

Confucius Is Confusing

Confucius is confusing; his philosophical ideas have elicited utter bewilderment in some and complete cognitive turmoil in others, but perhaps there is a method to his madness.

Throughout history, there have been many different interpretations of Confucian thought; many have attempted to sift through the myriad of metaphors, contradictions, and anecdotes in *The Analects* in order to identify the indisputable absolutes that Confucius proposes. Scholars around the world have tried to decipher Confucius's wisdom, but what if more can be learned from recognizing the obscurity of his words than from coercing them into clarity? Confucius may make many seemingly absolute statements, but these declarations are overshadowed by their ambiguity.

One might argue that striving for absolute Goodness is integral to Confucius's philosophy, yet how can this be if he cannot define what it means to be Good? In Book Fourteen, Yuan Si asks Confucius about Goodness: "'To refrain from competitiveness, boastfulness, envy, and greed – can this be considered Goodness?' The Master said, 'This can be considered difficult, but as for its being Good, I do not know.'"¹ Confucius may emphasize his conception of Goodness throughout *The Analects*, but this emphasis does not forfeit its ambiguity. Confucius often discusses how Goodness (or lack thereof) can affect the life of an individual and the people around him/her in an intellectual or emotional sense;² but time and time again, he cannot (or will not) identify instances when Goodness is actually obtained, nor will he verify the presence of

¹ Edward G. Slingerland, trans., "*Kongzi (Confucius) 'The Analects,'*" in *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Philip J. Ivanhoe and Bryan W. Van Norden (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2001), 14:1, 40.

² *Ibid.*, 12:1, 33.

Goodness when others ask him about it³. Not only does Confucius fail to identify specific examples of when Goodness is actually attained, but he does not advocate that it is even entirely attainable. In Book Four, Confucius says, ““I have yet to meet a person who truly loved Goodness or hated a lack of Goodness.””⁴ If he has never met a single person (including himself), who has wholly dedicated himself to Goodness, how can Confucius have knowledge of absolute Goodness, let alone suggest that individuals follow or find that absolute Goodness? In fact, he suggests the opposite of this; in Book Fifteen, Confucius says, ““When it comes to being Good, defer to no one, not even your teacher.””⁵ He teaches his disciples that they should not adhere to any one person’s perception of Goodness – not even Confucius’s – because he recognizes that no two people define Goodness the same way. Therefore, absolute Goodness cannot exist in Confucius’s philosophy because an absolute Goodness would not account for all of the ways in which people’s perceptions might contradict one another.

One of the ways Confucius proposes an individual should attain Goodness is through rituals – mindful acts that some would argue Confucius believes are necessary for the cultivation of oneself and becoming a “complete person.”⁶ However, this is not the case; Confucius often emphasizes the importance of rituals in *The Analects* but does not identify them as determinates in his philosophy. In Book Fourteen of the *Analects*, when Confucius’s disciple, Zilu, asks about what constitutes the “complete person,” Confucius compares a man who practices ritual to a man who does not. When describing the first man, Confucius explains how he practices ritual and music, and thus could be considered a “complete person.”⁷ However, the second man he

³ Ibid., 14:1, 40.

⁴ Ibid., 4:6, 11.

⁵ Ibid., 15:36, 46.

⁶ Ibid., 6:22, 18.

⁷ Ibid., 14:12, 41.

describes does not practice ritual, and he says, ““When enduring an extended period of hardship, he does not forget what he had professed in more fortunate times – such a man might also be called a complete person.””⁸ Confucius explains how both men could be classified as “complete,” and yet one man does not partake in daily rites. Confucius advocates for the importance of the rites throughout the *Analects*, and would argue that by cultivating oneself through rituals, one could become a “complete person.”⁹ However, Confucius does not describe the rituals as absolutely necessary for any facet of life because, as also seen in the example above, various other qualities contribute to whether or not someone can become or be “complete.” Confucius also explains to his disciples how rituals might be detrimental to humans moving forward in their lives. In Book One, Confucius says, ““If you merely stick rigidly to ritual in all matters, great and small, there will remain that which you cannot accomplish””¹⁰. Confucius suggests that rituals are a crucial part of self-cultivation¹¹, but he also recognizes that there is danger in rigidly devoting oneself to them because rigidity allows no room for the ever-changing circumstances of life and the fluidity of identity. This may seem to contradict many statements Confucius makes in *The Analects*, but contradictions are a crucial part of Confucius’s philosophy.

Confucius appreciates contradiction, and his contradictory statements add to the ambiguity of his philosophy. In Book Eleven of the *Analects*, he says, ““Yan Hui is of no help to me – he is pleased with everything that I say.””¹² Confucius expresses how when others readily accept his ideas instead of challenging them, he is displeased. If a student accepts Confucius’s ideas without further investigation, neither person can grow or improve from their experiences.

⁸ Ibid., 14:12, 41.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 1:12, 4.

¹¹ Ibid., 12:1, 33.

¹² Ibid., 11:4, 31.

When like-minded people engage in discussion, or when one person doesn't question another's seemingly sound conclusions (as is the case with Yan Hui and Confucius), there is no room for growth because no one will be able to see where they need to strengthen their arguments, or where their arguments may fall through. This is why Confucius does not appreciate easy agreement, because discord often illuminates where one might have unknowingly succumbed to a false paradigm. Why would Confucius value discord if he believes his convictions are foolproof? In some cases, his teachings are even contradictory. In Book Eleven, two men ask Confucius the exact same question, and to each of them he gives a different response. One of Confucius's disciples notices this, and asks Confucius why his answers were contradictory. To this, Confucius replies, “‘Ran Qiu is overly cautious, and so I wished to urge him on. Zilu, on the other hand, is too impetuous, and so I sought to hold him back.’”¹³ Ran Qiu and Zilu are also disciples of Confucius, and trust his judgement. And yet, Confucius gives them both different advice because he recognizes that while the questions are the same, the individuals and the situations are different. If Zilu interprets Confucius's answer as an absolute, but Ran Qiu also interprets his answer as an absolute (as Confucius did not start his responses with the phrase “It depends on...”), who would be right? Neither would be right because Confucius does not advocate for absolutes, but rather embraces contradiction and ambiguity. It is with ambiguity and contradiction that he is able to teach his students and guide his disciples.

Confucius employs certain methods for teaching, and he often utilizes ambiguity to teach his students rather than suggesting absolutes. Throughout the *Analects*, Confucius expresses how he is not willing to teach anyone who is not willing to learn¹⁴. In Book Fifteen, he says, “‘I have never been able to do anything for a person who is not himself constantly asking, ‘What should I

¹³ Ibid., 11:22, 31.

¹⁴ Ibid., 15:16, 45.

do? What should I do?”¹⁵. Confucius’s teaching strategies are very specific; Confucius will not aid those who are not intrinsically motivated, and even then, he does not provide answers, but a piece of the puzzle so that his students can go actively seek the other pieces, and put the pictures together for themselves¹⁶. In Book Seven, Confucius says, “I will not open the door for a mind that is not already striving to understand, nor will I provide words to a tongue that not already struggling to speak. If I hold up one corner of a problem, and the student cannot come back to me with the other three, I will not attempt to instruct him again”¹⁷. This further reiterates how Confucius values his students being able to figure out problems for themselves. He does not offer his students absolutes, because to do so would impede their learning processes and abilities to come to such conclusions on their own. If Confucius did believe in absolutes, he would not articulate these beliefs to his students in a way in which they would perceive his ideas as absolutes, because to do so would contradict his strategy for teaching. In fact, if he did present his thoughts as if he believed in absolutes, he would not appreciate it if his students did not question his stipulations.

Confucius does not propose absolutes because first and foremost, he was a teacher, and he would want his students to come to conclusions on their own; he’d leave the issue of whether or not absolutes exist up to them to decide. Confucius did not condemn ambiguity, but rather embraced it because it allowed him to teach. Confucian philosophy has been the culprit of mysticism for centuries, and though many have claimed to decipher Confucius’s words successfully, perhaps the true meaning of *The Analects* still today remains a mystery. But if there is one absolute in Confucian philosophy, it is that Confucius is confusing.

¹⁵ Ibid., 15:16, 45.

¹⁶ Ibid., 7:12, 21.

¹⁷ Ibid.