hierarchy to maintain global order, as the traditional Chinese *tianxia* model suggests. They deem this form of cosmopolitanism deeply unrealistic. Instead, they advocate “one world, two hierarchical systems,” an ideal where the world is ruled by two main coalitions, “with the United States and China as heads of two regional hierarchies of states” (p. 140). If implemented, they argue, this ideal can promote greater stability globally.

Chapter 4 examines relations between humans and animals. Many contemporary animal ethicists argue that animals are humans’ equals and should enjoy equal rights with humans. The authors reject this view and endorse the opposite view—“humans are on top of a moral hierarchy, with the power to dominate animals.” Although

they reject treating animals and humans as equals, they claim that humans owe “different levels of moral concern for different kinds of animals, depending on their capacity to suffer and their relations with human beings” (p. 175).

Chapter 5 concerns hierarchy between humans and machines. The authors worry that rapidly developing AI could one day enslave humans to super-intelligent machines. In their view, machines are created to serve our interests and should remain our slaves.

Given the preceding summary, I now offer some evaluation. First, this book excellently reminds us of the role of hierarchical relations in our society. The authors target the view that all social relations should be equal. However, before commenting on their negative program, it is fair to ask: does any contemporary moral/political philosopher defend this view explicitly? Perhaps not. As the authors note, the ideal of equality has become one main theme of Western political theory at least since John Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice* was published in 1971. While Rawls focuses on equality in distribution narrowly, social egalitarians later broadened their focus and applied the egalitarian ideal to social relations. Charitably understood, they mainly argue that since equality is morally desirable and essential, we should strive to establish a society realizing this ideal as much as possible. However, this does not commit them to saying that all social relations should be equal or no hierarchies should exist.¹ While advocating equality, these philosophers may also realize that how much the ideal of equality can be realized is an empirical question. In the end, perhaps a feasible social program maximizing equality must still include some hierarchies. I do not think a sophisticated social egalitarian would absolutely oppose including some hierarchies in her program.

Whether the authors intend to attribute the target view to any contemporary philosophers is unclear. To be charitable, I will not presume an answer. Although hardly any contemporary philosophers defend

¹ For example, a pacifist advocates world peace and wants to better the world by achieving this ideal as much as possible. However, this does not commit her to the idea that a world without conflicts and wars would be desirable if bringing about such a world involves greater disasters, e.g., eradication of all humans.

the target view, this does not render the authors' project meaningless.² Social equality has become a default moral position among many Western societies. Our commitment to the ideal of equality at times risks generating "delusions" that our world can be organized in a completely equal way or without hierarchy, which may engender excessive concern for equality in our actual decision-making. Thus, one of the book's merits is in warning us, or Western readers, of the dangers in this utopian view.³ As they observe, a large modern society cannot sustain itself without some kinds of hierarchies. If so, radical application of the ideal of equality, unmitigated by other considerations such as the function of hierarchy, can be disastrous.

In striving to identify which hierarchical relations can be morally justified and how so, the authors' methodology has many good points. First, students of East-West comparative philosophy should find this book rather exciting. While the authors mainly derive their ideas from Chinese history and philosophical traditions, they compare them with Western views. They thereby demonstrate vast knowledge of the classical texts of different traditions and put them into conservation coherently. Moreover, the authors display impressive mastery of empirical knowledge about various subjects. Their project is ambitious, since they intend to discuss hierarchical relations in different contexts. However, it is quite noteworthy that they support their arguments with copious empirical evidence from different disciplines, including psychology, sociology, political science, organizational theory, and international relations. Beyond citing extensive empirical evidence, the authors also appeal to personal experiences. For example, when discussing why we should treat our pets with care, they invoke

² Perhaps some radical activists strive to establish a community based on the target view. In this regard, the book is helpful for telling us why such radical movements are dangerous.

³ Interestingly, they are not alone in criticizing this utopianism. For example, in "The Idea of Equality," Bernard Williams, who is considered a main proponent of resurgent political realism, has a similar position. He cautions that radically applying the ideal of equality (whether as equality of opportunity or equality of respect), without considering how to reconcile it with other factors (e.g., human desires for social prestige), can lead to "a quite inhuman society" or "a futile Utopianism" (Williams 2005, 114).

one author's (Bell's) story about a cat named Didi. Undoubtedly, such stories will make the authors' arguments more accessible to readers unfamiliar with the subjects discussed.

While the book has many other merits that I lack space to discuss, it is also not without problems. I will briefly note a few here. The first problem concerns hierarchy between lovers. In chapter 1, the authors agree that "nighttime hierarchies are problematic from a feminist point of view when lovers habituate themselves to unchanging habits of dominance and subordination, even if the woman is the dominant partner" (p. 38). Their proposed solution is that intimate lovers should engage in role reversals and take turns being dominant. Certainly, as the authors note, someone who was previously oppressed in an unchanging nighttime hierarchy can benefit from this reversal. However, this does not justify nighttime hierarchy if the hierarchy itself is already problematic. Note that I take no personal stance about this nighttime hierarchy involving dominance and subordination.⁴ The authors could be right that practice of this hierarchy can help maintain lovers' relationships by bolstering passion or generating empathy. However, this does not entail that the hierarchy is just. To prove it just, the authors need to address some concerns surrounding this hierarchy. My objection derives from the authors' own concern about the negative effects of dominance and subordination. They say, "If 'private' sexual relations between lovers . . . are characterized by male dominance—with the male on top and playing the more active role—it's hard to believe that the psychological effects of male dominance won't be transferred to other realms of social interaction, including daytime interaction between lovers" (p. 37). If the authors worry about negative effects of male dominance, they may also need to worry about negative effects of dominance in general. Thus, although role reversal can shift the power relation between lovers, it does not change the nature of such relations based on dominance. In other words, if habituation in dominance and subor-

⁴ As the authors say, even when this hierarchy is voluntary, "its moral and legal implications are not straightforward" (215n36).

dination is bad, then role reversal may merely help both lovers cultivate a disposition toward dominance together, and ultimately foster a bad habit. If so, we need to worry that practicing dominance would negatively impact other interactions. Likewise, this worry also applies to the authors' general appeal to role reversal in their attempt to justify hierarchical relations.

Another problem concerns their views about hierarchies in international relations. In chapter 3, the authors mainly argue how hierarchy among states can be justified. Given their criticism of Zhao Tingyang's ideal *tianxia* system, they are clearly very concerned about feasibility. While they do not offer detailed plans for realizing their proposed hierarchical systems, they do address some thorny issues surrounding their proposal. Here I will not argue that their proposal is infeasible,⁵ but raise a different issue they have not explicitly addressed. In their ideal, China should occupy the leading position in East Asia, while neighboring states should defer to its dominant power. The authors argue that such a hierarchy is justifiable if it benefits China and its weaker neighbors mutually. One may worry whether this is merely a moral pretense that China would adopt and whether weaker states' well-being should depend on China's goodwill. Such concern is not unfounded, but assume for a moment that China does have good intentions and wants to benefit the region. My main concern is how China will do it.

To maintain the relationship, China should provide neighboring states with benefits and cultivate a sense of community with them (p. 137). While these "soft" means may win China some "buddies," it is not quite clear whether it can make all its neighbors submissive. Given the complexity of international relations, we may realistically expect that some states would still refuse to accept China's superior status, regardless of China's good efforts. Such resistance may have numerous possible causes. For instance, neighboring states may refuse to defer to China because of national pride, which, one might

⁵ Given China's rise and current China-United States relations, something like what they propose may come about in the future, although how and to what degree that can be morally justified remains unclear.

argue, is not very prudential.⁶ Then what should China do? China could ignore these defiant states. However, tolerating defiance may bring consequences: if a precedent is set and no punishment inflicted for defiance, other weak countries may disobey China when they see fit in the future. If so, one may worry how long this hierarchy can last. Or, China could take action. However, since these states are unmoved by “moral” means, what else can China do? Since the authors desire a moral justification, their justification cannot be “Might makes right.” Neither can it be considered moral if China uses its economic policies to coerce these states into submission. A hierarchy of authority within the region may foster peace and order, but if maintained through realpolitik and oppression, we may worry whether the end justifies the means.

Overall, this book is empirically informative, interesting, and thought-provoking. However, as I think the authors would agree, it is only the beginning of an ambitious project, and many relevant topics are not covered thoroughly. That said, we should look forward to their future explorations.

REFERENCES

- Bell, Daniel A., and Pei Wang. 2020. *Just Hierarchy: Why Social Hierarchies Matter in China and the Rest of the World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Williams, Bernard. 2005. *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

⁶ Other reasons can include historical conflicts, divergence of essential national interests, etc. Here I lack space to discuss whether it is immoral for weaker states to refuse to accept China’s power, if the hierarchy is indeed morally justified.