

Regular Article

The Modern Significance of Confucius' Laments in Virtue Ethics Practice

Atsushi Asai ^{1*}

Hua Xu ¹

Miki Fukuyama ²

Motoki Ohnishi ³

Abstract

This essay rereads the *Analects* by focusing on Confucius' laments, understood as emotionally charged expressions of normative tension between moral ideals and actual human conduct, social conditions, or fate. We examine twenty-one passages in which Confucius expresses disappointment, grief, self-criticism, powerlessness, or despair. These passages reveal difficulties in virtue-based moral practice: the decline of virtue, the lack of inward sincerity, the gap between understanding and practicing virtue, the limits of self-reflection and moral education, the loneliness of those who uphold moral ideals, and the absurdity of fate. Rather than treating these laments as merely biographical or rhetorical elements, we argue that they illuminate both the promise and the limits of virtue ethics. The *Analects* cannot simply be equated with contemporary virtue ethics, but Confucius' laments remain relevant to ethics education because they show that virtue cannot be taught merely as knowledge or external conduct. The concerns about moral issues and virtue ethics found in Confucius' society are yet to be resolved in the present society. Contemporary virtue education must therefore attend to inner motivation, the limits of educational effects, the social conditions that hinder virtue, and the possibility that a virtuous life may not lead to recognition, success, or happiness.

Keywords: Confucius, Analects, Virtue Ethics, Laments, Virtue education

Introduction

The *Analects* is a collection of the sayings of Confucius, one of the most influential thinkers of Eastern philosophy and a representative of Eastern culture (Tsai, 2005). The *Analects* is highly regarded in the history of philosophy, and has been read by one

generation after another for two and a half millennia in the Asian cultural sphere as well as in China (Asai, Kodooka, & Masaki, 2014). As in China, the *Analects* has long been read in Japan and influenced many Japanese; it is the classic of the classics among the Japanese people (Asai, Kadooka, & Masaki,

¹ Department of Medical Ethics, Tohoku University Graduate School of Medicine

² Course of Nursing, Faculty of Life Sciences, Kumamoto University

³ Department of Health and Welfare Public Policy, Laboratory of Public Health, Aomori University of Health and Welfare Graduate School of Health Science

* Corresponding Author

E-mail: atsushi.asai.d1@tohoku.ac.jp

2014; Saito, 2010). Japan has a long history of reading the *Analects*. It was imported from China in the early sixth century and formed the foundation of some parts of the first Japanese Constitutions by Shotoku-Taishi. Since then, through its massive acceptance by people, regardless of class, during the Edo Era, the *Analects* has molded the mentality and culture of the Japanese (Saito, 2010; Kaizuka, 1999).

We think that even now, the *Analects* is one of the most popular philosophy books in Japan (Asai, Kodooka, & Masaki, 2014). The *Analects* is popular as a practical guide, self-help book, and educational text, and has been discussed and utilized from many different perspectives. For example, it has been introduced, referred to, and quoted as an instruction manual to make the reader's life more fulfilled and happier. This is because the *Analects* teaches readers much about how to improve themselves; build personal relationships; and lead a calm, rich life (Hei, 2022). It is also frequently referred to in discussions on success at work; the ideal for a harmonious family; how individuals should live their lives; and theories of education, organization, and politics (Saku, 2010). Accordingly, many people adopt Confucius' teachings in the *Analects* as their personal motto (Hei, 2022; Saku, 2010; Uchiyama, 2011). Allegedly, Confucius teaches young disciples how to avoid being discouraged by failure as a great failure himself (Saku, 2010). Furthermore, today, it is strongly recommended to read the *Analects* as a source of mental support for people living in modern society, which threatens its members with mental distress and breakdown—a “mental standard” of sorts (Saito, 2010).

Some argue that it can play a key role in medical ethics education and when considering problems

relating to clinical ethics (Tsai, 2005; Asai, Kodooka, & Masaki, 2014; Asai, 2025). Moreover, it is a classic work of virtue ethics in the Eastern cultural sphere that mentions virtues such as humaneness (*ren*), ritual (*li*), trust (*xin*), and the Doctrine of the Mean, as well as exemplars of virtue (Kaizuka, 1999; Uchiyama, 2011; Asai, 2025). In this way, many modern writers have found their own distinct values in the *Analects* and highlight the utility of this record of Confucius' words and actions for ordinary modern readers.

This essay focuses on Confucius' laments and discusses them as important subjects of analysis, not as mere biographical or rhetorical elements. The *Analects* is not a systematic philosophical text, but a work that gathers short comments and dialogues. Clear emotional expressions by Confucius are relatively rare and thus worthy of attention in terms of methodology. Interpreted as moments when Confucius' normative expectations conflicted with the actual state of society and people, these laments visualize the limitations inherent in virtue-based moral practice and its tensions and setbacks. The laments, therefore, do not merely represent what Confucius considered most important, but also function as indicators of normative tension that demonstrate how and why these values were difficult to achieve. Focusing on laments from this perspective may improve understanding extending across time of the fragility of act-focused interiority and spontaneous self-cultivation, as well as reliance on social conditions, which are the essence of virtue ethics. Accordingly, Confucius' laments should not be regarded as random emotional outbursts. Rather, they are philosophically meaningful expressions that reveal both the promise and the limits of virtue-based moral practice.

This essay therefore aims to examine with an open mind what people engaged in ethics education, virtue education, and biomedical ethics education in modern human society can learn by better understanding the laments of Confucius from 2,500 years ago, that is, his earnest cries from the heart. Confucius aimed for a friendly and peaceful society without conflict by cultivating virtue among the people. However, what were his concerns and misgivings regarding the morality, virtue, and ethics education of his contemporaries? What issues and limitations did he sense in the essential nature of humans and in life? In our involvement in ethics education and research in modern society, we seek to discuss what we can learn by answering these questions and addressing what next we should do.

Among previous studies that pay particular attention to Confucius' complaints, sadness, and despair in the *Analects*, Olberding's work is especially important (Olberding, 2013). That discussion aimed to correct the oversimplification of the conventional argument, based on considering Confucius' complaints, that the virtuous person necessarily enjoys a good life and that notes the possibility that a virtuous life could create suffering for the individual (Olberding, 2013). Olberding's important study shows that the *Analects* does not present the good life as a simple harmony between virtue, happiness, and social success. By attending to Confucius' complaints, sadness, and despair, Olberding emphasizes that a virtuous life may involve suffering for the person who tries to live it (Olberding, 2013). Olberding also argues that her sense of the *Analects* is that it is commendably modest in what it expects to follow from the life of virtue and succeeds in avoiding any chimerical claims

concerning what the life of virtue can promise (Olberding, 2013).

We share this concern, particularly the view that Confucius' emotional expressions complicate overly optimistic readings of the *Analects*. The present essay, however, pursues a different question. Rather than focusing primarily on whether the virtuous life is happy or flourishing for Confucius himself, we ask what Confucius' laments reveal about the difficulties of virtue-based moral practice and the limits of virtue education. Our concern is therefore educational and practical as well as interpretive. Through a broader set of twenty-one passages, we examine how Confucius' laments disclose several obstacles to virtue: the fragility of inner motivation, the gap between moral understanding and moral practice, the limited effect of moral teaching on those who do not seek self-reform, the loneliness of those who uphold moral ideals, and the dependence of virtue on social conditions. In this respect, the essay aims to contribute to contemporary discussions of ethics education and virtue education by using Confucius' laments as indicators of the limits, tensions, and setbacks inherent in moral cultivation. We select and discuss 21 passages of Confucius' words and actions, of which only 6 overlaps with the Olberding paper. Furthermore, this essay presents different arguments regarding the modern-day implications derived from these readings. Accordingly, we believe that the substance of this essay is novel.

At the outset, we would like to make it clear that we are not concerned here with the details of Confucian ethics as a whole. This essay focuses solely on Confucius' words and actions as derived from the *Analects*. Confucianism developed through a long and

complex history after Confucius, especially through thinkers such as Mengzi and Xunzi. At the same time, other schools of early Chinese thought, such as Mohism represented by Mozi, developed in dialogues and competition with Confucian thought. Consequently, the contents of their arguments do not necessarily agree with Confucius' thinking in the *Analects* (Hei, 2022; Yamucha, 2016; Kanaya, 2017). It is argued that the *Analects* is the only reliable record of his teachings (Radice, 1979).

We discuss our thesis with a focus on Confucius as an individual living person and his words, actions, and way of life, not on Confucius as a sage or an object of worship. Confucius is someone who thinks and speaks and responds to the world with human instincts and an awareness of his own limitations (Confucius/Chin, 2014). With emotions that well up, like anger (Saito, 2010), we regard Confucius not as a great philosopher or thinker, but as a thoughtful individual person who had his own insights, views, and thoughts on wide-ranging problems in life and society, or as a good, familiar neighbor with a rich lived experience (Hei, 2022). It is said that the disciples remembered him for his jokes and irreverence and for his expressions of self-doubt and self-assurance as much as his profundities (Dawson, 1993).

The *Analects* is a record of Confucius' words and deeds and essentially a collection of sayings. The contents vary widely and organize many of the short phrases he uttered into a single text. These are notably characterized by their lack of organization and of systematic philosophical content (Hei, 2022). It is argued that Confucius stayed away from "putting forth theories" and did not make conjectures (Confucius/Chin, 2014).

However, the sayings were created as a result of innumerable people doing similar things over a long period. A renowned Japanese philosopher argues that sayings are wisdom regarding the matters of life that the populace has gained through various experiences over a long period, and that these are superior to the theories of individual academics (Watsuji, 1988).

Furthermore, we do not assume that Confucius' ethics and contemporary virtue ethics are identical. Confucius' understanding of virtue is inseparable from *ren*, *li*, the cultivation of the gentleman, and the restoration of moral-political order. The Confucian emphasis on ritual is a distinguishing aspect of his virtue ethics and it is claimed that we cannot refine ourselves unless we bother to learn about our community's history and its rituals and practice. Confucian ethics also makes no appeal to an objective world or structure of unchanging beings or natures (Koehn, 2022).

Although the Confucian notion of virtue was historically associated with rulers, exemplary persons, and moral-political order, Confucius' laments are not relevant only to such elite contexts. They illuminate more general difficulties of moral formation: the gap between knowing and practicing virtue, the limits of teaching virtue merely as knowledge, and the dependence of virtue on social and institutional conditions. For this reason, they can speak to contemporary ethics education, including professional ethics education, even though the historical meaning of virtue in the *Analects* differs from that in contemporary virtue ethics.

Tachibana and Nakazawa argue recently that in the West the concept of virtue is derived from the ancient Greek word *aretē*, which originally meant 'excellence' of any kind, and 'virtue' refers to the excellence that one

should acquire as a human being. They also argued that what makes the Confucian notion of virtue different from that of the West is that the notion of virtue is considered the excellence to be possessed by rulers, such as kings and monarchs, rather than by every human being, including the general public (Tachibana and Nakazawa, 2024).

Contemporary virtue ethics often discusses virtue in terms of character, practical wisdom, moral psychology and motivation, professional formation, ethical agency, a variety of bioethical decision-making, universality of virtues, and its incompleteness as an ethical theory (Rachels and Rachels, 2015). Despite its very long and rich history, debates continue among virtue ethicists regarding the relationship between righteousness and virtue, and virtue ethics can take diverse forms. Some view virtue as excellence pertaining to human fulfillment, while others see it as a disposition that contributes to harmonious interaction with others within society. The relationship between virtue and God is also complex. Furthermore, in virtue ethics, ethics is treated as something that pertains to the entirety of human life, and it is believed that our very way of life is deeply connected to virtue (Russell, 2013).

Thus, we believe that both traditions share a concern with the formation of persons rather than merely the regulation of acts. It is at this level—the difficulty of forming, sustaining, and teaching virtue—that Confucius' laments become relevant to contemporary ethics education. We also believe that the new perspective we offer in this paper is that Confucius' laments are not merely expressions of emotion; rather, they point to the moment at which the ideals of virtue ethics collide with the realities of human beings, society, and fate. The

originality of this paper lies in its systematic interpretation of these laments not as expressions of Confucius' personal misfortune or mere rhetoric, but as subjects of analysis that reveal the limitations of the practice and education of virtue.

In recent years, numerous academic papers on Confucius and the *Analects* have been published; these papers present normative ethical arguments from the perspectives of Confucius and Confucianism regarding contemporary medical decision-making, cutting-edge science and technology, human nature, and the implications of mainstream medical ethical principles and global bioethics (Lan, Zhu, & Liu, 2021; Koehn, 2022; Deng and Fan, 2023; Tachibana and Nakazawa, 2024; Tan and Neo, 2025; Jecker and Chung, 2025). There are also active research and discussion on the methods by which both the general public and professionals can cultivate their own virtues (Hawking, Curlin, & Yoon, 2017; Lamb, Brant, & Brooks, 2021; Matchett, et al., 2024; Verstegen, et al., 2024; Okamoto, et al., 2025). We will draw on the valuable findings from these papers in our discussion as needed.

The newly added literature serves three purposes in this essay. First, studies on Confucian ethics and contemporary bioethics provide the background for considering the continuing relevance of the *Analects* to present-day ethical issues. Second, studies on virtue ethics and virtue education clarify the conceptual distance between Confucian virtue and contemporary virtue ethics, while also showing their shared concern with moral formation. Third, recent work on virtue education and professional ethics helps situate the present essay within contemporary educational concerns. Unlike these studies, however, this essay focuses specifically on

Confucius' laments and interprets them as indicators of the limits, tensions, and setbacks of virtue cultivation.

This paper is structured as follows. First, the next section extracts passages with clear emotional expression from Confucius' sayings recorded in the *Analects*, and organizes and analyzes them from the perspectives of laments on contemporary society, himself, and the absurdity of fate. Then, we use the contents of these laments as a basis to consider the issues inherent to virtue ethics, such as the understanding and practice of virtue, internalizing virtue, spontaneous self-cultivation, and difficulty of virtue education. Finally, we consider what stance we should adopt in our involvement in ethics and virtue ethics education in modern society, keeping in mind both the potential and limitations of virtue ethics as demonstrated by Confucius' laments.

Confucius' laments: The 21 passages

In this essay, we use the term "laments" not simply to refer to any emotional expression by Confucius, but more specifically to passages in which Confucius expresses distress, disappointment, grief, resignation, self-criticism, or a sense of powerlessness in response to the gap between a normative ideal and actual human conduct, social conditions, or fate. Thus, a lament is understood here as an emotionally charged expression of normative tension. It reveals not only what Confucius valued, but also where he perceived virtue, moral cultivation, or ethical education to encounter resistance, limitation, or failure.

We selected passages according to three criteria. First, the passage had to include an explicit or clearly implied emotional response by Confucius, such as disappointment, grief, sadness, frustration, despair, or self-

criticism. Second, the emotion had to be connected to a moral or existential concern, rather than to a merely personal preference or incidental episode. Third, the passage had to illuminate a difficulty in virtue-based moral practice, such as the decline of virtue, the lack of sincerity, the difficulty of self-cultivation, the limits of education, loneliness, or the absurdity of fate. Passages that merely state a moral teaching without such an emotional or tension-laden dimension were not included.

The initial selection was made through repeated close readings of Annping Chin's English translation and Saito's Japanese translation (Confucius/Chin, 2014; Saito, 2010). We then consulted two other English translations and two other Japanese translations to confirm that the selected passages could reasonably be interpreted as laments in the sense defined above (Confucius/Lau, 1979; Confucius/Dawson, 1993; Kaizuka, 1999; Kanaya, 2017). The data extraction was initially performed by AA, and the other authors then reviewed and confirmed the results. Chin's English translation includes original Chinese texts, detailed commentary on every passage, and numerous references to previous research, making it extremely useful for identifying "Confucius' lament." All citations from the *Analects* are taken from Annping Chin 2014 (Confucius/Chin, 2014). The themes extracted from the 21 passages describing Confucius' laments are presented in **Table 1**.

The twenty-one passages were classified according to both the object of Confucius' lament and the type of difficulty in virtue-based moral practice that each passage reveals. The authors read the 21 selected passages multiple times to grasp their essence, grouped passages with common themes and assigned concise labels that captured the central concern of each group. The analysis

was initially performed by AA, and the other authors then reviewed and confirmed the results.

At the broadest level, the laments are directed toward three objects: contemporary people and society, Confucius himself, and fate. Within these three groups, we further distinguished the passages according to the specific moral difficulty they disclose. For example, some passages concern the decline of virtue in society, some concern the lack of inward sincerity beneath outward conduct, some concern the difficulty of understanding and practicing virtue, and others concern the limits of self-reflection or moral education.

This classification is not intended to be exhaustive or mutually exclusive in a strict sense. Some passages could reasonably be read under more than one category. Nevertheless, the classification is useful for the purposes of this essay because it clarifies the different levels at which virtue-based moral practice can fail: the social level, the interpersonal and educational level, the personal level, and the existential level. Table 1 should therefore be read as an analytical map of the difficulties disclosed by Confucius' laments, rather than as a rigid taxonomy.

Table 1: Themes extracted from Confucius' laments

<u>Laments about the contemporary period</u> "Decline of virtue in present-day society" "Lack of inner life" "Difficulty in understanding virtue and putting it into practice" "Difficulty of self-reflection" "Inferiority of virtue for beautiful people"
<u>Laments about Confucius himself</u> "Self-criticism" "Lost dreams" "Misfortune" "Limitations of educational effects" "Loneliness"
<u>Laments about fate</u> "Absurdity of birth, aging, sickness, and death"

In the following, if a single passage is longer and includes a dialogue, we extracted and included only Confucius' sayings at our discretion. We also mention other related passages outside the selected 21 when appropriate.

Laments and disappointment in contemporary people

and society (12 passages)

The following five passages lamented "the decline of virtue in present-day society." Here, the word "present-day" is used in the sense of "now" from Confucius' viewpoint. For him, 2,500 years ago was the present day.

Book 3-18: The Master said, "If in serving your ruler you try to do everything correctly by the rites,

others will look upon you as being obsequious.”

Book 5-7: The Master said, “If I cannot practice a proper way here in this world, then I shall take to the open sea and drift around on a bamboo raft.

Book 6-29: The Master said, “Attaining a balance all the time in practical matters and in everyday life (*zhongyong*) is the virtue not the best? For so long now, it has been rare to find it among the common people.”

Book 15-26: The Master said, “I am old enough to have seen scribes leave a gap when they are unsure about a word and horse owners leave the driving to those with the right skills. Nowadays there are no such cases.”

Book 17-16: The Master said, “People in ancient times had three kinds of shortcomings, but even these, I regret to say, seem to have disappeared today. In ancient times, those who were wild dared to act and speak their mind. Today, those who are wild are simply out of control. In ancient times, those who were self-regrading had principles. Today, those who are self-regarding are contentious and bad-tempered. In ancient times, those who were stupid were at least straightforward. Today, those who are stupid are deceitful.”

Book 3-18 laments the inverting phenomenon that due to the waning of morality in society and proper rites, practicing things that were natural and a matter of course to Confucius would be considered “obsequious”

and excessively ingratiating. Natural things would be regarded as abnormal. Confucianism believed that in the era in which he lived, “the world was confused about right and wrong” (Confucius/Chin, 2014). In Book 14-32, he is criticized by a hermit for using “glibness” for his own self-interest, but refutes this criticism. Book 5-7 can be read as Confucius’ wish, albeit a half-joking one, to abandon virtue education for others and flee society because of the excessive corruption of morality in the world. Like Book 3-18, Book 6-29 shows that Confucius regrets the fall of morality in the present day compared to that in the past (Saito, 2010). Book 15-26 mentions that modern society has lost its prudence and humility, and Book 17-16 laments the loss of the merits that could formerly be found in even the most unbalanced personalities. In former times, people considered eccentric had their own personalities and followed a certain logic.

Two passages lamented the “lack of an inner life” among contemporary people.

Book 3-26: The Master said, “To be without tolerance when in a high position, without respect when performing the rites, without sorrow when in mourning – what is the point of witnessing such things?”

Book 6-16: The Master said, “If you have only Song Zhao’s good looks and not Priest Tuo’s rhetorical skills, it will still be hard for you to escape unscathed in the present world!”

Books 3-26 and 6-16 both express anger at the senselessness of the attitudes, skills, and conduct lacking in a

mental inner life. A good inner life is precisely what Confucius sought in other people. He seems to have detested people who were merely superficial as suggested by Book 1-3, "A man of clever words and of a pleasing countenance is bound to be short on humanity". In Book 5-5, he also questions the need for surface-level skills.

In addition, two passages lament "the difficulty in understanding virtue and putting it into practice."

Book 5-12: Zigong said, "I do not wish others to impose what is unreasonable on me, and I also do not wish to impose what is unreasonable on others." The Master said, "Si (Zigong), this is not something that is within your power."

Book 15-4: The Master said, "You (Zilu), there are only a few who understand virtue."

In Books 5-12 and 15-4, Confucius laments situations in which his contemporaries are unable to understand virtue and cannot effectively put it into practice. Concerning Books 5-12, Chin comments, "even when a person has acted correctly in his relationship with others, this does not mean that his conduct will be reciprocated. You cannot wish one's humaneness on anyone else" (Confucius/Chin, 2014). If Chin's interpretation is right, Confucius believed that even if he were virtuous, he could not rely on others to similarly respond morally, and he appears to have despaired deeply of his contemporaries' lack of virtue.

One passage also expresses a feeling of despair concerning "the difficulty of self-reflection."

Book 5-27: Confucius said, "It's hopeless! I have yet to see anyone who could recognize his mistakes and take himself to task privately."

As Liu notes, honestly admitting one's own faults with sincerity and correcting them was highly important for Confucius, but also extremely difficult. Apologies and corrections to show off to others are meaningless, and correcting one's own faults and reforming oneself is important in becoming a better person with pure sincerity (Confucius/Chin, 2014; Baonan, 1974). Here, too, sincerity and internal honesty are questioned, and Confucius is saddened by the lack of these among others. Nevertheless, his sense of despair may also be caused by his own overly lofty ideals for the good character he expects people to have. Higher ideals mean deeper despair regarding reality. It requires self-criticism for its own sake, which will not be seen or well regarded by anyone else. Here, simply apologizing to others is not enough. This attitude toward others is harsh, but he also appears to be harsh on himself, as discussed below.

Two passages concern "the lessening of virtue for beautiful people."

Book 15-13: The Master said, "I should give up hope! I have never met a person who loved virtues as much as he loved physical beauty."

Book 18-4: The men of Qi made a present of singing and dancing girls. Ji Hunazi accepted the girls (on behalf of Duke Ding), and court was not held for the next three days. Confucius left Lu.

Confucius criticizes the difference in people's attitudes to virtuous and to beautiful people, or more accurately, our attraction to people who are beautiful rather than to those who are virtuous. Similar criticisms appear in Books 1-7, 9-18, and 16-7. In the case of the two passages mentioned here, Confucius' deep despair is detected from his direct emotional expression in the former and from his decisive act of leaving the country of Lu in the latter. However, thinking of things people are likely to prefer over being virtuous is simple: for example, their desire for status, fame, wealth, power, career success, appointment to an office, and the satisfaction of the desire to control. Our attraction to people's external beauty seems evident even today.

Laments about himself (6 passages)

In six passages, Confucius laments his own failings and treatment, the limitations of moral education, and lack of understanding demonstrated by the people around him. The first three passages record Confucius' words to himself.

Book 7-3: The Master said, "To fail to cultivate virtue, to fail to practice what I have learned, not to direct my steps toward what is right when I know what that is, and to make mistakes and not be able to correct them—these are the things that worry me."

Book 7-5: The Master said, "I must have been slipping fast! It has been so long since I dreamt of the Duke of Zhou."

Book 9-17: Standing by the river, the Master declared, "How it flows on like this, never ceasing day and night!"

Book 7-3 can be regarded as harsh self-reflection by Confucius. This passage also suggests the difficulty of putting virtue into practice, as mentioned above. Simultaneously considering the other chapters of the *Analects* (Books 7-37, 9-4, and 14-28) objectively, Confucius may have viewed himself too harshly, because he was an almost ideal virtuous person. In Book 7-5, Confucius notices that he had partially abandoned his lifelong dream of realizing his ideals, albeit largely because he led an unfortunate life due to the lack of understanding of those around him. He laments that he lost the will to reform society in moral terms (Yamucha, 2016)—that he abandoned it himself, rather than it being stolen by another.

However, Book 9-26 states, "The Master said, "One can strip the Three Armies of their commander, but no one can deprive even a commoner of his purpose" and in Book 18-6, Confucius questions "Whom can I be with if not with other human beings?" Inoue interprets this as Confucius' determination that he "must not turn his gaze from this world in great disarray and must not stray from this world teeming with human life" (Inoue, 2014). Confucius seems to have resolved this issue in a bid to avoid retreating from society. In addition, there is a statement, "A gentleman takes office in order to understand the rightness in an important human relationship (moral responsibility between ruler and subject). As for putting the moral way into practice, he knows all along that it is not possible." in Book 18-7. For Saitō, in Book 18-7, Confucius states that he knows it will be

difficult in reality, but will do it nonetheless (Saito, 2010). This may depend on the phase of Confucius' life, his situation, or mental state at the time. Regardless, these statements represent the rises and falls in his will. As such, the *Analects* present Confucius in a deeply human way. The remaining three passages express Confucius' deep despair at those around him.

Book 9-24: The Master said, "How can one not agree with exemplary words? But what is important is that they will lead you to self-reform. How can one not be pleased with gentle and tactful words of advice? The important thing is that to try to understand the point of such words. To be pleased but not to try to understand; to agree with but not bring about self-reform-there is nothing I can do with those who behave like this."

Book 15-16: The Master said, "I can never do anything for a man who has not been asking himself, 'What should I do? What should I do?'"

Book 14-37: The Master said, "No one understands me...I blame neither Heaven nor men (for any not being understood). I begin my learning on the ground and travel up to reach a higher knowledge. It is, I believe, only Heaven that understands me."

The first two passages lament that the virtue education he practices is ineffective on people who do not spontaneously seek moral correctness or truth and do not aim for self-reform. Here, too, great importance is placed on individuals' inner life and spontaneity regarding virtue.

Confucius appears to have felt powerless at his inability to inspire these in others. Book 14-37 laments his misfortune due to the lack of understanding demonstrated by those around him. The expression, "No one understands me," gives a sense of his deep loneliness.

Despair at the absurdity of fate (3 passages)

We consider that the three passages below express Confucius' laments at the absurdity of birth, aging, sickness, and death.

Book 6-10 Boniu was ill... "We are going to lose him! Such is the force of destiny, that this man should have this illness, that this man should have this illness."

Book 11-9 When Yan Hui died, the Master cried out, "Oh, Heaven is destroying me! Heaven is destroying me!"

Book 9-9 The Master said, "The phoenix has not been seen. No chart has emerged from the river. It is the end of me, is it not?"

In this regard, in Book 6-10, Confucius laments the fact that a person he considered highly virtuous had fallen seriously ill. In Book 11-9, he laments the early death of his most beloved, most adept disciple, to whom he had entrusted the Way. In Book 9-9, he laments the fact that Heaven had sent him to this world at the wrong time. Essentially, in all three passages, Confucius' grief runs deep. Specifically, Boniu is said to have been afflicted with Hansen's disease. For this, it is argued that Confucius recognized the limits of human affairs and resigned

himself to fate, given that “such an outstanding person contracted such a wretched disease” (Kanaya, 2017; Kaji, 2011).

Confucius was certain that Heaven had given him a mission to make society more moral as shown in Book 7-23, “Heaven has given me this power-this virtue (Inoue, 2014)”. The inability of his good disciple to fulfill a good, long life, and his own birth in an era when he could not complete his divine mission despite this, was a completely illogical state of affairs that made no sense to Confucius. Perceiving this condition as absurd, he was unable to find any convincing solution through human rationality or reason. As for Book 9-9, according to Chin, Confucius’ lament refers either to the fact that he would not be able to live in such a world or to the fact that he was born in the wrong age and so would never be able to realize his potential (Confucius/Chin, 2014). However, in Book 14-38, a gatekeeper describes Confucius plainly as “the person who knows that what he is working toward simply cannot be realized,” highlighting that making society more moral is impossible.

Confucius’ laments and virtue ethics

Our research on Confucius’ sayings recorded in the *Analects* revealed the various difficulties faced by a person who had firm moral ideals and sought to live in a way that realized these ideals. As shown in **Table 1**, these difficulties included contemporary people’s lack of virtue, the decline of virtue at that time, superficial conduct lacking in sincerity, practice of virtue, difficulty of virtue education and moral self-criticism, loss of ideals in an absurd life, social misfortune, and loneliness. Many aspects provide a point of entry for discussion, such as Confucius’ emotional history, ethical relativism,

reason and emotion, theories on limitations to virtue ethics in general, virtue education theory, the absurdity of life, and existence of Heaven; however, we examine the implications for those involved in ethics and virtue ethics education in modern society.

Confucius’ teachings in the *Analects* frequently include mentions of “the virtue of benevolence and acting in accordance with the rites and rightness” and moral exemplars, and they strongly include elements of virtue ethics (Kaizuka, 1999; Uchiyama, 2011; Radice, 1979; Tan, 2005). Their central issues pertain to the question of what kind of person one should become (Tan, 2005). Accordingly, we believe that Confucius’ hurtful experience and despair recorded in the *Analects* shares something in common with the experiences of people involved in ethics education, especially virtue ethics education, in modern society. This is because many major issues have been noted regarding modern virtue ethics for many years, such as different opinions on what personality characteristics constitute virtue among individuals and groups, differences in important virtues and virtue orders over time, differing views on life objectives and ideals, the weak relationship between individuals’ virtues and their conduct, potential for several virtues to suggest diametrically opposed actions, and complicated motives for action (Higgs, 1997; Hursthouse, 1991).

No clear conclusion has been derived on the question of what human moral excellence, which is one definition of virtue, is. Confucius’ contemporaries did not appear to share his awareness of the ideal form for society or desirable personality characteristics for people. Confucius was a great admirer of the Duke of Chou and looked upon himself as a transmitter of early Chou

culture, rather than as an innovator (Radice, 1979). This could be due to the decline of morals over time, as Confucius thought, or to generational differences. Confucius' laments are understandable from the viewpoint of the authors, who consider Confucius' teachings important.

Virtues are good character traits that enable human beings to act quickly, spontaneously, and happily, so that they may better attain the ends that are perfective of their nature (Austriaco, 2017). By definition, the actions of a virtuous person must be truly spontaneous. However, Confucius' laments suggest the difficulty of spontaneous virtue practice that is not superficial and originates in sincerity, as well as that in virtue education aimed at those who make no attempt to spontaneously and actively study morality. We consider this an issue that cannot be disregarded in modern virtue ethics education settings.

Several Japanese researchers recognize Confucius' teachings as "mediocre truth" and "commonsense arguments in ordinary society" (Hei, 2022), "simple morality and sound argument" (Yamucha, 2016), an "entirely natural way of life for a person in society" (Kanaya, 2017), and "dubious preaching" (Saku, 2010). In other words, these are obvious things stated since antiquity. The virtues and exemplary people Confucius discusses in the *Analects* likely existed in eras predating him, because he is reactionary rather than revolutionary and sought to restore, organize, and establish things from better days (Watsuji, 1988). Therefore, the morally important things mentioned in the *Analects* may be considered obvious preaching from more than 3,000 years ago.

At this juncture, a simple question is raised: Why are we able to easily create lists of virtues and imagine

ideal virtuous people, but not practice and embody them or effectively teach them to others? Confucius' teachings are recognized as things that "are correct but not as straightforward to put into practice in reality" (Yamucha, 2017). Confucius said, "Is humaneness far away? As soon as I desire humaneness, it is here." (Book 7-30) . However, as Chin suggests, "a person can choose to live a moral life if he wants to, and he has the strength to do so. But he resisted putting effort into it, or worse, he finds the other life-a life stripped of its moral impulses-to be alluring" (Confucius/Chin, 2014). Chin regards this situation as paradox (Confucius/Chin, 2014). We are able to identify the virtues important to us as people and to easily practice conduct based thereon if we have the will to do so. However, in many cases, we do not or cannot behave in that way. Confucius' self-criticism in **Book 7-3** suggests a similar situation.

Resolving this issue is extremely difficult, and requires that many people in society have, like Confucius, a willingness for them and their neighbors to achieve a friendly, peaceful human society that values consideration and courtesy. However, achieving this is impossible, unfortunately, unless an epoch-making virtue ethics education method is discovered. Harari claims, "Morality doesn't mean 'following divine commands.' It means 'reducing suffering.' Hence in order to act morally, you don't need to believe in any myth or story. You just need to develop a deep appreciation of suffering. If you really understand how an action causes unnecessary suffering to yourself or to others, you will naturally abstain from it (Harari, 2018)." However, we believe that developing a deep appreciation of suffering is the most difficult thing of all.

According to Freud, people engage in war based on

their desire for power, the pursuit of self-interest of all kinds, instinctive aggressiveness and violence, existence of conflicts of interest, and enmity and hatred toward people different from oneself. As long as we continue to have these vices, it is impossible to cultivate a deep appreciation of suffering (Freud, 2016). For Baldock, the period 2,500 years ago when Laozi wrote *Tao Te Ching* and the present day are no different, in that we humans pursue power and status with unceasing conflict, and it has become a compulsion to possess wealth (Baldock, 2019). Although the dating and textual formation of the *Tao Te Ching* and the *Analects* are complex, both texts emerged from the broader intellectual world of early Chinese thought. For the purposes of this essay, the important point is that the concerns expressed in these classical texts—such as power, desire, moral cultivation, and human conduct—remain relevant when we compare Confucius’ world with our own (Kanaya, 1993).

Conclusion: What should we do in our present-day lives?

The results of our research showed that living in an absurd world as a virtuous person is challenging and accordingly, emphasized Confucius’ misfortune and loneliness. Confucius traveled to foreign lands in exile. As he toured each state, he futilely hoped that the ruler of a certain country would resonate with and adopt the principles of his political philosophy. However, upon his return home, he took on no further roles and did not return to the political sphere (Hei, 2022; Yamucha, 2016; Kanaya, 2017). Confucius was a magnificent failure (Saku, 2010). He was also considered “a loser in life who died in misfortune without having done any of the things he

had wanted to” (Yamucha, 2016). After over ten years spent in travelling through the various states, Confucius, realizing that there was no hope of converting any of the feudal rules to his way of thinking, returned to Lu where he spent the rest of his life teaching a group of gifted and devoted disciples (Radice, 1979). Alongside Confucius, the same applied to his disciples.

The Master said, “Those who followed me to Chen and Cai are no longer studying with me now” (Book 11-2).

Kaizuka notes that Confucius sympathized with his disciples, who lost the opportunity to find employment because they faithfully accompanied him on his journeys to Chen and Cai (Kaizuka, 1999). Confucius lived in the late Spring and Autumn period, before the Warring States period, although many of the political tensions later associated with the Warring States world were already emerging. The powerful sought personnel with materialistic knowledge and capabilities, as well as mythical authority. However, Confucius preached the politics of courtesy by demonstrating feelings of consideration, emphasized respect as an attitude, and rejected mythical authority. This prevented the powerful of the time from accepting him while he was alive (Yamucha, 2016). However, he did not change his way of thinking to advance in the world (Yamucha, 2016), and refused to retreat from it (Saito, 2010; Inoue, 2014).

Essentially, Confucius’ credo was that people should value the feeling of consideration and live courteously (Yamucha, 2016). Government by virtue, which aims to realize a better society by instilling virtue in the hearts of the people and is centered on humaneness and

rites, seems difficult to achieve in view of this analysis and our life experiences. Laws are important in maintaining the social structure, but on their own, cannot achieve a world of heartfelt mutual care and respect. In that case, what should we do to achieve a friendly, peaceful human society that values consideration and courtesy? This is a difficult problem, but we should begin by first improving ourselves, like Confucius, from a virtue ethics perspective.

The Master stayed away from four things: he did not put forth theories or conjectures; he did not think that he must be right; he was not obdurate; he was not self-centered. (Book 9-4)

The Master said, “to give comfort to the old, to have the trust of my friends, and to have the young seeking to be near me.” (Book 5-26)

The Master is gentle but serious and principled, dignified but not fierce, respectful but relaxed.” (Book 7-38)

The Master said, “It is perhaps the word *shu*. Do not impose on others what you yourself do not want (others to impose on you). (Book 15-24)

As mentioned above, the approach of taking Confucius as a role model could be described as “exemplarism” (Lamb, Brant, & Brooks, 2021; Okamoto, et al., 2025). Second, one must also constantly strive to achieve the Mean (golden mean) so as to accomplish the goals one has set for oneself as Confucius. For Confucius, the Mean is a virtue that enables one to respond flexibly to

changing circumstances and realize one’s goals without excess or deficiency; it is an attempt to fully understand all the diverse and conflicting views and positions before making the highest quality decision that best suits one’s need to achieve the goals at any given moment (Asai, Xu, & Ohnishi, 2025). People in modern society involved with ethics and virtue ethics education must take Confucius as their model and not retreat from society and maintain his willingness, regardless of how absurd the world. One possible starting point is to cultivate virtue in ourselves while encouraging those around us to recognize its value and develop a sincere desire for similar virtues. We hope that the statement, “Virtue does not stand alone. It is bound to have neighbors (Book 4-25)” is true.

The Japanese philosopher Yamucha writes that what we should really learn from the *Analects* lies in the spirit that “a man who was no more than a mere scholar stood against state power and mythical authority without submission in an era of power struggles by force, in an attempt to return history to the right path” (Yamucha, 2016). We agree with this view. Confucius was unable to build a world of freedom and harmony by making the people of his generation virtuous. Even today, 2,500 years after his death, no one has been able to achieve this. Thus, much remains for humanity to learn from the *Analects*. We must continue to read the *Analects*, remain engaged with society, and keep striving to make the world a better place, as Confucius did, while enduring misfortune and loneliness and seeking like-minded companions.

Second, Confucius’ laments teach us about our own moral weaknesses and the obstacles that prevent us from living virtuously. According to Bazerman and

Tenbrunsel, even if we humans fully understand what is ethically correct in our daily lives, when we are actually faced with a dilemma and must take action, we are unable to act ethically due to self-indulgence, a focus on immediate gains and losses, tunnel vision, preconceptions, and vulnerability to various temptations. In their view, by being aware in advance of factors that might influence our moral actions, activating abstract thinking to recognize the values we hold dear, and acknowledging in advance the weaknesses in our capacity for ethical behavior, we can increase the likelihood of putting into practice what we believe we should do on a daily basis (Bazerman and Tenbrunsel, 2011).

From Confucius' laments recorded in the *Analects*, we can understand the moral weaknesses of human beings—including ourselves—the lack of ethical agency, and the obstacles to the manifestation of virtue. Confucius' laments are directed at us. We are weak in the face of beauty, superficial, vain, prone to self-justification, and tend not to reflect sincerely on our own undesirable behavior. We also have a tendency to prioritize fame or power over virtue. Therefore, in our view, if people come to know Confucius' laments in the *Analects* and realize that they themselves are among those being lamented, they will be able to practice basic morality and increase their potential to become more virtuous beings. Therefore, we should encourage as many people as possible to read this classic.

We now note the weak points in our argument. First, deciding which of Confucius' 500-odd teachings in the *Analects* to recognize as important laments or take as a life motto is a choice that differs between individuals. Confucius' words and actions may also be interpreted differently. Choosing between selected virtues and

sayings is to a certain extent unavoidable. Why Confucius' teachings are correct, why the characteristics he considers virtuous are virtuous, and why behaving according to his teachings is correct cannot be objectively proven. In addition to these questions, which are shared with virtue ethics in general, Confucius' teachings do not seem to fit with modern society in some respects. However, there are no perfect theories of ethics, nor are there theories that cannot be refuted. There are also no premises that everyone accepts unconditionally. Even if there were a perfect theory, it could not be used by imperfect people and would be frequently distorted, misused, or abused. We do not assert that the conclusion to this paper is universal, objective, or certainly valid. We merely hope that if those who agree with our ideas behave in the same way, human society may become a little more peaceful.

In conclusion, this paper examined the significance and implications of Confucius' laments for people involved in ethics and virtue ethics education in modern society. His words and actions as recorded in the *Analects* are very important for ethics educators like the authors. However, this education is equally important outside of educational institutions. Regular examination of the virtues and character that members of society should have, whether at home or in friendships or organizations, is essential for building a society in which people are sincerely considerate of others and courteous. In addition, insights into the limitations, tensions, and setbacks inherent in moral practice based on virtue may prevent people's educational practice from becoming excessively idealistic and fundamentalist, inhibit unnecessary criticism of people who speak or act contrary to virtue—including criticism by the people themselves—and

enable moral forgiveness with suitable magnanimity. We believe that moral education that fulfills the Doctrine of the Mean in educational settings and in daily life is necessary to achieve a better society.

Finally, we would like to add more specific reflections for present-day virtue education as follows. Taking Confucius as a model, therefore, does not mean simply imitating an idealized sage or assuming that virtue education can straightforwardly make people virtuous. Rather, Confucius' laments invite us to take seriously the difficulties and limits that accompany the cultivation of virtue. The preceding analysis suggests four implications for contemporary virtue education and professional ethics education.

First, virtue education should be based on the premise that there is a gap between understanding virtue and practicing it, and knowing virtue, being able to speak about virtue, and being able to practice virtue are different things. Second, virtue education should acknowledge the limits of educators' influence on learners' intrinsic motivation. Educators can provide knowledge and set examples, but they cannot fully produce learners' inner spontaneity. Third, virtue does not guarantee happiness, success, or recognition. Finally, virtue education should focus not only on individual cultivation but also on social conditions. In a society where it is difficult to practice virtue, individual effort alone is insufficient. Institutions, organizational culture, evaluation criteria, power, fame, and profit can all hinder the practice of virtue.

We believe that Confucius' laments offer at least these four important implications for modern ethics education and professional ethics education. The Analects is not a panacea for making people virtuous.

Nevertheless, it can provide moral reminders that help readers recognize the importance of particular norms and virtues. Such reminders may also create a psychological barrier against self-justification and self-deception (Lamb, Brant, & Brooks, 2021). These four implications constitute the main contemporary significance of Confucius' laments. They show that the Analects remains valuable not because it offers an easy solution to moral education, but because it helps educators recognize both the necessity and the limits of cultivating virtue.

References

- Asai A (2025). Clinical Ethics Tsuresure Essay. Sendai Medical Association Journal;734:51.
- Asai A, Xu H, Ohnishi M (2025). The Doctrine of the Mean and Doctor-Patient Relationship: Proposal for the Doctor-Seeking-the-Mean Model. *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry* <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11673-025-10476-x>
- Asai A, Kadooka Y, Masaki S (2014). Doubt the Analects: An educational session using the Analects in medical ethics in Japan. *Eubios Journal of Asian and International Bioethics* 24:138-141.
- Austriaco NPG (2017). Human nature as normative concept: relevance for health care, p273-285. In Thomas Schramme and Steven Edwards Editors. *Handbook of the philosophy of Medicine*. Springer, Dordrecht.
- Baldock J (2019). Introduction, in Lao Tzu Tao Te Ching Translated by John H McDonald. Arcturus Publishing Limited, London, 6-19.
- Baonan L (1974). Collected commentaries on the Analects. In New Edition of the works of the early

- philosophers. Vol. 1. Taipei: Shijie shuju.
- Bazerman MH, Tenbrunsel AE (2011). *Blind Spots. Why we fail to do what's right and what to do about it.* Princeton University Press, New Jersey.
- Confucius/Chin A (2014). *The Analects (Confucius' Lunyu)* Translated with and an introduction and commentary by Annping Chin. Penguin Publishing Group. London.
- Confucius (1979). *The Analects.* Translated with and an introduction by D. C. Lau. Penguin Books, London.
- Confucius (1993). *The Analects.* Translated with and an introduction and notes by Raymond Dawson, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Deng R, Fan R (2023). The Confucian case for a married couple's social embryo freezing. *Developing World Bioethics* 1-8 DOI: 10.1111/dewb.70002
- Freud S (2016). Letters to Einstein. In Albert Einstein, Sigmund Freud: *Why Do People Go to War?* Translated by Shogo Asami. Kodansha, Tokyo, 19–55.
- Harari YN (2018). *21 lessons for the 21st Century,* Vintage, London, p234.
- Hawking M, Curlin FA, Yoon JD (2017). Courage and compassion: Virtue in caring for so-called “difficult” patients. *AMA Journal of Ethics* 19;357-363. DOI 10.1001/journalofethics.2017.19.4.medu2-1704.
- Hei S (2022). *The Japanese Who Awoke to the “Love” of the Analects, the Chinese Who Made Confucianism a Tool of “Power”.* PHP Bunko, Tokyo.
- Higgs R (1997). Virtue, In Kenneth M Boyd, Roger Higgs, Anthony J Pinching Edition, *The new dictionary of medical ethics,* BMJ Publishing Group, London, 269-70.
- Hursthouse R (1991). Virtue theory and abortion. *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 20:223-46.
- Inoue Y (2014). *Confucius,* Shinchosha, Tokyo.
- Jecker NS, Chung RYN (2025) Lessons from li: a Confucian-inspired approach to global bioethics. *Journal of Medical Ethics* 1-8. doi: 10.1136/jme-2024-110480.
- Kaizuka S (1999). Rongo (The Analects). In Shigeki Kaizuka Edition (Chief) *Confucius and Mencius,* Chuokoronsha, Tokyo, 55-383.
- Kaji N (2011). *The Wandering Life and Teachings of the Sage “Confucius”,* pp. 6-40. Words from the Analects, edited by Ichikojin Editorial Department, KK Bestsellers.
- Kanaya O (1993). *Reflections on Chinese Thought: Tradition that Opens the Future,* Chūō Shinsho, Tokyo.
- Kanaya O (2017). *Confucius,* Kōdansha, Tokyo.
- Koehn Daryl (2022). Applying Aristotelian and Confucian virtue ethics to humane work in the business context. *Humanistic Management Journal* 7:189-209.
- Lamb M, Brant J, Brooks E (2021). How is virtue cultivated? Seven strategies for postgraduate character development. *Journal of Character Education* 17; 81-108.
- Lan L, Zhu Q, Liu Y (2021). The rule of virtue: A Confucian response to the ethical challenges of technology. *Science and Engineering Ethics* 27:64.
- Matchett CL, Usher EL, Ratelle JT, Suarez DA, et al. (2024). Physician humility: A Review and call to revive virtue in medicine. *Annals of Internal Medicine*; 177:1251-1258.
- Okamoto S, Kataoka M, Itano M, Sawai T (2025). AI-based medical ethics education: examining the potential of large language models as a tool for virtue cultivation. *BMC Medical Education* 25:185.

- Olberding A (2013). Confucius' complaints and the Analects' account of the good life. *Dao*;12:417-440.
- Rachels J, Rachels S (2015). *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* 8th edition, 2015, McGraw-Hill Education, New York.
- Radice B (Advisory editor) (1979). *Confucius. The Analects (Lunyu)* Translated with and an introduction by D.C. Lau. Penguin Books, London, p1.
- Russell DC (2013). Virtue ethics in modern moral philosophy. *The Cambridge Companion to virtue ethics*, Russell DC edition. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Saito T (2010). *Gendaiyaku Rongo (The Analects)*, Chikuma Shinsho, Tokyo.
- Tachibana K, Nakazawa E (2024). The consciousness of virtue: uncovering the gaps between educational specialists and the general public in their understanding of virtue in Japan. *Frontiers in Psychology* 14:1171247.
- Tan C, Neo R (2025). Illustrating the contribution of Confucian philosophy through a reinterpretation of Beauchamp and Childress' principle of respect for autonomy. *Monash Bioethics Review*. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40592-025-00257-y>
- Tsai DFuC (2005). The bioethical principles and Confucius' moral philosophy. *Journal of Medical Ethics* 31:159-163.
- Tan SH (2005). Imagining Confucius: Paradigmatic character and virtue ethics. *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*;32:409-426.
- Uchiyama K (2011). "The Analects" that Captivated Writers and Celebrities, pp. 55-59. *Words from the Analects*, edited by the Ichikojin Editorial Department, KK Bestsellers, Tokyo.
- Verstegen PMB, Kole JJ, Groenewoud AS, Hoogen FJA. (2024). Virtue ethics, the next step in quality improvement? *International Journal for Quality in HealthCare*;36: mzae072. doi: 10.1093/intqhc/mzae072
- Watsuji, T (1988). *Confucius*, Iwanami Bunko, Tokyo.
- Yamucha (2016). *The super guide to philosophy*. Kawade Bunko, Tokyo, 207-227.

Funding

This work was funded by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (C) (KAKENHI 22K10357): Empirical Studies using Mixed Methods Research on and Normative Considerations concerning Medical Assistance in Dying (Principal Investigator Atsushi Asai, 2022 to 2026).

Received 7 April 2026

Accepted 21 August 2026

Published online 23 August 2026