What's Wrong with the I Ching?

Ambiguity, Obscurity, and Synchronicity

The I Ching is an ancient Chinese oracle that many believe mysteriously offers clear advice on important questions. However, the book's wisdom is no more mysterious than randomly flipping through a book of proverbs for advice.

CHARLES SULLIVAN

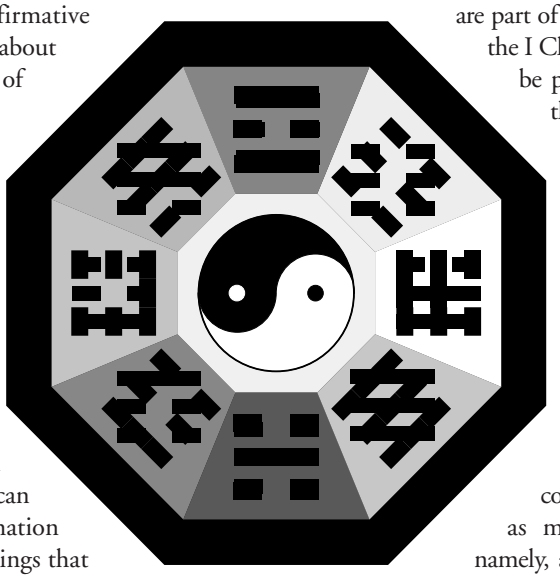
The best of seers is he who guesses well.
—Euripides

The I Ching, or *Book of Changes*, is an ancient Chinese text that combines the influences of Taoism and Confucianism and is typically used for divination purposes. The book (sometimes called "the Oracle") is said to find order in what otherwise would be chance events. The I Ching is based on Yin and Yang, the two fundamental ordering principles in Taoist philosophy and cosmology. Typically, one formulates a question for the I Ching and then tosses three coins a total of six times.[1] Depending on the configuration of heads and tails for each throw, one gets

a straight line (representing the Yang principle) or a broken line (representing the Yin principle). After six throws with the three coins one has what's called a hexagram, a collection of six straight and/or broken lines stacked on top of one another.[2] There are sixty-four possible hexagrams, and all have their own particular meaning, often with a Confucianist ethical angle to them. The hexagram one receives is believed to provide an answer to the question asked.

The Ambiguous and the Obscure

Some specific words of advice show up numerous times throughout the I Ching that appear to be no more illuminating than the advice found inside fortune cookies, although they are elaborated upon at length in the form of commentaries. Some of these words of advice include the following: "*It furthers one to undertake something*," "*Perseverance brings good fortune*," and "*Undertakings bring misfortune*." These first two bits of advice would be considered affirmative responses to one's initial question about whether to pursue a particular course of action, whereas the third seems decidedly negative.



As with other forms of divination, such as astrology or tarot cards, the answers provided by the I Ching are rather general, allowing for multiple and ambiguous interpretations. These answers are also subject to the same psychological phenomena that plague all forms of divination, namely, the Barnum Effect, where we tend to find personal meaning in statements that can apply to almost anyone, and confirmation bias, where we tend to notice those things that confirm our beliefs but ignore or downplay those things that don't.

Other advice offered by the I Ching is much harder to understand and may refer to ancient, culturally specific Chinese symbols and proverbs. Some of these include: "*A shoal of fishes. Favor comes through the court ladies*," "*Darkening of the light injures him in the left thigh. He gives aid with the strength of a horse*," and "*The companion bites his way through the wrappings. If one goes to him, how could it be a mistake?*"[3]

It seems that we could do just as well, if not better, by randomly flipping through a book of English proverbs and contemplating the advice found in such sayings as: "*The squeaky wheel gets the grease*," "*Where there's a will, there's a way*," "*Don't bite off more than you can chew*," or that most ambiguous of proverbs, "*A rolling stone gathers no moss*," whose interpretation depends upon whether the metaphor "gathering moss" is taken to be a good or a bad thing.

Obviously one can find some wisdom in proverbial sayings, and there's nothing mysterious about it. Yet many who consult the I Ching insist that something deep and mystical is at work because the utter appropriateness of the answers to the questions seems to go beyond the mere chance involved in tossing coins.

Synchronicity Time

The psychologist C.G. Jung was impressed by what he saw as the I Ching's ability to offer clear answers to important questions. Jung coined the term *synchronicity* and used this idea to explain how the I Ching works, stating, ". . . whatever is born or done in this moment of time has the quality of this moment of time" (Jung 1931, 142). The idea here is that when I concentrate on a particular question while tossing the coins in my consultation with the I Ching, my question and my coin tosses are part of that particular moment in time, and the I Ching's answer to my question will also be part of that moment in time, hence, the question and the answer are united in that moment. This somehow accounts for the coincidental appropriateness of the answer to the question. This Principle of Synchronicity is supposed to explain meaningful coincidences that, we are told, cannot be connected by cause and effect yet cannot be explained by chance either. In relation to the I Ching, Jung says, ". . . synchronicity takes the coincidence of events in space and time as meaning more than mere chance, namely, a peculiar interdependence of objective events . . . as well as the subjective (psychic) states of the observer or observers" (Jung 1950, xxiv).

Needless to say, the Principle of Synchronicity is not recognized by modern science, and the only evidence that synchronicity is behind the appearance of two coincidental events—i.e., the appropriateness of the I Ching's answer to one's question—is simply that one *happens to find* the occurrence of those events significant. The problem is that in life we're exposed to a multitude of experiences and events such that the probability is quite high that some coincidences will seem dramatic (Dean et al. 2005, 7).

Jung himself was not clear about how synchronicity is supposed to work. At one point he maintained that the outer event (e.g., the I Ching's answer) and the mental state (e.g., the question asked) are simultaneous[4] (Jung 1960, 441). Later he maintained that a mental state coincides with a "(more or less simultaneous) external event" or with a "future event that is distant in time"[5] (Jung 1960, 526). The writer Arthur Koestler, a popularizer of much of Jung's work, found Jung confusing on the matter of synchronicity, writing, "One wonders why Jung created these unnecessary complications by coining a

Charles Sullivan teaches writing and philosophy at Portland Community College in Portland, Oregon. He's written articles for Playboy, The Writer, *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER, and the Secular Web, as well as a popular science book,* The Top 10 Myths about Evolution *(Prometheus Books, 2007).*

term which implies simultaneity, and then explaining that it does not mean what it means"[6] (Koestler 1972, 95). As is often the hallmark of many pseudoscientific claims, Jung's synchronicity principle is a "nonrefutable or irrefutable hypothesis"[7] (McGowan 1994, 137). And despite its scientific-sounding name, the Principle of Synchronicity fares no better as an explanation than does the mysterious and undetectable "forces" used by astrologers to explain the "accuracy" found in their readings.

When Jung wrote the forward to Richard Wilhelm's 1950 translation of the I Ching, he asked the book what it thought of him introducing it to the Western mind. The hexagram he received in response was "The Cauldron" (hexagram #50).

Each hexagram within the The *Book of Changes* includes about three-to-four pages of description and commentary. This is, in part, because each individual line within the hexagram has its own particular significance and must also be explained. Jung found himself especially moved by the significance of the bottom line of the hexagram "The Cauldron," which reads, in part, "*A cauldron with legs upturned. Further removal of stagnating stuff.*"

Jung interpreted this to mean that the I Ching resembles an unused cauldron, and when the stagnating stuff is removed it "may be utilized for a higher purpose" (Jung 1950, xxx). This seemed to confirm to Jung that the I Ching approved of him introducing it to Westerners. One writer critical of Jung's interpretation pointed out how a skeptic might interpret this line from the I Ching. He suggested: "The I Ching should be overthrown, and our minds cleansed of antique superstition" (Gallo 1994, 400). It would seem that one's attitude toward the I Ching may influence one's interpretation of the answer received.

Conclusion

With the I Ching, as with other forms of divination (such as astrology, tarot cards, palm reading, crystal balls, and the obscure practice of rumpology—fortune telling by examining the folds and crevices of the buttocks), the general nature of the responses allows for multiple and conflicting interpretations. Moreover, there's no known scientific mechanism (synchronicity included) by which the I Ching can divine our fortunes, give advice for the future, or explain our situations. It's important to be open minded to the possibility that such a mechanism may exist, but simply "believing" in some unknown mechanism when the I Ching's responses can be easily explained by the Barnum Effect and confirmation bias is to shut down critical thinking. Ultimately, there's no evidence that the I Ching works as a form of divination other than that its ambiguous and obscure responses can invoke the mysterious feeling that it somehow does seem to work. One may experience a comforting and mysterious feeling when believing that the I Ching is intimately connected to one's life and mind, a kind of "cosmic connection," yet such a feeling would be motivated by the desire to *believe* rather than the desire to *know*. □

Notes

1. The ancient method for consulting the I Ching involved a lengthy procedure of throwing yarrow stalks (yarrow is a plant also known as *milfoil*). The three coins replaced the yarrow stalks during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE).

2. When throwing the three coins for the I Ching, one side of the coin (usually heads) is two, and the other side (tails) is three. Thus, each line in a hexagram can equal six, seven, eight, or nine, depending on the throw. Lines that are sixes or nines are considered changing lines, which suggests that the hexagram thrown is in the process of changing into another hexagram. In such a case, one reads the initial hexagram and the relevant lines (sixes or nines). Then the sixes and nines are said to change into their opposite: a solid line becomes a broken line, and a broken becomes a solid, creating a new hexagram. The second hexagram is typically read also, indicating further changes in store.

3. The above short bits of advice from the I Ching are taken from the Wilhelm translation.

4. Referenced in Dean et al. 2005, 7.

5. Referenced in Dean et al. 2005, 7.

6. Referenced in Dean et al. 2005, 8.

7. Originally published in Hines 1988, 1.

As with other forms of divination, such as astrology or tarot cards, the answers provided by the I Ching are rather general, allowing for multiple and ambiguous interpretations.

References

Dean, Geoffrey, Peter Loptson, Ivan Kelly, et al. 2005. Theories of astrology: A comprehensive survey. An updated and abridged version of a discourse by Dean, Loptson, Kelly, and seven others in: *Correlation* 1996, 15 (1): 17–52. Available online at www.rudolfhsmit.nl/a-theo2.htm.

Gallo, Ernest. 1994. Synchronicity and the archetypes. SKEPTICAL INQUIRER 18 (4): 396–403.

Hines, Terence. 1988. *Pseudoscience and the Paranormal: A Critical Examination of the Evidence.* Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books.

Jung, C.G. 1931, 1969. Appendix. *The Secret of the Golden Flower: A Chinese Book of Life.* Trans. from the Chinese by Richard Wilhelm. Trans. from the German by Cary F. Baynes. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc.

———. 1950, 1979. Forward. The I Ching or *Book of Changes.* Trans. from the Chinese by Richard Wilhelm. Trans. from the German by Cary F. Baynes. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

———. 1960. *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, Volume 8: The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche. Trans. by R.F.C. Hull. New York: Pantheon Books.

Koestler, Arthur. 1972, 1974. *The Roots of Coincidence.* London: Pan Books, Ltd.

McGowan, Don. 1994. *What Is Wrong with Jung.* Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books.

Wilhelm, Richard. 1950, 1979. The I Ching or *Book of Changes.* Trans. from the Chinese by Richard Wilhelm. Trans. from the German by Cary F. Baynes. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.