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# **Is the Course “In Dialogue with Humanity” Self-contradictory?**

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## **Introduction**

The course “In Dialogue with Humanity” centers on goodness. According to the course outline, students are expected to tell what good life and good society are and how they can be constructed (Yeung). Paradoxically, the texts adopted by the course seem to disagree on whether goodness should be emphasized. I want to make sense of this “loophole” and explore whether the course design is self-contradictory.

I would first delineate the aforementioned inconsistency with two texts. The first is *Symposium* which seems to match the course design and support the emphasis of goodness. The second is *Zhuangzi* which seems to challenge the course by negating goodness. At last, I would propose that the conflict can be resolved by reconceptualizing goodness.

## ***Symposium*: Pro-emphasis of Goodness**

The learning outcomes written in the course outline are predominated by two phrases—“good life” and “good society” (Yeung). However, the last

outcome, instead of “good”, uses “desirable” and “ideal” to describe “life” and “society” (Yeung). This suggests that goodness is desirable and ideal, echoing with Diotima and Socrates’ dialogue in *Symposium*.

Diotima and Socrates deduced that goodness is our ultimate object of desire (206b) based on the following syllogism: 1) Everyone wants to be happy (205a); 2) To be happy, one has to possess what is good (202c and 204e); 3) Therefore, everyone desires goodness (205a). Goodness thus matters to humanity.

According to Diotima, the collective desire for goodness suggests two possible cases: 1) we lack goodness or; 2) we already have it but fear losing it in the future (199e–200e). The former case is highly understandable as intuitively, we only desire what we lack. There is no need to want something if we already possess it. Immediately challenging it, however, is the latter case—we cannot guarantee that our possession is permanent. We yearn for future possession. Desire can thereby sustain even though we already have what we want. Now some might perceive their lives as permanently good. Absurd as it sounds, a possible way to conceive it is to believe that everything (including anything that will be) in life is good. Yet, the sense of being permanently good could still be ephemeral and the desire for it could reemerge again. Here I present the third case—3) we are uncertain of what goodness **really** is. That is, what we **think** is good might not be **truly** good. Once the doubt strikes us, we no longer feel good. We cannot claim to possess goodness if we cannot ascertain whether our standard of goodness is perfectly true. With that uncertainty, we have yet to possess goodness. Now I would show how the case just presented is rooted and developed from Diotima’s contemplation of beauty.

Diotima conceived knowledge of beauty as eternal, immutable, perfect, unique, transcending substance and instance (211a–e). Such knowledge

could be acquired at the “final end” of education (210e), preceded by generalizing particular cases of beauty and philosophical reflections (210d). In other words, during the learning process, we only see parts of true beauty. And when we gather enough of them, we could finally understand it. This knowledge serves as the standard of the good, engendering absolutely good thoughts and actions, making us immortal and god-like (211e). It would satisfy us permanently, and our lives would be worth living (211d). Presumably, that “final end” could be infinitely distant if the knowledge is as powerful as Diotima described. It is unlikely that anyone has acquired it and completely understood goodness. As a result, our uncertainty persists. Our thirst for goodness thus cannot be quenched. This offers an account of humanity’s continuous desire for goodness.

In light of the above, *Symposium* supports the emphasis of goodness in this course for three reasons: 1) Goodness is humanity’s common and ultimate goal; 2) We have not reached that goal; and, 3) The course offers a podium for education and philosophy, which might lead us to that goal. This might be the rationale of the course design.

### ***Zhuangzi: Anti-emphasis of Goodness***

Intriguingly, not all texts in this course are in line with the rationale just described. For example, Zhuangzi suggested that we should stop pursuing goodness as he contended it would blind us from the truth. He might respond to Diotima in at least the following ways.

First, nothing is absolutely good. In “Free and Easy Wandering”, Hui Tzu satirizes Zhuangzi by comparing Zhuangzi’s words with a huge gourd and a tree named shu (*Zhuangzi* 79–80). The former is too heavy to be used as a container and too large to be used as a dipper (79). The latter is big

but weirdly shaped and therefore does not interest carpenters (80). The two metaphors imply that Zhuangzi's words are big but useless, failing to draw attention from the public. Zhuangzi responds by pointing out Hui Tzu's prejudice. The huge gourd, though cannot be made into utensils, can be used as a tub for floating in water (80). Thus, whether something is useful or not depends solely on how we use or view them. Similarly, nothing is absolutely good or bad by essence. Whether something is good can always change with our thoughts.

Second, Zhuangzi went further than proposing relativism—he even undermined the meaning of categorizing things into “good” and “bad”. He thought that all attributes of things are not the nature of things, but artificial names. We name things to differentiate them, calling them “this” or “that”, “good” or “bad”, and so on. However, from the perspective of “that”, “this” is “that”; from the perspective of “bad”, “good” is “bad” (83–84). “This” is also “that”, “good” is also “bad”, and vice versa (84). Therefore, things appear to be better or worse not because they are naturally so, but out of our perceptions, which do not necessarily reflect the truth. Zhuangzi advocated seeing things from the perspective of nature, then we would realize that everything is equal—we are all just products of nature (90). One modern way to make sense of this equality is that everything is simply combinations of protons, electrons or neutrons—the chemical nature of things. The more we try to differentiate them into good or bad, the more we conceal their nature, the further we are from the truth.

If goodness is unrelated to the truth, then it might not be our ultimate object of desire. This is because, as described previously why humans continuously desire goodness, only the truth can confer certainty, neutralize doubts, and completely satisfy us. Moreover, unlike Diotima, who believed

humans can attain perfection, Zhuangzi told us to doubt our capacities and “lose our selves” (81). He thought that to approach the truth, or the Way as he named it, one cannot be confined by his human perspective or else he is doomed to fail. Therefore, Zhuangzi proposed abandoning our body, mind, self, conventions, reasoning—everything. In that way, we can become nothing and do nothing—totally spontaneous and purely subject to the force of nature (81). He would likely advocate the abandonment of education and philosophy as well given they are man-made.

Now Zhuangzi seems to fundamentally conflict with Diotima and contradict the course design. However, I would show how we might reconcile the two texts and reconceptualize goodness so that they could coexist under the course.

### **Reconciliation between *Symposium* and *Zhuangzi***

Even though Zhuangzi contended that everything is equal, it is difficult if not impossible to avoid differentiation. For instance, after reading his text, the nature-centered view appeared to be superior to the human-centered view as only the former could bring us to the truth. We would then regard the former as a “better” option. In other words, we would regard not seeing things as “good” or “bad” as “good”—and we are still confined in the notion of goodness. Therefore, we are unable to consistently take the nature-centered view and see all things as equal. Zhuangzi might have noticed this problem as well when he declared that his statements “obviously [fit] into some category” and are thereby “no different from others” (86). This statement might have exposed his tendency to be different from others. It also reflects his suspicion that he too made “discriminations” (87)

by differentiating his worldview (way to the truth) and others' (way to non-truth) into "good" and "bad", like what others did. Hence, we could not escape from the notion of goodness.

While it sounds unfortunate that we could hardly abandon goodness, goodness could be compatible with the truth if we did not limit what it might be. A negative example is Diotima's ideal of goodness. It was conceived to contain the truth (Plato 211c) but could be easily attacked by Zhuangzi. This is because Diotima sounds too assertive by describing what goodness might be and claiming that goodness could be acquired through reasoning and education (210e). She seems to be less aware of our epistemic limitations. Zhuangzi, on the other hand, not only questioned our capacities to know the truth but was also more cautious when describing it. He understood that the truth is "not named" because it could not be contained by words, which are bound by human's prejudice and subjectivity (*Zhuangzi* 87). We must exercise caution in our intellectual pursuits and keep verifying our understanding of the world.

All in all, though loopholes were found in their theories, both Diotima and Zhuangzi were concerned about the truth and inevitably regard it as the ideal of life, hinting a possibility to compatibilize truth and goodness. To realize that, we must reconceptualize goodness, hence the course design.

I propose that we should strive to empty the connotations of goodness and always doubt what goodness might be. In the course, we engage with numerous key thinkers. Their ideas have shaped many of our conventions, affecting how we think of good and evil, or truth and falsehood. There is a potential danger that we let these authorities define how we can live well without questioning them. We saw in the case of Diotima and Zhuangzi that even the most fundamental ideas, which form the basis of many other

theories, could contain serious loopholes. These fallacies were exposed once we carried out critical examinations. Therefore, goodness in this course should not signify some predetermined destinations. It is important to note that the key thinkers or texts in this course are not themselves a guide to goodness. Only by questioning and re-evaluating their ideas can we keep approaching true goodness.

Emptying connotations of goodness also means including any original and non-conforming ideas in discussion. This is best demonstrated by the course in which texts with competing ideas are included. When put together, the texts produce more insights and bring us closer to the truth than their mere sums. As in the case of Diotima and Zhuangzi, while they exposed each other's weaknesses, they complemented their counterpart at the end by showing how goodness and truth could be compatible, producing new angles for inquiries. Hence, it is crucial that the term goodness does not limit our intellectual freedom or favor particular types of ideas. We should strive to create a pluralistic environment in this course.

In short, our analysis and discussion result in three main implications: 1) We can abandon neither goodness nor truth; 2) We can compatibilize the two; and, 3) We should not set limits for goodness unless we understand its truth. Now it can be said that by emphasizing goodness, the course does not necessarily limit the texts or ideas it contains. The inclusion of contradictory texts is therefore legitimate.

## **Conclusion**

“Words have something to say. But if what they have to say is not fixed, then do they really say something?” (*Zhuangzi* 83) The meaning of

words always changes. In the beginning, we saw goodness as the ultimate object of desire. Then, we discovered that goodness might distract us from the truth and could be undesirable. Finally, we opened a possibility of compatibilizing the good and the truth. And we subsequently propose a way to fit conflicting ideas in the course framework of goodness. Did we “really say something” about goodness? Are we gaining certainty of what it truly is? Perhaps our understanding only becomes vaguer.

Yet, acknowledging the ambiguity of goodness is necessary as it honestly reflects our uncertainty. And uncertainty is the key to avoid being blinded from the truth and falling prey to conformist mentality. I particularly refer to the course design. At first glance, it seems to limit our direction of inquiries by urging us to pursue goodness, as if it defines our goals. Now that the ambiguity of goodness is revealed, allowing unlimited interpretations, our paths of intellectual pursuits become infinitely broad and diverse. In “In Dialogue with Humanity”, goodness is not necessarily a definite point marked on the map. Instead, it could be empty—simply a mirror reflecting what we are going after.

## Works Cited

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### **Teacher’s comment:**

As an intellectual inquiry, WONG’s work shows ingenuity in choice of topic and formulation of problematic. It is a purposeful and rigorous argument, addressing multiple perspectives, confronting challenges, to arrive at a conclusion that preserves the complexities of his chosen problem. As a response to the course “In Dialogue with Humanity”, WONG’s writing shows critical and reflective judgement on authority—the compulsory nature of the course itself and its designed goal. It is evident that his care for truth motivates him to keep formulating challenging questions as any responsible thinker would do. His reasoning is sound and lucid, his voice, composed and confident. WONG’s succinct conclusion that “acknowledging the ambiguity of goodness is necessary as it honestly reflects our uncertainty” sends a sparkle to all of us as members of the teaching and learning community of the course: it is the human ability to confront and dwell in the unknown and the unanswerable that crystalizes the value of intellectual and moral pursuits. (YEUNG Yang)

