How Confucius Seeks to Convince Others: Contrasting an One-World Analects with Two-World Theories

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Abstract: Western thinkers have often seen Confucianism as unique in that it does not fit well into standard categories of either religion or philosophy. In terms of how this difficulty is reflected in academia, it seems that Confucianism is simultaneously both a religion and a philosophy, and neither. This paper attempts to begin a discussion of a related issue, which has been relatively underappreciated; namely, how does Confucianism attempt to convince people to be Confucian? Restricting our discussion to the Analects, we can find appeals to a belief which seem almost religious, rational arguments which seem philosophical, and a host of other methodologies that may help to convince readers to follow the Confucian way. The discussion of the Analects is cursory here, and only a few passages will be discussed in a general manner. We will contrast this with a general outline of approaches to convincing people found in two-world theories, which can help to illuminate the uniqueness of the Analects, especially when it is read as a one-world perspective.

Keywords: Confucianism; Analects; comparative religions; comparative philosophy; morality

1. Introduction

Classifying Confucianism, especially in terms of either philosophy or religion, has long plagued Western scholars. Of the very first European readers of the Chinese tradition, many were staunch Jesuit missionaries. And while they tried to convince citizens of the Middle Kingdom that their beliefs aligned with Christian ideals, these missions were, overall, failures in many respects. Matteo Ricci (d. 1610), who was the first person to translate Confucian texts into any European language, also coined the terms “Confucianism” and “Confucius”. According to Ricci, while Confucianism is not a religion, early Confucian thought (largely pre-Qin) is a naturalistic philosophy that is compatible with Christianity, just as with much early Greek thought (Spence 1985). Ricci’s major focus was on whether or not Confucian thinkers acknowledged the existence of God. Since they did not, their beliefs were not religious. However, they did represent a form of monotheism, insofar as they developed systematic reflections on human relationships, 天 (natural world or heavens), and the relationship between humans and 天 could be considered as philosophical and compatible with developing a Christian orientation. The understanding of 天 needed to be extending to an other worldly God to help close the gap.

As the Confucian classics slowly became available in more European languages, they were met with a good deal of skepticism from many scholars. While some, such as Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (d. 1716), were quite positive about Chinese texts and sought to learn from them, many others, such as G.W.F. Hegel (d. 1831), deigned only a few positive comments and largely considered Chinese thought to lack any serious philosophy or religion. Contemporary scholarship, both in China and abroad, continues to discuss whether Chinese thought contains any religion or philosophy. Fierce debates have been further stoked by calls for greater diversity in the Western academy and controversies over whether adding a label such as “Confucian” to terms such as “virtue ethics” undersells Chinese thought.
This paper asks an underobserved question related to this perennial debate, while refraining from entering into it, namely: How does early Confucianism seek to convince people to be Confucian? Or, to put it more simply: Why be Confucian? With the discussion limited to the *Analects*, there will be less of a focus on what it means to be Confucian or how it is possible to develop a Confucian personality. The main issue we are concerned with is how Confucius and the *Analects* attempt to convince readers to follow his way. This line of inquiry is related to the discourse on labeling Confucianism as a religion or a philosophy (or in other discourses) and could, in future studies, shed new light on that debate.

In order to meaningfully explore how the *Analects* convinces people, it is useful to make some rather broad comparisons with other methods of convincing. We will look at some discussions of how religions and philosophies that are based on two-world understandings attempt to convince people and compare these observations with a one-world reading of the *Analects*. The underlying supposition is that perhaps the way Confucians aim to convince people to be Confucian is part of the reason it is difficult to classify this tradition. However, here we are only offering some initial cursory remarks to get the ball rolling on a broad way of thinking about some similarities and differences. They can be a buoyant force for gaining new insights into the *Analects* specifically and Confucianism more generally but should be recognized as observations made from a relatively broad perspective. More nuanced research would demonstrate that there are far more complexities that can be noticed in this line of inquiry.

2. One-World vs. Two-World: Religion and Philosophy

A key difference between the major religions and philosophies in the world is whether or not they rely on a “two-world” system. Some do and some do not. Broadly speaking, most Western religions and philosophies posit a second world in some form or another. This can be referred to in a number of different ways: a Platonic world of forms, the world of universals, Heaven, or Shamayim, to name a few. Additionally, there are often traces of this two-world framework even when an explicit reference is not given: notions of Truth, perfection as unattainable or otherworldly, and some interpretations of reason or rationality are all examples of ways two-world thinking is manifest even when it is not explicitly referenced. Although the exact account of the second world can vary greatly, most accounts are characterized by conceiving of the second world as outside of space and time, perfect, containing ideals, unchanging, objective, universal, and something we should aspire to emulate. Many understandings also say that humans have a special connection to this second world, be it because they first existed there, their soul belongs there, their reason can grasp it, or God wishes us to join him there. The world we live in, or *this* world, is then taken as temporary, changing, imperfect, messy, or even tainted by evil. The focus of various distinct religious beliefs and philosophical reflections should then be aimed at this second world.

By contrast, in early Confucianism and the *Analects* in particular, we find no reference to a second world. Confucius and those around him never mention another world where things are absolutely permanent, perfect, and universal. The idea of transcending space and time seems to be completely outside of Confucius’ imagination. Below we will look at broad accounts of how we can read certain aspects of early Chinese thought as developing without reference to a second world. This is not to say that we find no reference to a second world in Chinese thought, but simply that we can construct a reading of the *Analects* where no such second world is referenced. In what follows, we will consider belief and more religious themes before turning to philosophical reflection.

2.1. One-World Belief in China

In his new book, *China’s Humanistic Beliefs* (*Zhongguo de renwen xinyang* 中國的人文信仰), Lou Yulie 樓宇烈 (b. 1934) claims that much of Chinese culture is unique in so far as it “takes human as the root (*yi ren wei ben* 以人為本)” (Lou 2021, p. 3) and focuses on “the world we live in (*women shenhuo de zhege shijie* 我們生活的這個世界)” (Lou 2021,
This distinction has the potential to be useful in making more specific comparisons between certain thinkers and traditions in Chinese thought and various other thinkers and traditions in Western thought. According to Lou, a good deal of Western thought relies heavily on the construction of a second world, in both philosophy and religion, and this leads to overlooking of the significance of the human. While Lou is interested in exploring the philosophical reflections of this second world as well, much of his work is focused on religious thinking and specifically the phenomenon of “belief”.

Many other scholars have made similar observations, from David Hall and Roger Ames, to Li Zehou, Fung Yu-Lan, Guo Qiyong, and Yang Guorong. We find distinctions being drawn between cultures where people search for another world, and ones where they do not. We can classify this general difference as a difference between one-world and two-world thinking. Two-world thinking says that the second world is the world where God or gods exist, and/or it is a world where Truth and ideals may exist as well. The world we humans live in is an imperfect copy of this perfect world. Moreover, since our world was actually created by God or gods, people should therefore follow the intentions or will of the God or gods living in this other world. For those who hold this second world to be real, or even more real than the world we live in, it is the main or even exclusive target of belief. We can find this in many religions, including most forms or sects of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and even Buddhism and Hinduism—to name just a few major ones—which include some version of this second world. In sum, religious belief is, by and large, inherently linked to a second world. It is important to note that while two-world thinking is used by many thinkers to draw contrasts between Western and Chinese traditions, this can be grossly misleading.

For Lou, Hall, Ames, Li, and others, Chinese culture does not rely on a second world, which makes it somewhat unique, especially when compared with dominant Western traditions. While we may not fully agree with this classification, we can entertain some discussion of it to see what picture of religious belief and philosophical thinking it might yield. If there is no transcendence, as Hall and Ames emphasize, or no second world, then there is no God or gods that have created the world. The world then lacks a pregiven purpose, and humans too are not endowed with any special abilities or parts that belong to something higher than the actual, natural world. Indeed, many of the terms used to designate the world, such as “the sky and the earth (tian di 天地)” or “all things (wan wu 萬物)” or “[everything] under the sky (tian xia 天下)” clearly do not point to the possibility of a world beyond space and time. The Analects, in particular, does not speak of humans as connected to anything outside of the natural world. This leads the abovementioned thinkers to conclude that just as all things, all events, all ideas, and everything that we can think of, feel, or even imagine are also part of this world and only this world, or simply nature, so too are humans.

Seeing humans as fully in and of this world does not, however, negate the possibility of classifying them as special. Humans are distinct from other things in the world in that they can reflect, think, and have agency to a much higher degree than anything else. Other animals and things are bound, for the most part, to go along with other things and the natural world. They do not exhibit a significant amount of will or agency, so their actions are more or less completely dictated by their surroundings, their own nature, and their various and complex interactions. That humans are unique and break free from the otherwise causal world should be treasured. For some, including both Lou and Li, this represents the root of “belief” in Chinese culture. Chinese thought is largely humanistic, and the roots of this are found in the Analects, though we can trace them even further back as well. For Lou and Li, the particular type of humanism found in Chinese culture is exceptional when compared with other cultures, and especially when compared with most major religions that rely on a second world.

This way of reading traditional Chinese culture—as exhibited by Lou and Li—says that nothing about the human, the world, or belief itself has anything to do with a second world. For example, Lou quotes from the Book of Rites (Liji 禮記), saying Chinese believe
that “humans are the heart of the heavens and earth [i.e., nature]” (Lou 2021, p. 54). According to this reading, effective ways of organizing human society are all humanistic and based on the natural world. Accordingly, we find that problems arise when human desire gets out of hand and becomes incongruous with other aspects of nature. This is not because desire is itself evil or somehow representative of something “bad” in and of itself. It is only if desire gets out of control, that is, has inappropriate targets, is manifested at the wrong time, or is otherwise improper, that problems arise. This can be contrasted with other ways of thinking about desires. If one relies on an otherworldly notion of evil then that can mean that something like desire, or certain actions or thoughts, are always bad because they are in essence bad. The one-world reading of Chinese culture says that nothing is essentially bad; rather that things can get out of hand, or not match their environment, but nothing is simply in and of itself always “evil” in any context.

If we take a one-world approach then balance is integral to the belief system. Just as nothing is inherently bad, so too is nothing inherently good. Against the background of a single world, Lou casts Chinese belief as constructed around “acting in accordance with the time (timing) and place (environment/situation) (yinshi yindi er dong 因時因地而動)” and with “bringing about advantage through being in accord with the propensity of the situation (yinshi lidao 因勢利導).” These may not sound like pillars of belief, but only if we think of belief as oriented towards a second world. One can construct humanistic faith founded on one world with these guiding ideas. Lou says that these ideas will lead people not only to respect themselves and others, but also all things, and nature more broadly. (Similar arguments are made by Li, Hall, Ames, and others; in English, the pivotal term is often “appropriateness”).

Looking specifically at early Confucianism, we can note that self-reflection is paramount. However, the self that is reflected upon is always thought of in its contexts and situation. The self is not conceived of as abstracted from its environment, or the many social connections that constitute it. Accordingly, self-reflection is in and of this world, and does not look to a self as part of another world, or to standards or other dimensions of consideration that might be of another world either. Maintaining self-reflection allows one to have a positive influence on transformations in the world—meaning others around one, large social and political spheres, and also future generations. The belief, then, is that through cultivating oneself, one can help one’s family be well arranged, which in turn helps society and even affects the world. Again, it is a type of belief that is directed not at another world, at a god, a supernatural system or principle, but at humans, the natural world, and all their complex relationships. This is why even beliefs in various gods in China are developed in a way that differs from some other major world religions.

As mentioned above, the point of this section is not to argue that there is never any reference to anything resembling a second world in Chinese thought. There are various ways of reading early Chinese thinkers as referencing a second world, especially when we look to areas where Buddhism has been influential. But when we look at pre-Qin classics, and the Analects in particular, we do not find any systematic reference to another world—and certainly not one which is outside of space and time in the way that the second world of some other philosophies and religions is often described.

Having this world and the messy particulars of it as the exclusive target of belief has cascading effects on how people might be convinced by any ideas put forward. Below we will look more closely at some of these ramifications. First, we will explore the philosophical dimensions and see how the construction of a second world, or lack thereof, accounts for some of the most broad-reaching and drastic differences between philosophies.

2.2. One-World Philosophical Argument and Concepts in China

There are, as mentioned above, many possible reasons why early Chinese thought is not taken as a serious philosophy by much of the contemporary Western academy. In terms of the interests of this paper, we can note that some of the key issues revolve around
the way in which arguments are made and the appeal to reason. In the type of thought that Western academic philosophy does endorse, arguments are largely theoretical, rely on logic, and are supposed to have a universal appeal. Reason is at the core, and emotions often play a less significant role (although this is not always the case). Much of Chinese thought operates differently, especially when we look at academic philosophy in Mainland China or Taiwan. Broadly speaking, philosophy is not as reliant on abstract theories, and while reason and logic are employed, they are often discussed in different ways. We can also see that in some thinkers and texts, universality is not assumed or even thought of in the same way—especially when thinking about a one-world system, “universality” means something more like “general”.

The most apparent difference comes into view when we look at emotions. In texts such as the *Analects*, thought, emotions, and reason are not as strictly separated as in some other texts. While we might note a difference between thoughts, emotions, and reason, they can never be meaningfully pulled apart and analyzed in isolation from one another. As such, discussions do not appeal to one and not the others, and they are seen as developing “together”. In addition, experience and the situation one finds oneself in are always part of emotion and reason as well. Emotion is directly connected to one’s environment, the particular state of one’s body and mind, and one’s relationships with others. Experience in the world, including encounters with models one desires to emulate and the accumulation of experience about what works well and what does not, and how and why, are all part of the development of a person—i.e., their emotions and reason. In many cases, reason is neither universal nor divorced from experience. It is developed from and through experience, and therefore it is subject to its constant influence. Emotions are the same. Some exceptions notwithstanding the arguments found in early Chinese texts are then often not constructed to appeal to reason alone. And in the *Analects*, as will be shown below, there are always emotional and experiential elements to any argument.

In Chinese texts where we do not find a reference to a second world, key philosophical concepts are conceived of and argued about very differently when compared with texts where we do find a reference to a second world. Summarizing the way that philosophical imagination has developed in some strains of Western traditions, Bertrand Russell writes of “justice”:

“This common nature, in virtue of which they [instances or examples of justice] are all just, will be justice itself, the pure essence the admixture of which with facts of ordinary life produces the multiplicity of just acts. Similarly with any other word which maybe applicable to common facts, such as ‘whiteness’ for example.... The ‘idea’ justice is not identical with anything that is just: it is something other than particular things, which particular things partake of. Not being particular, it cannot itself exist in the world of sense” (*Russell* [1912] 2001, p. 52).

This description is applicable to much of Western thought, from Plato until today. Again, even though a second world is not explicitly referenced, the idea that something should be universal, objective, or pure already implicitly posits a second world, or at least a way of thinking that devalues particulars and “the world of sense”.

One way to read early Chinese thought says that in many texts the potential universality, objectivity, or pureness of concepts is not highlighted—and perhaps not even conceived of in the same way, if at all. In the foundational Confucian classics, the vocabulary that populates the discourse on acting well is comprised mainly of terms such as *ren* 仁 or “humaneness”, *yi* 義 or “duty”, *li* 禮 or “ritual”, *xiao* 孝 or “filial piety”, and *he* 和 or “harmony”. The third, ritual, does not necessarily refer to anything otherworldly. Rituals might be a conduit of communicating with the dead, or of asking the heavens for something, but the dead are not of a “second world” outside of space and time. Similarly, the heavens are just as much part of this world as dirt. Even more importantly, the specific practices that comprise ritual are subject to change. There is no assumption that their meaning is somehow “otherworldly” or communicates, as some Christian or Jewish versions might, with a world outside of space and time.
Descriptions of filial piety also make the concentration on our “world of senses” rather apparent. While there are guidelines for being filial (which are quite general and subject to change), what is most important is how one’s parents feel and their relationships. In other words, being filial is born out of interacting well and is determined by the feelings, thoughts, experiences, and other particulars of the persons involved. Nothing objective, universal, or pure is (necessarily) referenced. Even the love for one’s parents is totally contingent—one loves their parents because they are their parents. Things could be otherwise, but they are not. So one must proceed from the contingencies that make them who they are.

Harmony is also contextually determined and born from the ground up. It is not a reflection of something otherworldly, but relies entirely on how people treat one another and the meaningfulness they construct together. Unlike Russell’s description of justice, a Confucian sense of harmony does not speak to any sense of essence. Harmony is derived from the ordinary life multiplicities of constructed harmony. The idea of harmony “is identical to anything that is harmonious: it is [nothing] other than particular things….Being particular it cannot [but] itself exist in the world of sense”.

Even humaneness and duty, the cardinal virtues in early Confucian and Daoist discourse on ethics, are not discussed in a way that is consistent with thinking that posits a second world. In the Analects, Confucius discusses humaneness many times. The conversations he has with his interlocutors are a reversal of what we find in Plato’s dialogues. In Plato’s writings, those who speak with Socrates provide examples of when Socrates is looking for essences. Socrates is often narrowing the discussion, discarding particulars and other “world of sense” factors. In the Analects, Confucius speaks of examples and is asked for more abstract definitions by his students. Each time Confucius resists, demonstrating that any understanding of humaneness must be tailored to the situation and the particulars of everything involved. It is always Confucius’ task to gather more information on whatever is going on and broaden the scope of what people consider when they are trying to be appropriate. Like harmony or filial piety, humaneness and duty are thereby constituted entirely of contingencies. They are not terms that denote a concept or idea that should be reflected in the world but they are general names for various instances of effective behavior. What should be concentrated on is how exemplars of these virtues deal with their situation. As the Mencius notes of exemplary persons, they are “clear about things, investigate human relationships, and acting from [a sense of] humaneness and duty; they do not act according to humaneness and duty” (Mencius 4B47). In other words, humaneness and duty are formulated through behaviors, behaviors do not reflect them.

3. Convincing Methodologies: Two-World Religions and Philosophies

For those religions and philosophies where we find an appeal to a second world, this heavily influences their methods for convincing people. First, we may note that one way in which the distinction between philosophies and religions can be made (for example in many universities) is, as mentioned above, by noting that the former seeks to convince people mainly through appeal to reason and arguments, while the latter works on the axis of faith, belief, and experience. But many philosophies and religions have also shared reference to a second world, which means that contingencies, concreteness, and particulars are less important than whatever second-worldly and non-contingent factors that they posit. These are simultaneously the most important aspects of the person and the crux of their attempts to convince people. In other words, if reason is taken as pure and otherworldly (in some sense) or as a tool for approaching what is pure and otherworldly (in some sense), then it is both in humans that is their defining quality, and also the means through which the respective convincing methodology operates. Or, if a person is supposed to be a reflection of God, then this is what defines a human, and it is also the locus of belief and appeals to encourage people to follow this model. This does not mean that the contingent, concrete, and particulars have no place, but rather that they are significantly downplayed relative to those factors thought to be part of, or reflective of, the second world.
When analyzing how people are supposed to be convinced by philosophies and religions where a second world is referenced, we will concentrate on the moral instructions therein. This will be useful for two reasons. First, most of the weight of the convincing appeals is comprised of moral ideas. Likewise, when looking for lines of coherence between two-world philosophies and religions and a one-world reading of Confucianism, morality is obviously a good candidate. There is a shared concern for encouraging people to interact well and develop themselves into better people. Second, we can compare how the ideal moral person is conceived in two-world philosophies and religions with a one-world reading of Confucianism. The second discussion will bolster the first and is in itself an interesting point that is somewhat overlooked in comparative thought.

Using broad strokes, we can appreciate that two-world philosophical attempts to compel people to be good sometimes define a “good person” as being wholly, rightly, or actually human. In many modern two-world philosophies, this is more or less equivalent to being “rational”. Convincing someone to be good means speaking to the rational parts of a person and identifying this rational part as the part that makes a person truly a person—and it is also the part that is above contingencies, being both objective and universal. In Kant’s philosophy, for example, reason can operate apart from the contingencies of this world. Ideally, reason functions in such a way that it has nothing to do with the particulars of being “human”, and any being with reason would be subject to the same exact moral principles that are determined correct for humans. Humans should rely on their reason because they are rational beings, so reason is what makes them what they are. Other aspects of being human, such as emotion or feelings for family or of community, should be sidelined in favor of prioritizing reason. Strictly speaking, it is not “reason” that makes a person a person but it is the most important part of being a person; Kant is speaking to our capacity to be rational. It is only when acting from pure reason that rational beings (humans are just the only known cases) express their freedom. This freedom, which is completely rational, is also completely in accord with being moral. Thus, reason, freedom, and morality are all wrapped up into one tightly knit structure and anchored in concerns with “otherworldliness” or whatever is beyond space and time. Likewise, anything contingent, concrete, or particular is outside of these concerns. From feeling love to being hungry to the concrete consequence of one’s actions, everything should be ignored in favor of adherence to the pure (otherworldly) moral law. From this perspective, one way to think about the “compelling” aspect of moral philosophy is that a person should be good because they have reason and wish to express their freedom. The human capacity to participate in this otherworldliness is enough to necessitate this participation. This is one way that philosophy can try to convince people—it can appeal to transcendental reason and demonstrate, through rational argument, how humans should act.

Aristotle also concentrates on reason, but he also takes contingencies into consideration and concentrates most heavily on the “end” or telos of being human. A good person should flourish as a person, and this includes membership in various communities. This could, as in the case of the Analects, be limited to complete contingency, but this is not the route Aristotle or various contemporary Aristotelians take. Rather they seek to bracket off various contingencies and highlight an otherworldly sense of reason and a (non-contingent and inborn) capacity for agency as unique to the human species. So while some contingent factors are admitted into Aristotelian philosophies, the major impetus for being a good human comes from an abstract sense of a “human being”, which is both second-worldly and non-contingent. The human is entangled in contingencies, but the most essential aspects of being human are not wholly constituted therefrom. One should become a moral person because that is what being a person is all about, and certain facets of their personhood, including agency and reason (and perhaps others), are both non-contingent and best expressed in being moral. In sum, Aristotelian views say that the most important aspects of a person are second-worldly and non-contingent, and through convincing people of this, these theorists seek to convince people of the validity of their arguments.
There is some overlap between the way that Aristotelians view the person and try to convince people, and the way that some religions based on a two-world theory view the person and try to convince them. The method for convincing people in many two-world religions is centered on the idea of belief. Practically, it might be being born into a religious family and/or an association with certain groups that serve to convince a person to be religious. Other mechanisms, such as the use of reason, certain experiences, and exposure to rituals or texts, might also play significant roles. Belief, however, is the main anchor. Religions make use of rational arguments but also feelings of solidarity with religious communities, the experience of participating in rituals, and other experiences. They never ask that people are wholly committed to or convinced by these mechanisms. In fact, believing despite rational thought, or despite other feelings or commitments—as the story of Abraham shows—is often taken as the epitome of religious conviction.

4. A One-World Approach to Persons and Ethics

These are fairly rough sketches and they are exceedingly brief, but they do provide a useful backboard for bringing on a way of reading the approach given in the Analects into a clearer focus. In doing so, we can further appreciate the uniqueness of the method of convincing found in the Analects, which is well illuminated through the contrast. For example, when speaking of how to think of persons or morality, contemporary academic discourse largely revolves around terms such as “moral agent” or “moral reasoning”. This vocabulary reflects an implicit agreement with the content and structure of the abovementioned approaches, which are based on a second world. When thinking about persons and morality as containing, either importantly or exclusively, non-contingent factors, a gap between morality, persons, and the contingencies that surround them is necessarily created. This world, the world of senses and particulars, is less important than the other (perfect) world, the world our reason and soul can access. Since the Analects does not suggest anything outside of contingency (at least not in any detail), appreciating what the text does say requires that we move away from the terms “moral agent”, “moral reasoning”, and others that reflect this assumed distinction between contingency and non-contingency in content and structure. Any system of thought that does not separate contingency from non-contingency and sees the person and morality in the same vein does not conceive of “agent” or “reasoning” in the same way as systems which do make this separation. This is a critical difference between approaches based on a one-world perspective and those based on a two-world perspective.

Throughout the Analects, we find nearly all contingent and particular aspects of the person and morality to be relevant. What we do not find is some one aspect of the person, or even some fixed type of aspects, that is considered generally more significant than any other. What we do see is that most if not all identifiable parts—which can be loosely categorized as thoughts/reasoning, emotions/feelings, and behavior/speech—matter, and are all potentially on same playing field. Reason is not more important than emotions. As was noted above and will be explained in more detail below, these two are viewed as informing one another and inseparable. Likewise, there is no self or agent in any abstract sense. The person is taken for all the contingent factors that make them up and always dealt with as a particular person situated in concrete social, political, and natural environments. Any assessment of the person is thus attuned to the entirety of the person and the circumstances that they are part of. Therefore, contingent particulars do not merely factor into evaluations, they are all there is.

Confucius is abundantly clear that the individual contingencies of each person should constitute how we think about them. In 3.16, we find: “The Master said, ‘In archery, piercing the leather target is not the principal purpose, because people’s strength is not equal. This is the way of the ancients.’” (Ni 2017, p. 123). Here, archery is a metaphor for achieving personhood or being a “moral person”. Contingent factors are what the assessment is all about. This is clearly very different from many other theories of morality. If, for example, an abstract notion of reason, or will, or soul, is the crux of moral cultivation, ac-
tion, and appraisal, then everyone can be held to more or less the same standard. Indeed, many approaches to ethics claim “universalism” and “objectivity” precisely because everyone should act more or less the same when in similar situations. (This also posits and relies upon theory of a second world). According to this way of thinking, only in extreme cases can contingencies play any role—either in what the individual decides to do or how we judge it. With the Analects, we see basically the opposite approach. Contingencies are determinative, the more about them we can know the better. With the Analects, we see basically the opposite approach. Contingencies are determinative, the more about them we can know the better.

We find this also reflected in how the Analects attempts to persuade its readers. The way the Analects tries to convince people to be moral—and thus achieve personhood—is not dependent or even chiefly dependent upon rationality alone. Likewise, it does not necessarily appeal to humans as “agents” or as in any way divorced from their contingencies—although they can, and should, reflect on contingencies. The Analects hopes to convince people to become moral, or to become real humans (which is a “moral” not a biological category) in somewhat vague and general ways. For example, the Analects notes that other people can serve as models. Simply seeing others act well, or not act well, can be enough to motivate someone. At other times, it tells of how people can be selfish or arrogant, with the implication being that the reader will not want to be the same. There are also places where more rational arguments are constructed, but more often we find appeals to the more emotional aspects of a person. We also find places where consequences matter most, and places where consequences are less important. Thus, we cannot meaningfully single out one way in which the Analects compels people to be moral.

In this way, Confucian morality differs critically from standard approaches to ethics, at least as they are commonly taught in Western university classrooms. Confucianism does not endorse virtue ethics, care ethics, consequentialism, deontology, or a belief-based approach as the sole formulation of ethics. However, all of these orientations are, to a greater or lesser degree, relevant in different parts of the Analects. Of these commonly discussed approaches, no single method is necessarily more important for Confucius. Each can be useful depending on the context, and it is best to develop an understanding that broadly encompasses them all. Similarly, there are no one or two aspects of the person or the way they think or act that are more important than others. Being a good person speaks to how one thinks, feels, speaks, and acts (12.1)—and it is not more about intention or consequences, but always both, though sometimes one or the other may be more important.

5. Convincing Methodologies of the Analects

In terms of philosophical style, the opening lines of the Analects are characteristic of much of what we find Confucius reportedly saying throughout the text:

The Master said, “To learn (xue 学) and to practice (xi 习) what is learned repeatedly (shi 时), is it not pleasant? To have companions (peng 朋) coming from far distances, is it not delightful? To be untroubled when not recognized by others, is this not being an exemplary person (junzi 君子)?”. (Ni 2017, p. 79)

Like much of the Analects, and also much of many other pre-Qin texts, we find here some general observations that the reader may or may not agree with. Traditionally, the sheer authoritarian weight of “The Master Said” already did much of the “convincing”. Simply being something reportedly said by Confucius was enough for this to be seriously considered, at least for scholars, politicians, and anyone who wanted to be thought of as cultivated. But from a more (contemporary academic) philosophical or religious perspective, we may put aside the towering figure of the Master and think about how this line communicates with readers in other contexts. Asking rhetorical questions presumes that the reader is predisposed to agree, and though only a portion of the Analects is comprised of rhetorical questions, this attitude pervades much of the text. One is assumed to already agree, at least in part, with what is being said. In other words, readers are expected to want to be convinced, or to want to develop an agreement with what the Master says. For this reason, relatively simple and mundane observations sit alongside more complex
The passage above is asking that we spread our agreement with an easy-to-grasp part—say with the fact that it is nice to see friends who have come from far away—to other areas, such as the timely application of what one has learned or being humble. What is being given then is mainly observations that can serve as hints for the person to reflect on themselves—the importance of which can hardly be underestimated.

It seems that this type of attitude that Confucius and the Analects want people to have is the attitude that Confucius himself had towards the traditional ways of the Zhou (3.14) and in many other areas. For example, he took it as propriety (li 礼) to ask about everything in the grand temple (3.15) and was adamant that his followers should study classics on poetry, history, and rites (17.9; 11.25). Through this type of learning, Confucius thought that people would understand that they need to cultivate themselves, and that they would know how to do it. He himself engaged in the same study, and put it into practice, which is, he says, what allowed him to understand the mandate of the heavens (tianming 天命) (2.4). Indeed, Confucius is often depicted as being in awe of the greatness of the heavens (tian 天), which gave him the sense of having a mission. He traveled the fractured states, which made up the area that we now call China, looking for a ruler who would heed his teachings. Confucius was highly motivated by this sense of a mission to try to convince others and, as already outlined above, Confucius sought to ignite this same vision in others.

Perhaps one of the most important passages when considering how Confucius sought to “convince” others is also one of the most morally relevant passages, in which themes related to more religious and philosophical orientations (as discussed above) are heavily intertwined. In 17.21, we find:

Zai Wo asked, “The three-year mourning period is too long. If an exemplary person abstains from observances of ritual propriety for three years, ritual proprieties will be lost. If he abstains from music for three years, music will fall apart. Within one year the old grains will be consumed, the new grains will be available, and a cycle of using different wood for procuring fire will be completed. That would be good enough”.

The Master said, “If you were to eat fine rice and wear embroidered clothes, would you feel at ease?”

“I would,” replied Zai Wo.

The Master said, “If you would feel at ease, then do it. When exemplary persons are in mourning, they are not aware of the good taste when eating fine food, they do not feel joy when listening to music, and they do not feel at ease when lodging at home. That is why they do not do these things. But now you feel at ease, then you do it”.

Zai Wo went out, and the Master said, “How lacking in human-heartedness Yu [Zai Wo] is! It takes three years before an infant is able to leave the arms of its parents. The three years’ mourning is universally observed under heaven. Didn’t Yu receive three years of loving care from his parents?” (Ni 2017, pp. 402–3).

First, we can note that Confucius condemns Zai Wo rather harshly once he leaves. This may be an important technique as we can often be heavily swayed by our peers, often even more so than by people in authority. So it might be the case that Confucius is purposely setting up a situation where Zai Wo’s friends would encourage him to reconsider his ideas. Second, some scholars have suggested that what Confucius says at the end represents a naturalistic grounding to his moral understanding (mourning for our parents as long as they cared for us as infants). Being convincing might then be founded upon arguments grounded in naturalistic claims. However, this is not well supported by the tradition, where reference to parents’ three years of care died out, indicating that it was not the most pertinent thing that Confucius said. (Additionally, nowhere else does Confucius provide such “naturalistic claims”, so it is better to look for a reading that pervades more of the text). Third, and perhaps most importantly, what Confucius says to Zai Wo is little more than indirectly asking him to reexamine what he thinks. Confucius hopes that through Zai Wo’s reflection on his own experience, he will change his mind. But The
Master marshals no arguments, presents no principled reasoning, and posits no theory. In fact, if we are looking for well-reasoned arguments, there is no doubt that Zai Wo is the one utilizing them. Compared with Confucius, Zai Wo is a much better representative of rational argument, and what he says is much more generalizable, or even “universal”. Confucius, on the other hand, is relying completely on a subjective feeling of “being at ease”. He is asking Zai Wo to trust him (Confucius), as well as his (Zai’s) own feelings, and the practices of others, and reassess his own more rational thoughts in light of these more contingent factors.

Experience is one thread for tying together the varied approaches taken by the Analects to convince readers. The reflection the text constantly assumes must take place is reflection on one’s experience with reference to certain texts and ideas. It is not reflection that is purely rational, nor purely emotional. Someone like Zai Wo should respect the exemplary people in his community. He might not be rationally convinced, but this only means he should rely on his emotions more. If he feels “at ease” with one year of mourning, maybe there are other ways for him to reflect so that he can put into practice the three-year mourning with the corresponding psychological states. For example, thinking about what his peers tell him, or the shame he might feel, can be beneficial in his reflection on what mourning for one year means not only to him, but to others around him and their relationships as well. Broadening his experience, and being open to how others view him, will help him realize that he will not, or should not, be at ease. We can note that even the more rational reasoning Confucius expresses to Zai Wo’s friends might be available to him.

Additionally, since Confucius relies on contingencies and thinks only of this world, he does not expect any guarantees. Many simply might not have the strength or determination to follow him. Unlike a reason-based approach, reliance on a soul, or other two-world ways of thinking, the Analects never supposes that all people will follow the text in the same way. In an ideal world, everyone would follow Kant’s categorical imperative, or come to Christ, and everyone would be in general agreement with one another. But in a Confucian ideal, even if everyone was fairly Confucian, there is no uniformity—contingencies are always different, and since they constitute everything, a great amount of diversity, in all areas, will always exist. Some will feel the appropriateness of a three-year mourning period right away, others might need to spend a good amount of time cultivating their willingness to do it, and others might never get there. The Analects expects, and speaks to, the entire spectrum.

6. Conclusions

In contrast to the glosses on two-world philosophies and religions given above, what a one-world reading of the Analects provides is not principles or statements of how the world is or should be. Rather, it asks readers to reflect themselves on their circumstances and only provides starting points for such reflection. Even when there is an idea of how things should be, it expects people to do the work themselves and to come to an appropriate understanding through their own thought. There will be variance here—imagining only this world, the Analects cannot but allow for a great deal of difference, and since Confucius often comments that things will and must change, there is of course space to diverge from the content of the Analects. The uniformity that the second world can provide is absent, as is the otherworldly reason that often accompanies it. There is no attempt to construct an argument or speak to reason (alone) in the Analects. One might, post hoc, describe what Confucius says, for example in 1.1 or 17.21, as “rational”, but this is not how these passages, or the Analects in general, develop discussions. Of course, this is not to say that the text is irrational, rather simply that abstract types of reason and rational arguments are not defining characteristics of the Analects. Comparing with Western religions, where belief or faith is primary, we find something somewhat similar in the Analects. The predisposition that the text assumes comes from readers applying or noticing the veracity of the simpler statements in the text and then trusting it enough to experiment with more complex reflections. Trust in the Analects is not in a second world and does not require
as much as, for example, Christian belief in Jesus or faith in the grace of God, but it does operate somewhat similarly.

In a discussion of how early Chinese texts try to “convince” readers, Brook Ziporyn states that the Analects, for example, “doesn’t assume you are starting from a blank slate, that you are listening to things and neutrally adjudicating them” (Ziporyn 2023). Instead, it tries to convince you to be moral and to be a person in a moral naturalistic and “non-trying” type of way, like the way one learns a language. Simply by being around people, especially as a child, one learns a language without having to be convinced that they should learn it. Being exposed to texts—which includes memorizing them and reflecting on them consistently—and people in one’s community following Confucian practices will convince one in the same way that a child is “convinced” to learn their mother tongue. Just as the person is not a blank slate, they are also already in relationships with others and therefore predisposed to be influenced by them. When those around a person (or the texts they read) think, feel, speak, and behave in certain ways, the person will naturally try to be like that as well.

Just as the Analects speaks of the person being cultivated in all aspects—reason, emotions, tastes, desires, and so on—so too does it seek to convince people by appealing to those different aspects. Its appeal comes from a variety of places, from authoritative past models or texts to a person’s own intuitions, from poetry to ritual and music, from one’s friends to the community in general. Appreciating Confucianism in this way can help us to better understand its relationship to other philosophical and religious traditions, and also provides a unique perspective to reflect on contemporary moral, ethical, social, and political issues.

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Notes

1 Hegel does say that Chinese thought contains religion, but “religion of magic” or “naturalistic” religion, which he thinks constitutes a very low level of development (cf. Griffioen 2012).

2 For a robust challenge to the virtue ethics reading of Confucianism—which is mainly popular in Anglophone discourse—see discussions of role ethics, the most influential example being Ames’ (2011) Confucian Role Ethics: A Vocabulary.

3 In some sense, Confucius and Mencius were not trying to convince people to be Confucian—they are probably better understood as simply trying to help people be better people. However, when we consider about how the tradition functions, there is much to be gained from applying this type of thinking to these texts, and asking how they might respond or function in light of them.

4 The target audience of this paper is not experts in Chinese thought, but those who are interested in gaining more understanding. Generalizations help to create new frameworks for understanding different cultures. It does not mean we are attempting to essentialize a tradition, but rather create avenues for opening up new ways of appreciating differences. Otherwise, when people attempt to learn but are stuck in their fixed views, they often misinterpret new ideas and ways of thinking.

5 This observation has been made numerous times throughout the history of comparative philosophy and religion. David Hall and Ames and Hall’s (1998) Think from the Han discusses immenence versus transcendence, categorizing Chinese and Western thought, respectively, and their work has been very influential in contemporary Anglophone discourse. Many other thinkers, including Fung (1962), Huang (2018), and Guo (2009), to name only three, have made significant contributions to this discussion as well. The specific vocabulary “one-world—two-world” was developed simultaneously by Li (1998) and Ames (1993), unbeknownst to one another. While this discourse is quite popular in Chinese academia, it has been largely ignored in Anglophone studies, which are tending strongly away from any types of generalizations.

6 Lou discusses Western thought and culture in the plural and also notes that the focus on humans and this world marks a difference between other Asian cultures and thought as well. For the purposes of this paper, we will not go into too much detail on these points, as they do not significantly impact the argument we are making.
There are various ways to challenge the idea that the Chinese tradition has no “two-world thinking”. For some, early ideas of 天 (heavens) or god-like figures represent the idea of another world. More recently, Daniel Sarafinas (forthcoming) has proposed that the role of history in early Chinese thought plays a role similar to the second world in many other religions and philosophies. More obvious examples include the introduction of Buddhism, and much of the tradition after that (including Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism in particular).

There are, of course, complications to this assessment. Chinese culture has been heavily influenced by Buddhism, and there are many Chinese people who believe in Islam and Christianity. Lou provides detailed discussions of these issues in this book. However, he also speaks of Chinese culture in a broad way and usually focuses on the vast majority of (Han) people who are not Muslim and whose association with Buddhism is not reliant on a belief in a second world. For the most part, Lou is concerned with Confucianism and Daoism, which he takes as both philosophical and religious in some sense. Although, when compared with mainstream Western understandings, Lou says we might not consider Confucianism and Daoism as either philosophical or religious. Traditional Chinese thought, he continually emphasizes, is distinct and better than traditional Western thought.

The Book of Rites 9.10 reads, “人者，天地之心也”.

All translations, unless otherwise noted, are the author’s own. References to classics are given in chapter and verse number according to the Chinese Text Project (www.ctext.org (1 April 2024)), which follows the Harvard Yenching Library annotations.

In his book, Heaven and Earth are not Humane: The Problem of Evil in Chinese Philosophy (Perkins 2014), Franklin Perkins argues that some things are considered evil in early Chinese thought. Chinese scholars, such as Fei Xiao tong and Fei Xiaotong (d. 2005) (cf. Fei 1948) Li Zehou 李澤厚 (d. 2021) (cf. Li 1998), or Chen Lai 陳來 (b. 1952) (cf. Chen 2014), hold views consistent with the one given here.

Lou references a common scholarly abbreviation of different phrases found in the Wu Yue Chunqiu 吳越春秋 (History of Wu and Yue).

Here, Lou is using a common abbreviation for the phrase “yin qi shi er li dao zhi 因其勢而利導之”, found in the Shiji 史記 (Records of the Grand Historian) 65.5.

It is outside the scope of this article to go into a detailed discussion here. We can simply note that often Chinese gods, ghosts, and spirits are not outside of space and time, and even when they live in “another world”, it is one that is parallel to this one, not categorically distinct from it.

In their respective works and independently of one another, both Li Zehou 李澤厚 and Roger T. Ames have discussed significant and general differences between Western and Chinese philosophy as being founded upon the former’s development and a constant reference to a second world. They each pick out different resources from these traditions and emphasize the different dimensions that reflect how a “two-world theory” versus a “one-world theory” marks distinctions between everything from metaphysics and ontology to ethics and political theory. For more on this, see Li (1998, 2014) and Ames (1993).

By “reason” and “logic”, we are referring here to particular types of reason and logic, namely those abstract versions that dominate certain aspects of dominant Western philosophy. Undoubtedly, there are some parallels between the type of reason and logic predominant in Western philosophy and that in Chinese thought, but, as is demonstrated below, it is also important to note the differences. See also, note 17.

Even today, Guo Qiyong 郭齊勇 (b. 1947) (cf. Guo 2018), Yang Guorong 楊國榮 (b. 1957) (cf. Yang 2011), Li Zehou (cf. Li 2014), and others use pubian 普遍 and argue that it means “universal” (often referencing the English word, and Western thinkers). However, they also say that pubian or “universal” can admit exceptions, and must be adapted to circumstances. In other words, they are talking about something that is general and not universal. From the perspective of one-world, there can be nothing universal in the way a two-world theory might suppose, so being generally applicable seems universal. The two frameworks are simply different, and it is difficult to communicate smoothly between them.

This is also why we can say the “reason” and “logic” in dominant Chinese texts differs significantly from many Western counterparts. To some extent, this will be elaborated on below. For a general discussion of this, in reference to Li Zehou’s philosophy, see (D’Ambrosio et al. 2016).

In Chinese, the term 情 qìng connotes both emotions and the environment. Nearly all Chinese thinkers argue, either explicitly or implicitly, that emotions are directly connected to the environment. For a summary of this discussion, in the context of Li Zehou’s philosophy, see (D’Ambrosio et al. 2016, pp. 1059–61).

Again, we can add a number of qualifications here. There are texts, for example Mohist ones, where reasoning is prioritized, and of course there are different ways to think about what reasoning means and how we interpret reasoning in various texts.

Relatedly, the idea that nothing in this world is perfect, also rests, at least loosely, on the idea of a second world.

Fei (1948) gives a lengthy discussion of the importance of emotions in Confucianism, ultimately arguing that only a child and their parents can really determine if they are filial or not.

Because harmony is an umbrella term used to note the effectiveness of certain ways of interacting well, it is resistant to abstract conceptualization in the way that ideas such as “justice” are not. Many scholars have noted these general differences. Li Zehou, in particular, has highlighted the “otherworldly” nature of theories concerning justice and contrasted this with the “one-worldly” Chinese conception of harmony (cf. Li 2014).
There are, of course, other ways to interpret these concepts. For some scholars, such as Chung-ying Cheng (d. 2024), Confucianism is very much concerned with transcendent ideals.

There is, of course, plenty of room to question whether Western philosophy is as rational as it thinks it is. Friedrich Nietzsche was one of the most prominent thinkers to challenge this assumption, followed quickly by Sigmund Freud and many others. Today, the most influential voices speaking about this issue include scholars. For example, in The Righteous Mind (Haidt 2013), Johnathan Haidt looks at how people who are otherwise often quite rational can become overly influenced by emotions when discussing morality, and particularly when they think they are right and others are wrong. Another prominent example of how emotions and environmental factors can be determinative to the way people think is Kahneman’s (2013) Thinking, Fast and Slow. Here, Kahneman argues for two general ways of thinking, and shows that the “fast” way is mostly emotional, and highly influenced by external factors. In this article, we will not go further into these discussions, but deal rather with the way that scholars of philosophy classify the discipline, and especially note the importance of “reason” as something abstract and divorced from environmental conditions.

We should still be careful with the term “morality”. As some scholars have noted, it can be potentially misleading when discussing early Confucianism (cf. Alt 2023). (We should note too that what is misleading about “morality” is that it often evokes a second world, and from here problems arise).

Discourse comparing moral ideas often looks at principles, ideal social or political states, or details such as virtues or approaches to specific problems. Thinking about the ideal person is sometimes mentioned, but is far less popular. Importantly, it is something that Chinese scholars often describe; therefore, it ought to play a bigger role in English-language research as well.

Many of the most influential thinkers today borrow much from Aristotle, including Charles Taylor, Martha Nussbaum, or Michael Sandel. In their respective works, they all posit something beyond this world, or beyond contingencies, as an essential characteristic of being “human”. Their various methods of convincing people of their arguments all rest on strong appeals to this second-worldly non-contingent essence.

It has become increasingly popular to use these terms when discussing early Chinese thought in English. One central argument in this paper is that reliance on this language can reveal, or lead to, ways of thinking about morality/persons and the contingencies that are alien to the concerns we find in the Analects.

As noted above, Socrates, Kant, and other thinkers can be understood as dismissing particulars in favor of searching for universalities, objectivity, and essences. Confucius is precisely the opposite, always trying to gather more and more particulars.

For an in-depth discussion of why humans should not be referred to as “agents” in the context of early Confucianism, and also the importance of concrete particulars, see Rosemont’s (2015) Against Individualism. Li (2014) also provides many similar discussions.

Aristotle too thinks others can serve as models. As discussed above, virtue ethics often requires interactions with exemplary persons for the development of virtues in an individual. However, for Aristotle, the most important part of the person is still their reason, which is otherworldly. This shades the influence of role models and grounds the person and morality in a second world—something we do not find with Confucius.

We find numerous passages in the Analects where Confucius reportedly just says something, and the readers are expected to engage, or even just be convinced, by his words. For example, see 3.3, 4.18, 7.6, 12.2, 13.23 14.2, 15.4, 16.8, 17.13, or 20.3; however, this statement applies, in varying degrees, to a large percentage of the Analects. These passages are related to the rhetorical questions Confucius uses, and the general attitude associated with them. See the next footnotes for further comments.

Confucius sometimes uses rhetorical questions as a way of asking whomever he is speaking with to reflect on their own situation. Sometimes he seems to be asking them to consider another angle or to think about something new, while in other places it seems that he is just asking them to think more. This idea of self-reflection is mentioned earlier in this paper, and applies to much of the Analects, including sections where no rhetorical questions are asked. Further studies could be performed to look at these questions in more detail, as one review of this paper has suggested. Also, as the reviewer suggests, the best way to think about the way that the Analects seeks to convince its readers would be to consider each individual passage.

The entirety of chapter 10 of the Analects is a good example of this point. It is also related to the previous note about rhetorical questions. In chapter 10, we find numerous examples of how the master (either Confucius, some other exemplary person, or an imaginary figure) behaves in various contexts. Everything from the sleeping position and the amount eaten, to walking by blind persons or alighting from carriages is taken up. Sometimes readers with certain expectations regarding philosophy or religion are surprised by this chapter. But we can see that it can actually do much to “convince” readers if they are predisposed to want to act like a Master, and if they are receptive to being self-reflective in the way that the Analects hopes.

Even just being a good person to those around one was enough, Confucius thought, to count one as positively contributing to the heavenly mandate (cf. 2.21).

Edward Slingerland exemplifies such an approach, writing, “Here the universality of a three-year mourning period was linked to an essential characteristic of human biology: the helplessness and dependence of the child through the third year. The length of the mourning period was therefore not arbitrary, but grounded in the very nature of human experience” (Slingerland 2001, p. 188).

See note 12 above.
References


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