

The Analects



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CONFUCIUS

While the *Analects of Confucius* were likely written by Confucius's disciples years after his death, they center on the teachings of the Chinese philosopher and sage, Confucius. Confucius's father is thought to have been an army commander who died when Confucius was three years old. He was then raised by his mother, and at 19, he married and had three children. As a child, Confucius belonged to a social class between the aristocrats and the commoners, and he went to a school for commoners where he learned the six arts: the rites (common cultural practices), music, archery, charioteering, calligraphy, and mathematics. Of these, he went on to champion the rites and music in his philosophical teachings. As a young man, Confucius is said to have worked in various government posts, while informally giving philosophical and ethical teachings. Around 500 B.C.E., he had acquired significant recognition for these teachings and was appointed governor of a small town in his province. He later was promoted to Minister of Crime in that same province. However, believing that the family in rule in the state of Lu had unethically taken power from the former duke, Confucius participated in a failed rebellion against the family. Shortly after, continuing to disagree politically with Lu's powerful politicians, Confucius exiled himself in the neighboring state of Qi. He continued with his teachings and returned to his home state at the age of 68, where he dedicated himself to teaching his disciples, who numbered around 70. Confucius died of natural causes in his early 70s.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Much of Confucius's life was spent in political office. He worked for his entire life to spread the teachings of the Way, or the *Tao*, and sought to do so through political office. Therefore, when the political groups in power were not advocates of the Way, Confucius sought to remove them from power. Most notably, Confucius sought to remove power from three wealthy families in the Lu province in order to make the centralized government more powerful. Because Confucius was morally opposed to violent revolution, he worked through diplomacy to convince each family to tear down their strongholds. Unfortunately, this left the city vulnerable to attack, and the city was attacked by the government from a neighboring province. Confucius refused to support the attacks, as he believed in nonviolence. This series of events demonstrates Confucius's commitment to the Way—he tried to remove families from power that did not support the Way, but at the same time remained loyal to the

Way's teachings by practicing nonviolence.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The *Analects of Confucius* is a foundational Confucian text written by the sage's disciples after his death. Another key text in Confucian philosophy is *Great Learning*, a text compiled by Confucius's disciples that stresses the importance of scholarship and teaches on the correct way to acquire knowledge. *Great Learning* stresses the importance of rest and reflection in order to be able to access peace of mind. It also emphasizes the idea that education needs to be well-rounded—that a person should pursue various intellectual interests rather than just one. The *Analects* also stresses the importance of education and of time for reflection. Another classical Confucian text is *Mencius*, which is structured similarly to the *Analects*: it is a series of anecdotes and recorded conversations between Mencius, a second-generation disciple of Confucius, and the heads of warring states. Through these conversations, Mencius seeks to encourage his interlocutors towards embracing the Way. Finally, the *Dialogues of Plato* are structurally similar to the *Analects*. Similar to the *Analects*, the *Dialogues* reveal the philosopher Plato's beliefs and theories by way of showcasing conversations among him and other thinkers and his students.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Analects of Confucius*
- **When Written:** 479-50 B.C.E.
- **Where Written:** Lu, Zhou Kingdom (present-day China)
- **When Published:** 479-50 B.C.E.
- **Literary Period:** Ancient Philosophy
- **Genre:** Nonfiction, Philosophy, Ethics, Spirituality
- **Setting:** 500 B.C.E. China
- **Climax:** Confucius takes public office.
- **Antagonist:** Opponents of the Way
- **Point of View:** Third-Person Omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Surpassing its Peers. The *Analects of Confucius* was first seen as an accompaniment to the Five Classics, which were originally considered the foundational texts of Confucianism. However, the *Analects of Confucius* is now widely viewed as the most important Confucian text.



PLOT SUMMARY

Confucius, also known as the Master, says that he enjoys studying philosophy and slowly integrating the lessons he has learned into his daily life. Yu, one of his disciples, comments that the root of a man's character is his behavior during childhood; if, during childhood, a boy is obedient, he will grow into a man who has respect for his superiors and does not instigate rebellion. Indeed, the Master believes that respect for one's parents is of the utmost importance. For him, one can judge whether a son is loyal or not to his parents if, three years after his father's death, the son has not strayed from copying his father's ways. This is what it means to be filial, at least in antiquity; nowadays, the Master explains, many people interpret being "filial" as simply providing one's parents with food and drink so that they don't have to worry about supporting themselves in their old age. For the Master, this is silly—one provides one's animals with food, as well; without deep respect for one's parents, then, providing them with food is essentially offering them the same treatment that one offers one's animals. Parents need to be treated with reverence.

In the Master's opinion, acquiring knowledge is of the utmost importance, and one must develop effective learning techniques. For instance, he believes one must both be willing to learn from others and think for oneself. On one occasion, the Master enters the Great Temple and asks many questions. After he leaves, someone who was also there is confused—Confucius is said to be an expert in the **rites**, but if that's true, why did he ask so many questions? When Confucius hears of this, he says that asking questions in itself is a rite. Confucius cares deeply about the rites of antiquity, and he wishes for them to be preserved. When someone wants to do away with the tradition of sacrificing sheep on the day of the new moon, Confucius is upset. He does not want to do away with the tradition.

For Confucius, cultivating the quality of benevolence is of the utmost importance. While gentlemen aspire to benevolence because they know it is an important quality, small men aspire to it because they imagine that it will be to their advantage to appear benevolent. Confucius praises those who are able to hold themselves accountable and commit to positive change when they realize they are wrong about something, but he is about to give up hope, for he has not met a man who is willing to do that. Although he believes that there are many people who are equally trustworthy and dedicated to a life of service as he is, he feels that he will never meet anyone who is just as eager to learn as he is. He believes that men who strive to be ingratiating and whose words are cunning are never likely to achieve benevolence.

When the Master thinks of himself, he fears most of all not succeeding at his attempts to cultivate virtue through deep understanding of what he has studied. For him, benevolence is

only achieved through overcoming oneself, and a person can overcome themselves through dedicated observation of the rites. The Master is careful to divorce acquiring material success from achieving benevolence.

Confucius believes that one must use study of the rites to inform their position in public office, but if a person does not know how to apply study of antiquity then they are not fit to take office. He believes that leaders need to be generous with their people, not overworking them or asking for unfair taxes from them. He believes that understanding the rites is crucial to one being able to participate in society in a meaningful way.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Master / Confucius – Confucius is the speaker of the *Analects of Confucius*. A Chinese political leader and philosopher who lived around 500 B.C.E., Confucius was known during his lifetime as a sage, and many of his teachings were compiled in books like this one after his death. Through the anecdotes that appear throughout, readers understand Confucius to be a well-respected leader in his community for his philosophical teachings. Dedicated to preserving the **rites**—cultural practices that date back to Chinese antiquity—in his contemporary times, Confucius's character has a bit of a conservative streak. He champions the wisdom of ancient rituals and way of life over modern developments. Throughout the *Analects*, Confucius champions people who are honest, and he warns his disciples time and time again not to trust those who use "ingratiating" words and have "cunning" faces but never follow through with their action. He praises those who dedicate their lifetime to studying the Way, or the *Tao*, which is the philosophical doctrine from which he draws many of his beliefs. For him, life should be dedicated to studying without expectation of external reward for the effort. But what Confucius values most of all is family. He believes that a good son is one who emulates his parents' behavior, even once they have passed. The repetition of parents' behavior, perhaps, is one of the ways in which Confucius envisions that ancient rites will be passed on from generation to generation. Through his evaluation of the people and practices in his society, Confucius reveals himself to be a thoughtful, sincere, and critical philosopher.

Tzu-hsia – Tzu-hsia is another one of Confucius's disciples. Tzu-hsia doesn't appear early in the *Analects*, but in the penultimate book, many sayings, particularly those relating to the importance of learning and study, are attributed to him. Indeed, he is even presented as a philosopher who has his own disciples. Historically, Tzu-hsia played an important role in passing on Confucian teachings to the next generation.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Yu – Yu is Confucius’s favorite disciple. Throughout the *Analects*, Confucius consistently commends Yu for his discipline, dedication to the Way, willingness to ask questions, humility, and thorough practice of the rites. Yu demonstrates himself to be deeply committed to his studies and to perfecting the **rites**.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



SELF-RESTRAINT

The *Analects of Confucius* is a compilation of Chinese philosopher and politician Confucius’s teachings collected together by Confucius’s disciples after his death. The teachings are aimed at introducing readers to “the Way,” also known as the *Tao*, a rigorous code of moral conduct that Confucius wished to spread to political officials and laypeople alike. Confucius, also referred to as “the Master” in the *Analects*, believed that by following the Way, men could achieve moral purity, becoming what he refers to as “gentlemen.” One of the most important behaviors that Confucius encourages people to cultivate is self-restraint both in terms of acquiring possessions and in terms of seeking social status and recognition for one’s work. Through detailing these types of self-control over the course of the book, Confucius shows how restraint is necessary to help people morally improve not only themselves but their communities.

The main type of self-restraint Confucius emphasizes throughout the *Analects* is material restraint. Confucius continually praises seekers of the Way for being willing to live without material luxury or even comfort. In Book 1, he says, “The gentleman seeks neither a full belly nor a comfortable home.” Here, Confucius immediately establishes a definition of “gentleman” that is different from what readers might expect. Often, the word “gentleman” refers to men of relatively high socioeconomic status who, secondary to their wealth, have refined tastes and behaviors. However, Confucius completely eliminates wealth as one of the aspects that makes a gentleman, instead associating this distinguished status with self-control and inner strength and fortitude. In doing so, he clearly communicates that morality rather than wealth is what makes a gentleman, and that restraining from accumulating wealth (or even comfort) may be a form of morality in itself. Confucius further valorizes self-restraint when he says, “It is not easy to find a man who can study for three years without

thinking about earning a salary.” The way Confucius phrases this statement—by saying that it isn’t easy to find someone with that quality—suggests that the willingness to study without earning is a rare and valuable trait. At the time Confucius lived, it was advantageous for those who wished to be appointed as state officials to study the cultural **rites** and rituals that formed part of the Way. Confucius is likely referencing those who study the Way with only future material gain in mind and whose primary motivation for studying is earning the salary of a government official. The ideal student of the Way, according to this saying, studies because he believes that studying has inherent moral value—and embodying this ideal means being able to exercise self-restraint when it comes to material acquisition.

Confucius also encourages people to exercise self-restraint when it comes to seeking social status and recognition. At the end of the first book, Confucius says that one should not be upset by “the failure of others to appreciate [one’s] abilities.” As a teacher, one of Confucius’s main roles in life was training his students to cultivate moral abilities. However, in this quote, he emphasizes that recognition for one’s abilities should not be the main motivator behind behaving honorably or learning. In asking his students to adopt this mindset, Confucius encourages them to exercise not just material restraint, but to also restrain their egos which compel them to seek recognition for their abilities. Confucius again highlights the importance of restraining the ego through the following anecdote. In Book 5, it Confucius “[tells] Ch’i-tiao K’ai to take office. Ch’i-tiao [says], ‘I cannot trust myself to do so yet.’ The Master [is] pleased.” Here, Confucius is likely pleased because Ch’i-tiao reveals that he values perfecting his understanding of the Way more than he values the prestige that would accompany assuming a position in public office. In other words, Ch’i-tiao demonstrates both material restraint (since it’s likely that he would make a high salary as an official) and egoic restraint by declining to take a high-status position.

Through recommending self-restraint both in seeking material wealth and in seeking social status, Confucius suggests that self-restraint enables his followers to be better practitioners of the Way. With self-restraint, those eager to learn the Way can be free of material or egoic motivation and they can therefore dedicate themselves completely to moral improvement.



HONESTY AND INTEGRITY

The *Analects of Confucius* is a compilation of anecdotes about the ancient Chinese sage Confucius, compiled by his disciples after his death.

In the book, Confucius comments on the most important traits that people should cultivate in order to have good character, which, in his (translated) words, makes one a “gentleman.” This advice stems from the moral teachings of the Way, or the *Tao*. Honesty is one of the most important traits that Confucius

repeatedly emphasizes throughout the *Analects*. In his discourse on honesty, he stresses how being sincere gives individuals the integrity necessary to make progress along the Way, and how practicing honesty in politics leads to more effective rulership. Thus, Confucius demonstrates that honesty is crucial for both personal and political success.

Confucius stresses the importance of being honest to his students, even when this means accepting an undesirable reality. Confucius tells his favorite student, “Yu, shall I tell you what it is to know. To say you know when you know, and to say you do not when you do not, that is my knowledge.” Here, Confucius frames honesty not just as a moral virtue but also as a trait that allows one to learn more effectively. Whereas proud students who don’t want to appear unintelligent might lie, pretending to know something that they don’t, Confucius teaches that instead, one must have the humility to be an honest student and to admit when one does not know something. Naturally, this enables students to learn in the future about what they admit to not knowing in the present. In this way, honesty about one’s abilities creates conditions that allow for further learning. Confucius also emphasizes how crucial it is for his students to back their words up with their actions. This form of integrity, for him, is threatened by manipulative or performative speech. He states, “One cannot but give assent to exemplary words. But what is important is that one should rectify oneself. One cannot but be pleased with tactful words, but what is important is that one should reform oneself.” In this moment, Confucius points to the differences that sometimes exist between what people who lack integrity say and what they do. By insisting that people should “rectify” themselves, he is essentially asking them to have integrity. Rather than merely saying what they think is right, he insists that they demonstrate the integrity to recognize that their actions may not align with their speech, and to make the effort to live up to their word. In this way, people can become more honest: only when actions align with words do the words have true meaning.

Confucius also believes that honesty is an important tool for politicians to be effective and moral leaders. He tells his students who are in politics (or who aspire to be in politics) that they need to “raise the straight and set them over the crooked and the common people will look up to you. Raise the crooked and set them over the straight and the common people will not look up to you.” Here, Confucius implies that leaders need to maintain their own integrity by celebrating their citizens who also exhibit integrity. He suggests that honesty is something that people inherently respect and that common people recognize when their leaders exhibit this trait. This gives honesty and integrity value not only on a personal level, but also as a means to foster respect between government leaders and their constituents. Confucius also praises the integrity of politicians who demonstrate their commitment to the Way

while in office. For instance, he refers to Ch’ü Po-yü as gentlemanly because “When the Way prevails in the state he takes office, but when the Way falls into disuse in the state he allows himself to be furlled and put away safely.” Here, readers can presume that Ch’ü Po-yü is a political leader in office who, due to his commitment to the Way, refuses to be in a position of leadership when the state disrespects the value system that Ch’ü admires. On the other hand, when the state is receptive to being the Way, Ch’ü takes office and leads the state in accordance with his values. This demonstrates his integrity: when the government does not act according to his values, he does not stay in office merely because it is prestigious or comfortable.

Throughout the *Analects*, Confucius characterizes honesty and integrity as moral values that are critical for students, leaders, and laypeople to develop. He believes that honoring one’s word, recognizing one’s faults, and encouraging honesty are all tools that create good students of the Way and effective leaders.



THE INDIVIDUAL VS. THE COLLECTIVE

In the *Analects of Confucius*, Chinese philosopher Confucius lays out various behaviors and moral values that he believes all people should cultivate to live life in accordance with the Way, or the *Tao*, the set of cultural and ethical teachings to which Confucius subscribes. One of the most significant components of the book is Confucius’s emphasis on family and community. He stresses loyalty to one’s parents as a defining trait that determines one’s character. He also emphasizes how important it is for political leaders to behave in ways that benefit the collective. In both cases, Confucius argues that the collective groups to which an individual belongs are more important than the individual themselves.

Confucius stresses that children should be obedient and loyal to their parents. In Book 1, Confucius first mentions the obligations children have to their parents. He says that after a man’s father has died, “If, for three years, he makes no changes to his father’s ways, he can be said to be a good son.” Confucius argues that being a good son means not only obeying one’s father while he is alive but also continuing his father’s ways once he has died. This, in turn, stresses the importance of tradition: if sons are to honor fathers by continuing to behave in the same ways that they did, then it is easy to maintain the same traditional customs for generations. This is significant because in the *Analects*, Confucius often complains about how the Way has fallen out of fashion in modern days. Therefore, a return to traditional ways favors his mission of spreading the Way to more people. In this way, family connection serves as an important vehicle through which the traditional values that Confucius prizes are able to survive. In some ways, family connections seem to be the single most important behavior or

value that Confucius espouses. In one moment, “The Governor of She [says] to Confucius, ‘In our village there is a man nicknamed “Straight Body.” When his father stole a sheep, he gave evidence against him.’ Confucius answer[s], ‘In our village those who are straight are quite different. Fathers cover up for their sons, and sons cover up for their fathers. Straightness is to be found in such behavior.’” This moment is interesting because Confucius often highlights the importance of honesty and integrity in the *Analects*. One would think that a son who turns his father over to authorities for committing a crime exhibits these qualities. However, for Confucius, loyalty to family is more important than integrity to the law. This suggests that family connection is the most important part of exhibiting good character.

The community-oriented values in the *Analects* also shine through in descriptions of what makes good political leadership and engagement. For instance, Duke Ai, presumably a high-ranking politician in a province, asks Yu Juo how he should cover expenses in his province during a year when the harvest is bad. Yu Juo suggests lowering the taxes, to which Duke Ai responds, “I do not have sufficient as it is when I tax them two parts in ten. How could I possibly tax them one part in ten?” To this, Yu Juo responds, “When the people have sufficient, who is there to share your insufficiency? When the people have insufficient, who is there to share your sufficiency?” While Confucius himself is not present in this conversation, it is an important moment in the book that highlights the importance of collective over individual wellbeing. Yu Juo implies that Duke Ai would be selfish to overtax his people—likely depriving them of food and other necessities—to cover his province’s expenses. Yu Juo seems to believe that the wellbeing of the majority is more important than the wellbeing of an individual—even if that individual is a high-ranking politician. At another point, Confucius quotes *The Book of History*, saying, “Oh! Simply by being a good son and friendly to all his brothers a man can exert an influence upon government. In so doing a man is, in fact, taking part in government. How can there be any question of his having actively to ‘take part in government?’” Here, Confucius equates being a good family and community member with being an effective political leader or participant. This comparison highlights Confucius’s belief that community-orientation is a key aspect to political engagement. He implies that the role of the government is very similar to that of a good son, neighbor, and friend. This further emphasizes the importance of the individual over the collective.

Community-oriented leaders seem to be the political equivalent of Confucius’s stress on the importance of family in personal life. Confucius stresses the necessity of staying loyal to one’s family and of children willingly sacrificing their own individual desires and identities for their parents’ wishes. This stresses the wellbeing of the family unit over individual wellbeing. Similarly, the interaction between Yu Juo and Duke

Ai suggests that politicians need to put collective wellbeing over their personal wellbeing even though they are leaders. In both cases, there is a community-oriented value system behind the actions that the *Analects* suggest laypeople and leaders should take.



SELF-MASTERY, DISCIPLINE, AND IMPROVEMENT

The *Analects of Confucius* is a series of anecdotes about the Chinese sage Confucius. The book, written by Confucius’s disciples, presents advice on various behaviors and moral virtues that people should cultivate if they wish to live in accordance with the Way, or the *Tao*, a spiritual practice that Confucius espoused. When a person has an advanced practice of the Way, Confucius refers to that person as a “gentleman,” or as someone who has achieved “benevolence,” or moral goodness. In the process of working toward these characteristics, two of the most important practices Confucius emphasizes are self-mastery and discipline. The *Analects* highlights how discipline put into the task of self-mastery is the essence of the path toward moral and spiritual superiority.

Although Confucius speaks often about respecting family and community, he is careful to emphasize the fact that one’s spiritual and moral improvement is an individual task. When asked how to cultivate benevolence, Confucius responds, “To return to the observance of the **rites** through overcoming the self constitutes benevolence [...] the practice of benevolence depends on oneself alone, and not on others.” This is an interesting quote, because often benevolence refers to being generous with others. In other words, benevolence might seem to be a trait that has to do with communities rather than the individual. However, Confucius focuses on the individual commitment that is necessary for one to become the type of person who has much to offer—spiritually, philosophically, and morally—to one’s society. The other themes highlight the various characteristics—chiefly self-restraint, honesty, and community-orientation—that Confucius believes men must cultivate in order to achieve benevolence. What he is likely saying in this moment is that making a commitment to developing these characteristics in every aspect of one’s individual life is the path to benevolence, rather than, for instance, depending on teachers or other external sources of wisdom to learn about benevolence.

On a similar note, Confucius states, “What the gentleman seeks, he seeks in himself; what the small man seeks, he seeks in others.” “Gentlemen” in the *Analects* are defined primarily as those who are dedicated to the moral guidelines of the Way; in other words, what they seek is to become more successful practitioners of the Way. Therefore, this quote implies that in order to practice the Way, one must look inward rather than outward. This also emphasizes the fact that moral and spiritual

superiority cannot be found in external measures of success—rather, it must be found by striving to improve oneself. By “overcoming the self,” Confucius likely refers to the internal obstacles that one might face in trying to cultivate benevolent characteristics. One example of an internal obstacle might be the desire to please—Confucius often criticizes those with “cunning words” and “an ingratiating face,” who, in his view, lack honesty and integrity. In order for one to stop using cunning words and ingratiating tendencies, one must address one’s deep desire to please others, and reframe the way one views social relationships in order to be able to prioritize being honest over being well-liked. In this way, the path to benevolence is one of cultivating greater self-knowledge and awareness.

While the process of becoming a gentleman or cultivating benevolence is individual, Confucius does mention that doing this work can both improve and involve entire communities. At one point, Confucius comments, “Even when walking in the company of two men, I am bound to be able to learn from them. The good points of the one I copy; the bad points of the other I correct in myself.” In this way, Confucius states how the work of self-mastery can in some ways involve others: others function as mirrors that can point one to one’s own strengths and weaknesses. In order to be able to see one’s strengths and weaknesses reflected in others, of course, one must have a certain initial level of self-awareness, of course, but here Confucius states that it is possible to engage with others to develop greater self-awareness. In this way, while the process of self-awareness begins individually, it is deepened through community. What’s more, cultivating self-awareness benefits communities. When asked about the gentleman, Confucius says “He cultivates himself and thereby achieves reverence [...] He cultivates himself and thereby brings peace and security to his fellow men [...] He cultivates himself and thereby brings peace and security to the people.” In this way, Confucius implicitly makes the meaning of “benevolence” clear. Previously, Confucius suggests that the bulk of following the way working on oneself. However, here he states that through that through improving oneself, “gentlemen” can greatly benefit their societies. It is clear that under a Confucian value system, one’s effort at self-mastery spreads through the entire community, improving the wellbeing of the collective.

In the *Analects of Confucius*, self-mastery is a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Confucius desires for his students to have the discipline to engage practices of self-mastery so that they might ultimately be of service to their communities and to their nation.



THE RITES

In the *Analects of Confucius*, the rites symbolize a deep respect for antiquity. Throughout the book, Confucius continually defends the rites—which are ancient cultural practices, such as spiritual sacrifice or musical performance, as well as regulations that determine who should perform them—from being destroyed in his contemporary times. For instance, at one point Confucius scolds Tzu-kung, who wants to end the practice of sacrificing sheep on the new moon, saying, “You may be loath to part with the price of the sheep, but I am loath to see the disappearance of the rite.” This is one of many examples throughout the *Analects* in which Confucius advocates for the continued practice of the rites even if they aren’t pragmatic in the present day. Rites are important, Confucius implies, because preserving and respecting antiquity is important, and rites are a vehicle for that. In conversations in which Confucius advocates for the rites, he often includes in his reasoning the fact that this was the way things were done in “antiquity.” Thus the rites, and their continuing, symbolize a respect for the cultural traditions of one’s ancestors.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Classics edition of *The Analects* published in 1998.

Book 1 Quotes

☞ “Observe what a man has in mind to do when his father is living, and then observe what he does when his father is dead. If, for three years, he makes no changes to his father’s ways, he can be said to be a good son.”

Related Characters: The Master / Confucius (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

In this moment, Confucius is sharing with his students what he feels it means to be a good son. In his opinion, a son should honor his father’s wishes, but that this kind of deference should continue even long after his father has died. Confucius clearly believes that a son should sacrifice his own desires for his life for the sake of pursuing whatever desires that his father has for him. Because much of Confucius’s ideology focuses on maintaining the cultural practices and traditions of generations past, it is possible that this piece of advice relates not only to what he thinks



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

makes a good child, but also the importance of preserving traditions and wisdom from the past. If generation after generation continues to honor their parents' behaviors and practices, then the traditions of antiquity will easily survive over time. It is perhaps for this reason, towards the broader goal of preserving antiquity, that Confucius gives this advice.

Book 2 Quotes

☞ “Nowadays for a man to be filial means no more than that he is able to provide his parents with food. Even hounds and horses are, in some way, provided with food. If a man shows no reverence, where is the difference?”

Related Characters: The Master / Confucius (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Confucius continues his discussion of what it means to be adequately filial—basically, what is expected of a son or daughter—which is a question he returns to several times throughout the *Analects*.

This is one of the first moments in which Confucius's disdain for the material realm shines through. He is critical of those who think they are being good sons or daughters simply because they tend to their elderly parents' material needs, namely, the need for food. Confucius compares this type of care for a parent to the care that one gives to one's animals, which implies that he thinks that this way of interacting with one's parents lacks respect. In other words, in making sure their parents are fed, the child is doing the bare minimum to care for them, not unlike feeding an animal so that it doesn't die.

Confucius again emphasizes here that one should have “reverence” for one's parents, a word that implies an almost worshipful sense of honor and awe. The deep respect that he expects children to have for their parents could more broadly represent the deep respect he thinks younger generations should have for the generations that came before them. This is related for Confucius's respect for antiquity and of traditional values.

☞ “Yu, I shall tell you what it is to know. To say you know when you know, and to say you do not when you do not, that is knowledge.”

Related Characters: The Master / Confucius (speaker), Yu

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Confucius is explaining to Yu, one of his favorite disciples, what knowledge is. The definition Confucius provides on what it is “to know” is perhaps surprising in its complexity. Rather than simply advising his student to acquire as much knowledge as possible so that he can claim to “know,” Confucius advises his student to be humble and to openly acknowledge when he does *not* know something.

This advice suggests several things: first, Confucius sees that admitting when one does not know something is the only way that one can learn something, so admitting ignorance has a practical layer to it. Secondly, this advice stems from Confucius's belief that one should not have an inflated ego—instead, a person should have the self-restraint necessary to be humble and admit to their shortcomings. Finally, this advice also draws on Confucius's belief in the value of integrity. He believes that people should be honest first and foremost, even if it means admitting ignorance.

☞ “The *Book of History* says, ‘Oh! Simply by being a good son and friendly to his brothers a man can exert an influence upon government.’ In so doing a man is, in fact, taking part in government. How can there be any question of his having actively to ‘take part in government?’”

Related Characters: The Master / Confucius (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 66

Explanation and Analysis


In this passage, Confucius further emphasizes the extent to which he values family relationships and being a respectful and kind family member. He implies that by engaging thoughtfully and kindly with one's family and friends, a person can influence the government, forging a link between the social and political sphere. This passage sheds light on the way that Confucius conceives an effective government. To him, an effective government is one that mirrors a healthy community. Throughout the *Analects*, Confucius implies that he values a government that cares for the collective over the individual and places a

community's needs over the needs of the people in power. In other words, he sees government as extension of civilian community life, and he believes that one of the chief values of a good government should be kindness and respect, just as it is described in the quote from *The Book of History* above.

Book 4 Quotes

☞ “Of neighborhoods benevolence is the most beautiful. How can the man be considered wise who, when he has the choice, does not settle in benevolence?”

Related Characters: The Master / Confucius (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Confucius enters into his discussion on “benevolence”—the quality of being kind and well-meaning towards others—which he suggests is the most important virtue to be cultivated through practicing the Way. His choice to compare benevolence to a neighborhood is significant, as it suggests that those who have achieved benevolence actually *reside* there, as if it were a physical place. In other words, those who have achieved benevolence are constantly living in a state of generosity towards everyone around them, consistently acting kindly and well-intentioned towards everyone they come in contact with. Benevolence is therefore a way of life as opposed to just an isolated moral virtue that’s achieved or acted upon once.

Confucius is critical of those who do not value benevolence, suggesting that they lack wisdom—this means that choosing to act benevolently isn’t just the nice thing to do, it’s also the intelligent and wise thing to do. In this vein, Confucius also emphasizes that benevolence is a choice—a person can choose to act benevolently or malevolently, kindly or unkindly. His criticism of these people also shows how deeply he cares about the Way and how dedicated he is to its moral values.

☞ “There is no point in seeking the views of a gentleman who, though he sets his heart on the Way, is ashamed of poor food and poor clothes.”

Related Characters: The Master / Confucius (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

In this moment, Confucius again emphasizes the importance of self-restraint when it comes to amassing material possessions. Here, he frames the desire for wealth and comfort as things that directly prevent someone from fully embodying the teachings of the Way—even someone who is so dedicated to the Way as to have “set his heart” on it. This moment may remind readers of the many times throughout the *Analects* in which Confucius teaches that one’s words should follow one’s actions, and not the other way around. In other words, Confucius believes that a person’s actions are what determine their character, and that words are irrelevant if not backed with action. Similarly, in the case of the proverbial gentleman mentioned above, Confucius would prefer for the man’s “heart” to follow his actions. One must learn to live without material comfort and prosperity in order to truly set one’s heart on the Way and live by its teachings.

Book 5 Quotes

☞ “I suppose I should give up hope. I have yet to meet the man who, on seeing his own errors, is able to take himself to task inwardly.”

Related Characters: The Master / Confucius (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 80

Explanation and Analysis


This is the first moment in the *Analects* when Confucius speaks to the importance of holding oneself accountable to self-improvement—that is, “take [oneself] to task inwardly.” Previously, he has mentioned ways to learn from teachers and from one’s community, but here he highlights the importance of self-observation and self-correction in the process of developing moral virtue. The fact that he feels he needs to “give up hope” because he hasn’t found a man who is self-critical enough suggests that Confucius’s standards for self-correction and self-observation are very high. This comment is particularly striking because Confucius has dozens of disciples; this quote then implies, somewhat bleakly, that none of them are able to “take themselves to task” for their flaws. It is in this moment that readers learn

the extent to which one who seeks to embody Confucian values must be highly disciplined, reflective, humble, and above all willing to change.

Book 7 Quotes

“It is these things that cause me concern: failure to cultivate virtue, failure to go more deeply into what I have learned, inability, when I am told what is right, to move to where it is, an inability to reform myself when I have defects.”

Related Characters: The Master / Confucius (speaker)

Related Themes: 


Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

Here, again, Confucius speaks to the importance of holding oneself accountable for one's actions. When he discusses the “failure to cultivate virtue,” Confucius is speaking of traits that he wishes to avoid not only in others, but also in himself. He recognizes that the standards he sets are so high that he himself sometimes struggles to uphold them, despite being the Master. His willingness to recognize this fact shows his humility: he does not seem himself as perfect or no longer needing to learn just because he's a teacher. Rather, he sees himself as someone consistently trying to cultivate moral virtue, just like the rest of his students. The traits that he most fears are those that would prevent one from learning: a lack of humility, a lack of willingness to learn, and an inability to correct one's mistakes. Confucius sees learning and growing as a dynamic, ongoing process, which points back to the idea that one must live in a state of benevolence as if it were a physical place.

“I was not born with knowledge but, being fond of antiquity, I am quick to seek it.”

Related Characters: The Master / Confucius (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 88

Explanation and Analysis


In this passage, Confucius frames his quest for knowledge within the context of his desire to understand and respect antiquity, which speaks to his deeply traditionalist and

conservative values. He clearly believes that the knowledge he has acquired in his lifetime isn't inherent to him—it derives from antiquity, and therefore that studying the past is the path to wisdom. He aims to preserve the values, practices, and traditions of generations before in his work; this is his main goal in sharing the Way with the people.

Not only does this quote draw attention to his deep appreciation for antiquity and its traditions, but it also highlights how Confucius values hard work and dedication. He does not say he is naturally intelligent or knowledgeable, rather, he talks about the act of seeking out knowledge. This in turn sheds light on the importance of discipline for those who seek to become knowledgeable or pursue the Way.

“Even when walking in the company of two other men, I am bound to be able to learn from them. The good points of the one I copy; the bad points of the other I correct in myself.”

Related Characters: The Master / Confucius (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 88



Explanation and Analysis

Here, Confucius blends the two different strategies he has said people can use to improve themselves: introspection and learning through community. The example he gives in this anecdote is one in which he is learning from his fellow travelers by observing their behavior. This is an instance in which learning occurs through community and relationships, which is something Confucius regularly references throughout the text. Additionally, Confucius includes an important element of introspection in this example. Without the ability to be self-reflective and self-critical, a person cannot recognize when another's poor behavior mirrors one's own, or when another's good behavior mirrors one's own. Therefore, it is impossible for one to correct oneself without an appropriate amount of reflection. Because in this passage Confucius has the awareness to adapt his behavior based on what he observes in his fellow travelers that mirrors what he observes in himself, he blends introspection and community learning in order to access self-improvement.

Book 9 Quotes

“If anyone can, while dressed in a worn-out gown padded with old silk floss, stand beside a man wearing fox or badger fur without feeling ashamed it is, I suppose, Yu.”

Related Characters: The Master / Confucius (speaker), Yu

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis

This is one of the passages in which Confucius expresses his admiration for Yu, who is one of his favorite disciples. Throughout the *Analects*, the trait that Confucius most often praises in his students and other people in the community is self-restraint, which he draws upon in this passage, too. He admires the way that Yu doesn't care for ostentatious dress, and that he doesn't feel ashamed of himself for wearing a garment that is older and less costly than what a rich man would wear. Throughout the book, Confucius often speaks of the fact that material wealth and comfort lack inherent value, and in this moment he praises Yu for having the wisdom not to feel ashamed for lacking these things. The implication here is that "fox or badger fur" is far less precious than the virtues Confucius espouses throughout the *Analects*, like wisdom, honesty, integrity, and respect for one's parents.

Book 11 Quotes

☞☞ The wealth of the Chi Family was greater than that of the Duke of Chou, and still Ch'iu helped them add further to that wealth by raking in the taxes. The Master said, "He is no disciple of mine. You, my young friends, may attack him openly to the beating of drums."

Related Characters: The Master / Confucius (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 108

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Confucius speaks out harshly against greed. In the past, Ch'iu had claimed to be one of the Master's disciples, however, his actions here have caused Confucius to denounce him. Confucius clearly feels contempt towards the Chi family for their greedy accumulation of wealth—and particularly for becoming rich by taking in taxes from the people. Throughout the *Analects*, Confucius often references the fact that it is important for community leaders to not exploit their people. This kind of behavior goes against the collectivist, community-oriented societies, rooted in honesty and integrity, that he aims to build through the Way. Therefore, he condemns Ch'iu for getting


swept up in the Chi family's lack of self-restraint surrounding wealth accumulation. The Master's strong words here—encouraging his friends to openly attack Ch'iu—show the strength of his sentiment. They also show that the Master is not afraid to take action against those whose values are in conflict with his own.

Book 12 Quotes

☞☞ "To return to the observance of rites through overcoming the self constitutes benevolence. If for a single day a man could return to the observance of the rites through overcoming himself, then the whole Empire would consider benevolence to be his. However, the practice of benevolence depends on oneself alone, and not on others."

Related Characters: The Master / Confucius (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 113

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the Master deepens his definition of benevolence. His description that achieving benevolence is the act of "overcoming the self" suggests that self-restraint—not indulging in one's most basic, egotistical desires—and introspection are key tools in cultivating benevolence. One must develop the strength of character to both recognize their lack of restraint and act to correct this behavior. Confucius seems to say here that it is only from a place of moral superiority that a man can effectively engage with the rites. He often refers to people who engage with the rites out of self-interest—political leaders who perform the rites to advance their own image, for instance. In this passage, he implies that once one has "overcome the self," one can perform an observance of the rites that is purely based on respect for the rites themselves, and it is this act that constitutes benevolence. The latter part of the quote also speaks to the importance of not seeking benevolence for one's ego—although he says that the whole Empire would recognize a man who achieved benevolence for his accomplishment, Confucius seems to imply that one should not seek benevolence merely to gain this recognition. This is why he says practicing benevolence depends on oneself, and not others.

☞ “Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire. In this way you will be free from ill will whether in a state or in a noble family.”

Related Characters: The Master / Confucius (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 113

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, which is also known as the Golden Rule, is one of the most important teachings of Confucianism. The idea that people should treat others the way they themselves want to be treated is mentioned several times over the course of the *Analects*, and it is one of the cornerstone values that Confucius passes on to his disciples. Although it sounds simple, Confucius often presents this as a difficult ideal to actually put into practice. At one point in the book, one of Confucius’s disciples tells him that he strives not to impose on others what he himself does not wish to experience, and Confucius tells him that he doesn’t think the disciple is able to do that yet. Therefore, Confucius frames the Golden Rule as a very high standard of moral conduct that one can achieve only after years of commitment to studying and implementing the teachings of the Way.

Related Characters: The Master / Confucius (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 131

Explanation and Analysis

In this moment, Confucius expands the definition of benevolence. Previously, he has spoken extensively about how benevolence is something that people achieve within themselves, that it depends on one’s own discipline and should be pursued not out of desire for recognition, but out of desire to improve oneself. However, here Confucius includes an additional bonus that people who set out to cultivate benevolence can access—they can improve their societies simply by improving themselves. This passage bridges the gap between Confucius’s emphasis on the importance of self-development and his belief in the importance of collective wellbeing. Here, he says that those who improve themselves, in the act of doing so, improve their society. This is likely because, as he has said in several other instances, people learn from those around them, and the more morally sound, wise people there are in a society, the more likely it is that other members of that society will admire them and learn from them. This seems to be the goal of all of the teachings of the *Analects*: that individuals might improve themselves and in doing so create a better world.

Book 14 Quotes

☞ Tzu-lu asked about the gentleman. The Master said, “He cultivates himself and thereby achieves reverence.”
 “Is that all?”
 “He cultivates himself and thereby brings peace and security to his fellow men.”
 “Is that all?”
 “He cultivates himself and thereby brings peace and security to the people.”



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

BOOK 1

The Master remarks that he takes pleasure in implementing the philosophies that he has learned into his daily life slowly and patiently. He comments that it is important to have friends from all different places, and that a gentleman doesn't take offense when others do not recognize his talents.

Yu shares that he thinks that men who are obedient sons as young boys rarely disobey their superiors later in life. Their good character prevents them from starting rebellions. Gentlemen "devote[] [their] efforts to the roots, for once the roots are established, the Way will go therefrom." For Yu, obedience as a child and young man are the roots of anyone's character.

According to the Master, those who always seek to please others are rarely benevolent. The Master says that in positions of powerful political leadership, one should treat one's duties with great respect, honor one's word, avoid overspending, and make the common people work only when appropriate.

The Master says that one must prioritize doing what's best for others over everything else. He says that it is important to be trustworthy and not to take on friends that are not one's moral or intellectual equals.

The Master advises his students to "observe what a man has in mind to do when his father is living, and then observe what he does when his father is dead." According to the master, a good son adopts his father's behavior for three years after his death.

The Analects begin with a quote from the Master, later revealed as Confucius himself, about the importance of hard work and patience. Over the course of the book, he continuously emphasizes the discipline required to live in accordance with the Way, the series of teachings Confucius espouses. What's more, he suggests that gentlemen are not influenced by their egos; their actions shouldn't be aimed at impressing others.



In this moment, Yu touches upon another important lesson of Confucian thought: obeying and honoring one's parents. Because it is through one's parents that one learns about the traditional cultural practices that Confucius and his disciples so value, it is important in their school of thought that a person not break with their parents' practices.



Here, Confucius highlights the value of sincerity. He suggests that only those who are honest can achieve benevolence. He also speaks to the importance of restraint when in office. The way that he advises people to govern elevates the collective over the individual; he protects the common people from being taken advantage of by leaders who would overwork them.



Confucius's suggestion that one should be selective about their friends shows the extent to which he values community. He believes that a lot of learning occurs through relationships, rather than alone.



Here, Confucius demonstrates his traditionalist values. By suggesting that each son should keep his father's ways alive even after the father is dead, Confucius champions a society in which very little changes from generation to generation. This moment showcases his dedication not only to family but also tradition and preserving the wisdom of the past.



Tzu-kung suggests that he should advise people to be “Poor without being obsequious, wealthy without being arrogant.” The Master comments that it might be better to advise the poor to take delight in the Way and to advise the wealthy to continue their observance of the **rites**.

In this moment, the Master proposes that dedication to the Way is the most important thing in anyone’s life, whether rich or poor. Both his and Tzu-kung’s comments emphasize that material wealth, relative to following the Way, is unimportant.



BOOK 2

The Master says that although there are 300 Odes, they can be summarized in a single phrase: “Swerving not from the right path.”

Here, Confucius describes the meaning of the Way with great simplicity. However, the fact that there are so many Odes to be studied also reveals how much hard work and rigorous studying it takes to learn about what the “right path” is and how not to sway from it. Therefore, this moment showcases the discipline necessary to live in accordance with the Way.



When asked what it means to be a good child to one’s parents, the Master says that a good child should “never fail to comply.” This means that good children complete their parents’ wishes when they are alive, and, after their parents die, follow the **rites** in by giving them a proper burial and making sacrifices to live in accordance with what their parents would wish for them. He adds that good children should cause their parents no stress other than illness.

Confucius again addresses how important it is for children to be loyal to their parents. He establishes a clear hierarchical relationship between parent and child, in which the child’s role is merely to obey and appease their parents. He mentions that children must follow the rites in burying their parents, which again highlights Confucius’s high opinion of tradition.



Continuing his discussion on what it means to be a good child, the Master comments that in the modern days, people understand a “filial” son to be one who keep his parents well-fed in their old age. He comments, however, that “even hounds and horses are, in some way, provided with food.” For the Master, without reverence for one’s parents, there is no difference between providing food for one’s parents and providing food for one’s animals.

This is the first moment in which Confucius seems to complain about modern ways as they differ from traditional ways. He seems to think that people in his day and age are overly materialistic, thinking that only in caring for their parents’ physical needs they are being sufficiently filial (that is, what is due from a son or daughter). For him, though, honoring one’s parents has much more to do with respecting cultural practices than giving them material comfort.



When asked about what it means to be a gentleman, the Master says that a gentleman allows his words to follow his actions, rather than speaking first and acting later. He says that a gentleman participates in “associations but not cliques,” whereas the “small man” participates in cliques instead of associations.

Confucius says several times in the Analects that it is important to say only what one can back up with their actions, which highlights Confucius’s strong belief in integrity. He also suggests that the way gentlemen engage with friends is inclusive and kind, whereas lesser men are exclusionary.



The Master says that those who learn from the people around them without thinking for themselves at all become bewildered. At the same time, those who think but refuse to learn anything from others are “in peril.”

The Master tells Yu what it is to know: it is “To say you know when you know, and to say you do not when you do not.” This, for the Master, is true knowledge.

A duke asks the Master how to get the common people to admire him. The Master tells him that he should honor the common people who are honest and admonish those who are dishonest.

When asked why he did not take part in the government, the Master quotes the *Book of History*, saying that a man who is a good son, brother, and friend can influence the government. For Confucius, this is a way to take part in the government.

BOOK 3

Speaking of the Chi family, Confucius mentions that they had “eight rows of eight dancers each” perform in their courtyard. For him, this is intolerable. He is equally upset that the Chi family will perform a sacrificial offering on Mount T'ai. This is not in keeping with the **rites**.

When the Master himself enters the Grand Temple, he asks questions about many things. After he leaves, someone comments that it would seem that Confucius knows nothing about the **rites**—why would he ask so many questions if he did? When he hears that this comment has been made, Confucius says that asking questions in and of itself is part of the rites.

In order to follow the Way, one must find a balance between relying on their own studies and relying on their friends' and community's wisdom. This highlights both self-discipline and the collective as important vehicles through which people can learn about the Way, as long as they're balanced against one another.



Here, again, Confucius emphasizes the importance of integrity and restraint. While someone's ego might tempt them into pretending to know things when they really don't, true followers of the Way have the humility to admit when they are ignorant. Through this, they can learn.



The Master often advises political leaders to lead by example. Through celebrating citizens who are honest, Confucius envisions that the duke will effectively lead his people to be honest themselves and earn their respect.



This is the first moment when Confucius is explicitly identified as the Master. Confucius's vision of participating in government is really a vision of how individuals can participate meaningfully in their communities. He suggests that the government should operate similarly to the way communities operate and vice versa; good moral character among one's community, for him, is already substantial political influence.



Clearly, Confucius thinks that the wealthy Chi family is indulgent. The eight dancers they have perform shows a lack of restraint, that they overly indulge in leisure. His frustration that the family plans to violate the rites to perform what is presumably a prestigious ceremony that it is not traditionally their place to perform shows that he values tradition over material wealth.



In this moment, Confucius's willingness to ask questions even about a topic on which he is widely considered an expert demonstrates his humility. It also shows that for those who follow the Way, all of life is an extensive learning process.



When he hears that Tzu-kung wants the end the tradition of killing sheep on the day of the new moon, the Master says that he understands that the other man doesn't want to part with the price of sheep. But Confucius himself is loath to part with the destruction of the **rite**.

Again, Confucius communicates the importance of preserving tradition over amassing material wealth. Tzu-kung doesn't want to lose the material value of the sheep, but for Confucius, the rites are worth far more than that.



The Master hears two of his disciples discussing different ways to create the altar to the god of the earth. On hearing them list out the various practices, he reminds them not to condemn the rituals of the past or to “argue against what is already accomplished.”

This is another moment in which Confucius demonstrates his own deep-rooted traditionalism. By framing the rituals of the past as accomplishments, he warns against overly criticizing the practices of the ancestors.



BOOK 4

Speaking metaphorically, the Master says that benevolence is the most beautiful neighborhood. Any wise man who can choose where to reside should choose to settle in benevolence. Wise men choose benevolence because they are genuinely attracted to it, while small men aspire to benevolence because they think that it is advantageous. Any man who “sets his heart on benevolence” will be free of evil.

The Master frames benevolence—being well-meaning and kind—as the ultimate goal to achieve through following the Way. Here, he points to restraint as an important tool to use in pursuing benevolence. A person should not seek benevolence because it will assist in self-serving needs; instead, they should aspire to benevolence for its own sake.



The Master comments that although everyone aspires to wealth and prestige, people should not accept these positions unless they are justly earned. Similarly, he says that although many feel aversion to poverty and low station, it is not worth it to try to escape these experiences. Only through benevolence, the Master says, can a gentleman make a reputation for himself. True gentlemen are always benevolent.

Confucius here again emphasizes restraint as an important tool. Through restraint, those who aspire to high station are able to discern when they've truly earned their wealth. Similarly, it is through restraint that poor people are able to live their lives without feeling contempt for their own low stations in life and society.



The Master wonders whether men would be capable of devoting all of their strength to the task of becoming benevolent for a single day. He says that he has never met a man who lacked the necessary strength to take on such a challenge.

In this moment, Confucius suggests that although becoming benevolent is a challenging task, everyone is fully capable of being benevolent as long as they put forth a sincere effort. He implies that it is the lack of willingness to be disciplined and make an effort that prevents more people from being benevolent.



According to the Master, a man who has his heart set on the Way but who is ashamed to be poorly dressed and poorly fed isn't worth speaking to. The Master says that while the small man understands profit, the gentleman understands moral virtue.

In this moment, Confucius again draws readers' attention to restraint as a key element to practicing the Way. Moral virtue, for him, is worth far more than profit. He suggests that to practice the Way requires wisdom to recognize that material comfort is not the most important thing.



The Master says that children, when they see their parents doing what is wrong, should only give advice gently. If the parents ignore the advice, the children must not insist. Children should remain obedient, even if this is a frustrating process.

This moment again suggests that being a good child means deferring to the absolute authority of one's parents. Even if children know that what their parents are doing is morally wrong, Confucius implies that children should choose to obey their parents over correcting wrong behavior. This may be surprising, given Confucius's interest in honesty and virtue—clearly, familial duty, traditional hierarchies, and deference to one's immediate family and ancestors are all far more important to him.



The Master mentions that in antiquity, men did not speak so much. This was because they considered it very shameful for one to fail to “keep up with [one's] words.”

Again, the Master speaks about integrity, emphasizing the importance of backing up one's words with actions.



BOOK 5

When Tsai Yü is in bed in the daytime, the Master comments that rotten wood cannot be carved, and a “wall of dried dung [cannot] be troweled.” He then asks what the use is in condemning Yü for such laziness. After meeting Yü, the Master says, he changed his approach to evaluating character. Before, the Master would trust people's actions aligned with their words. Now, he only listens to their words after observing their actions.

Confucius's judgement of Yü in this moment is severe—he compares him to dung. It is clear that Yü has claimed to be hardworking or disciplined, while his actions (lying in bed all day) reveal to Confucius that he is lazy. From the Master's point of view, Yü lacks inherent moral character because his words and actions don't align.



The Master says that he has never met anyone who is “truly unbending.” Someone asks whether Shen Ch'eng might be considered to be truly unbending. But the Master comments that he desires many things, and therefore cannot be unbending.

It is implied that by “unbending,” the Master means unwilling to compromise on acting in accordance with the Way. He again states that restraint is key if one is dedicated to the way—“desiring many things” suggests a lack of restraint and prevents one from being “truly unbending.”



Tzu-kung shares that he does not impose on others what he wishes for others not to impose on him. The Master tells him that he is not capable of this.

Tzu-kung references the Golden Rule—not to impose on others what one does not wish to experience oneself—which is one of Confucius's core teachings. However, Confucius tells him that he is not yet capable of truly putting that belief into action. This suggests that a lot of discipline is required to develop the skillset necessary to live up to high standards of moral behavior.



The Master says that he should give up hope, for he has not met any man who, upon observing his own weaknesses, holds himself accountable inwardly to change.

Here, the Master suggests that one of the main problems with society is not that men are incapable of improvement, but that they are unwilling to hold themselves accountable. This speaks to the importance of discipline.



The Master says that in any town he is likely to find those who are his equals in that they are trustworthy and dedicated to serving others. However, he doubts that he will find anyone who is as eager to learn as he is.

In this passage, the Master highlights the importance of his own continued curiosity. This passage points back to the moment when Confucius asked many questions about the rites while in a holy temple; it suggests that being continuously open and willing to learn is very important in living the Way.



BOOK 6

When asked which of his disciples are eager to learn, Confucius mentions one student who rarely takes his anger out on innocent people and doesn't repeat his mistakes. But now, this student is dead, and no other student comes to mind as having these same qualities.

Confucius only mentions one student here, which suggests that he has very high standards for his disciples' behavior. The quality that he praises is, again, restraint—he admires his deceased student's emotional restraint in controlling his anger.



The Master says that he admires Hui, who lives in a small home and only has a bowlful of rice to eat each day. Most men, he says, would find these circumstances unbearable, but Hui remains joyful in spite of this hardship.

This is one of many moments in which Confucius praises those who live in poverty and yet are happy. His admiration for such people draws attention to how little he values material comfort.



The Master says that it is appropriate to tell the above average about the behavior of the best, but not to tell them about the behavior of the below average.

Confucius says this because he believes that people should learn from those who are better than them. This moment implies that he also believes that, when surrounded by poorly behaved company, people change their behavior for the worse. In either case, he believes that one of the main ways people learn is through community.



BOOK 7

The Master describes himself, saying that he transmits knowledge but does not innovate. He says that he is honest and “devoted to antiquity.”

In this moment, the Master implies that the wisdom he shares with his students is not his, but derives from antiquity. By recognizing that he himself did not come up with these ideas, he demonstrates humility and devotion to antiquity.



The Master says that the behaviors he most fears in himself are the following: failing to cultivate virtue, failing to deepen his understanding of what he has learned, failing to correct himself when he is wrong, and failing to do the right thing when he knows what it is.

Earlier, Confucius complained that he's never met a man who holds himself accountable to high standards of behavior. In this moment, he suggests that what he most fears is becoming one of these men: he wants to continuously recognize his bad behavior and improve it.



The Master says that he refuses to enlighten those who are not so dedicated to learning that they are not occasionally frustrated by the process. He says, “When I have pointed out one corner of a square to anyone and he does not come back with the other three, I will not point it out to him a second time.”

When the Governor of She asks Yu about Confucius, Yu does not answer. When he tells Confucius of this, Confucius asks him why he did not describe him as the sort of man who drives himself to distraction trying to solve a problem, who is so joyful that he does not notice that he is aging.

According to the Master, he was not born a wise man, but because he is fond of antiquity he is quick to seek knowledge.

The Master says that he can learn from any two men with whom he walks. He copies the good qualities of the one while correcting in himself the bad qualities of the other.

Here, Confucius implies that he values hard work and individual thought in his students. He wants to work with people who are so devoted to cultivating wisdom that they put all their effort into thinking things through.



Here, Confucius again characterizes himself as someone who has a great deal of intellectual discipline. This is one of the traits that he values most in others and has praised repeatedly throughout the Analects.



Confucius implies that in order to preserve antiquity, he must seek out knowledge about ancient practices and beliefs. He suggests that it is through his passion for antiquity that he became wise.



Again, Confucius emphasizes the ways in which people learn from one another. To him, developing character is a communal process, in which the individuals learn by emulating others who are more skillful.



BOOK 8

The Master says that it is important that a man has the spirit of the **rites**. Without this spirit, he will grow exhausted when he tries to be respectful. He will be timid rather than cautious, intolerant rather than forthright, and unruly rather than courageous.

The Master praises one of his students, who eats and drinks “the meanest fare while making offerings to ancestral spirits and gods with the utmost devotion proper to a descendant.” While his everyday dress is shabby, when it is time for him to perform a **rite**, he wears all of the proper robes and caps. While his own home is lowly, he devotes all of his energy to building irrigation canals.

Confucius implies that one must have passion for the rites in order to truly follow the Way. He believes that without this deep belief in the rites and their value, people will feel exhausted by having to exert so much effort at following the Way’s practices.



Here, the student that the Master praises exercises restraint in that he doesn’t eat or dress especially well. However, he demonstrates his reverence for the rites by making an effort to dress well while performing them. He also shows his dedication to the collective by putting more effort into creating canals—sustainable water access for the community—than he does to beautifying his own home.



BOOK 9

The Master rarely discusses profit, Destiny, and benevolence in the same conversation. When someone praises him for being wise but not having established himself in any field, Confucius asks his disciples which field he should choose: driving or archery? He says he thinks he would prefer driving.

There are four things the Master refuses to engage with in any capacity: they are entertaining conjectures, insisting on certainty, being inflexible, and being egotistical.

Sighing, Yen Yüan comments that the more he looks up towards his goal, the higher it appears; the harder he works at achieving it, the more difficult it becomes. When he sees it in front of him, suddenly it is behind him. The Master, he says, is able to lead one step at a time. The Master teaches him high culture but keeps him grounded through practicing the **rites**. Yen Yüan knows that he will never be able to live in full accordance with the Way, and yet, he will never be able to give up on this goal.

The Master says that it is difficult not to be pleased by beautiful words, but what is most important is that one improves oneself. He says that he can do nothing with men who say that they want to reform themselves but take no steps towards this goal.

The Master says that Yu is perhaps the only man he knows who can be poorly dressed and stand next to a wealthy, well-dressed man without feeling ashamed. He quotes the *Odes*, saying, “Neither envious nor covetous, / How can he be anything but good?”

BOOK 10

When he is in the village, Confucius is submissive and not particularly well-spoken. When he is in the ancestral temple, he is very articulate but takes his words very seriously. When he speaks with low-ranking counsellors, Confucius is kind and friendly. When he speaks with higher ranking counsellors, he is sincere and respectful.

Here, the implication is that the Master is above worldly professions like archery or driving. Because he is so dedicated to studying and teaching the Way, he does not need to think about profit or profession in the same way common people do.



The four traits depicted here are the opposite of the things Confucius most values: intellectual humility and curiosity, willingness to learn, and emphasis on the collective rather than the self.



This is an important moment of characterization for Confucius. According to one of his students, he is both a gentle and stern teacher who inspires his students and yet reminds them that they have a lot of work to do. Yen Yüan sounds like the kind of student that Confucius most values, in that he is dedicated to the Way even though he knows that the process is hard.



Again, the Master speaks to the importance of one's actions aligning with one's words. If someone isn't honest with themselves about what they need to improve, and dedicated in their efforts to improve those things, Confucius refuses to help.



Again, Confucius praises one of his favorite students for being restrained, for recognizing that material wealth says nothing about one's value. He praises Yu for not wanting luxury.



The fact that Confucius is submissive and quiet even though he is a very wise man—and the fact that he's willing to treat low-ranking counsellors with respect—showcases his humility. Rather than trying to control or preach to villagers, he acts as their peer. His humility shows his dedication to the collective and his renunciation of the individual ego.



During periods of purification, Confucius wears a cheap house robe. He eats a simpler diet than usual and does not sit in the most comfortable place at the home.

Generally, the Master does not eat his fill of “polished rice” or “finely minced meat.” He also does not eat rice that has gone bad or spoiled fish or meat. He does not eat food that smells bad or that has a strange color.

When a friend of Confucius’s dies who has no family living, Confucius offers to give him a funeral in his own home.

Confucius here demonstrates his respect for periods of spiritual purification by exercising greater material restraint than usual.



This moment in the text suggests not only that Confucius exercises restraint when it comes to eating, but also that his restraint—not eating foods that have gone bad, presumably even if he is hungry—keeps him healthy.



This act of kindness shows how Confucius cares deeply about his community and is willing to make personal sacrifices for those he cares about.



BOOK 11

Although the Chi Family is very wealthy, Ch’iu helps them to increase their wealth by collecting extensive taxes. Confucius says that Ch’iu is no disciple of his. He tells his friends that they may attack Ch’iu openly.

Yu asks the Master if he should immediately put into practice what he has learned, and the Master tells him that he shouldn’t while his father and elder brother are still alive. Jan Yu asks the Master the same question, and he tells him that he *should* immediately put into practice what he has learned. Another disciple asks the Master why he has given Yu and Jan Yu different answers. The Master responds saying that Yu has too much energy, so he must be restrained. On the other hand, Jan Yu holds himself back, so the Master felt he needed to encourage him.

In this moment, Confucius demonstrates his scorn for greed and materialistic behavior, going so far as to tell his friends to attack Ch’iu.



Here, Confucius shows himself to be an excellent teacher. He is aware of his student’s unique skillsets and creates teaching approaches that are specific to both of them. The Master has told Yu to exercise a different type of restraint—while much of the text has focused on material restraint, here, Confucius speaks to the importance of patience in learning the Way.



BOOK 12

When asked about benevolence, the Master says that benevolence is the act of returning to observing the **rites** through overcoming the self. If a man can do this even for a single day, then he could be said to have benevolence. The whole Empire would acknowledge him to be benevolent. But the Master emphasizes that “the practice of benevolence depends on oneself alone, and not on others.”

Here, Confucius states that developing benevolence is first and foremost an individual act. He believes that through holding oneself accountable to improve on one’s weak points, one can cultivate benevolence. But this is not something that people should do in order to gain recognition; rather, they should do it for themselves.



When asked about benevolence, the Master says one should not impose on others what one does not wish to experience oneself. When asked again about benevolence, the Master says that one can recognize a benevolent man because he won't speak much—for if acting is difficult, how can speaking come easily?

Duke Ai asks Yu Juo what to do—the harvest in the province that he rules is poor, and the duke does not have enough to cover his expenditure. Yu Juo suggests taxing the people less than the usual. Duke Ai responds, saying that he doesn't have enough as it is—how will he have enough if he taxes the people even less? Yu Juo responds, saying, “When the people have sufficient, who is there to share your insufficiency? When the people have insufficient, who is there to share your sufficiency?”

Tzu-chang asks the Master what a gentleman needs to have accomplished before “he can be said to have got through.” Bewildered, the Master asks Tzu-chang what he means by “gotten through,” and Tzu-chang says that he means serving in a state or being part of a noble family. The Master quickly corrects him, saying that what Tzu-chang refers to is being known, not getting through. For the Master, getting through means a man who is honest, trustworthy, morally correct, and modest. Being known, on the other hand, describes a man who uses benevolence as a façade merely to advance his personal interests.

BOOK 13

Yu asks the Master about governance. The Master says that leaders must lead by example in order to get the people to work hard. Yu asks for more guidance, and the Master tells him that officials must not let up on their efforts.

The Master says that if a man who is in government has memorized all 300 *Odes* but fails to complete his administrative responsibilities, what use are the *Odes* to him? How many has he really learned?

The Master says that a man who makes himself correct will have no difficulty in taking part in government. If a man cannot make himself correct, why should he be in a position to make others correct?

Here, the Master defines benevolence as having integrity, which he's touched upon extensively up until this point, and as having deep respect for other people and their needs.



In this instance, Yu Juo's advice shows the importance of the collective over the individual. He believes that the more people there are who do not “share in insufficiency,” the better off the entire province is. The province's suffering is not measured by the suffering of its most privileged members, but simply by the suffering of the majority of its members.



Here, Confucius quickly corrects Tzu-chang's ambitions. Tzu-chang is seeking the sort of material wealth and social status that Confucius often speaks of as lacking value. He says that what one should really aspire to is not to be part of a noble family, but rather to develop the characteristics that practicing the Way can offer. The Master warns against seeking benevolence only to achieve material success.



Again, Confucius implies that it is important to lead by example. This destabilizes the hierarchy that may exist between political leaders and their subjects; Confucius believes that even the most powerful are not above hard work.



Here, Confucius suggests that study of antiquity is only useful to the extent that it is applicable; a good student will know how to apply antiquity to his contemporary profession and life.



Confucius implies that leaders need to improve the moral characters of their people, and that knowing how to do so comes from self-mastery. This draws attention to the importance of discipline and holding oneself accountable to correct one's mistakes.



The Governor of She shares with Confucius that in his village there is a man whose nickname is “Straight Body,” who earned this nickname because he turned in his father when his father stole a sheep. Confucius says that in his village those who are “straight” behave differently; “fathers cover up for their sons, and sons cover up for their fathers.” This, for Confucius, is straightness.

In this moment, Confucius reveals family ties to be what he values most. The Governor of She tells a story in which the son acts with integrity. However, to Confucius, loyalty to one’s parents is more important even than honesty. This is why the “straight” thing to do is cover up for one’s parents.



The Master quotes a saying that is common in the South of the country: “A man devoid of constancy will not make a shaman or a doctor.”

Again, Confucius speaks to the importance of continued hard work and effort in order to accomplish what one sets out to achieve.



BOOK 14

When asked about what is shameful, the Master says that making salary one’s primary objective, regardless of whether the Way is popular in one’s state, is shameful behavior. Confucius says that when the Way prevails in one’s state, one should “speak and act with perilous high-mindedness.” When the Way does not prevail in one’s state, one should act the same, but “speak with self-effacing diffidence.”

Here, Confucius suggests that followers of the Way should be dedicated to it even when it is not advantageous. He implies that, when the Way is not powerful in one’s state, rather than pursuing a high salary, one should seek to reestablish the Way as the state’s norms for moral conduct and behavior.



The Master wonders whether it’s possible to love someone without making them work hard, and whether it’s possible to do what’s best for someone without educating them.

In this moment, Confucius characterizes his rigorous teaching as an act of love. He believes that to truly love someone, one must encourage them to improve.



One of the Master’s disciples hears someone say that Confucius never speaks, laughs, or takes anything. The disciple corrects this evaluation, saying that Confucius only speaks when it is appropriate, so people never tire of listening to him. He only laughs when it is appropriate, so people never tire of hearing him laugh. And he only takes what it is correct for him to take, which is why people never tire of his taking.

In this passage, Confucius’s disciple characterizes his teacher, first and foremost, as someone who exercises a lot of restraint. He depicts Confucius as someone who is aware of what the collective needs—whether they need him to speak or stay in silence, for instance—which is what allows him to maintain healthy relationships with the community.



The Master says that men who “shun the world” are superior to men who shun a particular place; these men are superior to those who are averse to a hostile look, who are superior still to men who are averse to hostile words.

Here, Confucius implies that those who “shun the world” are superior because they exercise material restraint. His choice to devalue men who can’t tolerate hearing hostile words suggests that he thinks men who can’t bear criticism lack character.



When Yu asks about the gentleman, the Master says that by improving himself, the gentleman also improves his society.

Here, the Master links one's own moral improvement with the moral improvement of one's community. This expands upon his idea that people are constantly learning from one another. It shows that cultivating benevolence is not selfish—it is for the good of all.



BOOK 15

In the state of Ch'en, provisions run out. Confucius and his followers become so hungry that none of them can stand on their feet. Yu asks Confucius whether it is common for gentlemen to find themselves in such difficult circumstances. Confucius responds that it is—in fact, gentlemen are rarely surprised to find themselves in such circumstances. The small man, on the other hand, loses all restraint when in difficult moments.

Speaking about the value of non-attachment, Confucius suggests that gentlemen are used to living through moments of material discomfort and therefore are not perturbed when they find themselves in difficult situations. They are not attached to ease or comfort. Small men, on the other hand, are, and therefore lack resilience.



The Master praises Shih Yü, who is just as honest and trustworthy when the Way prevails in a state as he is when the Way falls into disuse. He also praises Ch'ü Po-yü, who takes office when the Way prevails but refrains from holding office when the Way falls out of use.

Here, Confucius praises the two men's discipline and dedication to the Way. Shih Yü doesn't depend on the Way being popular to act on it; he follows the Way out of his deep personal belief in its teachings. Ch'ü Po-yü has the integrity not to take part in a government whose values he disagrees with.



The Master says that what the small man seeks, he seeks in others. In contrast, the gentleman only seeks that which is already inside himself.

This passage expands on Confucius's earlier statement that cultivating benevolence is an individual project, accessed by holding oneself accountable to high moral standards.



When asked if there is a one word that can serve as a guide throughout one's life, the Master says that it is the word *shu*, which encompasses the principle of not imposing on others what one does not wish to experience oneself.

By placing this as the singular, most important value, Confucius characterizes his teachings as being principally about collective and community wellbeing.



The Master says that when one has the opportunity to practice benevolence, one should make this a priority even over one's teacher.

Again, Confucius states that one's personal practice of benevolence is the most important way in which one can develop one's moral character.



BOOK 16

Duke Ching of Ch'i in his lifetime had thousands of horses, but when he died the common people couldn't find anything to praise him for. On the other hand, Po Yi and Shu Ch'i were starving during their lifetimes, but after their deaths the common people continue to sing their praises.

This anecdote serves to communicate that material wealth has nothing to do with whether one has lived a meaningful life. The poor men, likely through their generous actions, live on in the townspeople's collective memory.



BOOK 17

Confucius meets with Yang Huo, who asks him whether a man can be said to be benevolent if he hoards his wisdom and allows the state to falter. He asks whether a man can be said to be wise who is eager to participate in public life but never takes the opportunity. Confucius responds, "All right. I shall take office."

This is a unique moment, because Confucius is suddenly the student rather than the teacher. Yang Huo shows Confucius that in refusing to take on a position of leadership, Confucius is not doing his duty. Many more could learn for him if he takes office. In allowing himself to be corrected, Confucius shows humility.



The Master says that men are naturally close to one another, and they are only driven apart due to consistent practice.

This moment again shows Confucius's community-oriented values.



The Master asks Yu whether he has heard of the "six qualities and the six attendant faults." When Yu says no, the Master explains. One cannot love benevolence without loving learning, otherwise this leads to harmful action. One cannot love forthrightness without loving learning, otherwise this leads to intolerance. One cannot love courage without loving learning, otherwise this leads to insubordination. One cannot love unbending strength without loving learning, otherwise this will lead to indiscipline.

Confucius characterizes learning as the most important practice one can implement throughout one's lifetime. Without learning, all of the other values he teaches in the Way become useless. Therefore, continuing to hold oneself to a high standard of intellectual engagement with all of one's actions is integral to the Way.



BOOK 18

At one point, Yu and the Master are traveling together. Yu falls behind and meets with an old man and asks him whether he has seen the Master. The old man responds that Yu doesn't know one type of grain from the other and seems never to have worked with his hands—who can his master be? Later, the old man invites Yu to stay for the night. When Yu meets up with the Master the next day, the Master says that the old man must be a recluse. Yu comments, "Not to enter public life is to ignore one's duty."

Here, Confucius's judgement of the old man's choice to be a recluse echoes the scene in which his student told him that he should run for office. According to Confucius's values, it is important for people to be of service to the collective in whatever way they can. Clearly, he believes that people's lives have most meaning when they are serving the community rather than the self.



BOOK 19

Tzu-hsia says that a man can be considered eager to learn if within a day he doesn't forget what he lacks and if within a month he never forgets what he has mastered.

Tzu-hsia says that one should learn widely and not stray from one's purpose—one must always ask questions and reflect on the present moment. If one does this, one does not need to look for benevolence anywhere else. Tzu-hsia says that the small man is sure to ignore all of his mistakes.

Tzu-hsia says that when a student finds that he is able to handle all of his studies, he should take office. Similarly, when an official finds that he is comfortable handling all of his official duties, he should return to studying.

A disciple of the Master says that Confucius "cannot be equaled just as the sky cannot be scaled. Were the Master to become the head of a state or a noble family, he would be like the man described in the saying: he only has to help them stand and they will stand, to guide them and they will walk, to bring peace to them and they will turn to him."

Tzu-hsia here commends both self-criticism—in not forgetting what he lacks—and acknowledgement of the fruits of one's efforts. Both are integral to learning.



Here, Tzu-hsia positions the ability to learn from one's mistakes as the quality that most often leads to cultivating wisdom. Small men remain ignorant precisely because they ignore their mistakes.



The setup Tzu-hsia has created in this moment is one in which people are continuously learning. He suggests that whenever someone becomes too comfortable with their current occupation, they change so that they are newly challenged and may learn again.



In this moment, readers recognize the extent to which Confucius's disciples are dedicated to him. It is clear that they see their teacher as the embodiment of all of the virtues that they themselves seek to cultivate through the Way.



BOOK 20

When asked what a man must be like before taking office, Confucius says he must be generous without it costing him anything, work hard without complaining, want things without being greedy, be relaxed but not arrogant, and be awe-inspiring without being intimidating. When asked what it means to be generous without it costing him anything, the Master says that he is referring to a man who shares things with the common people that they find beneficial.

According to the Master, those in office must not use the death penalty to punish those whom they have not tried to reform. They also must not expect results from the people without giving them time to implement orders.

Here, the Master highlights the traits that leaders must have to be successful. It seems that he thinks they should prioritize the needs of the common people over everything else and not be driven by ego.



Confucius's disapproval of the death penalty likely stems from his belief that people are continually learning, and therefore can always be reformed. This belief also likely comes from his belief in benevolence.



The Master says that a man cannot become a gentleman if he does not understand Destiny, a man cannot “take his stand” if he does not understand the **rites** and cannot judge others if he does not understand words.

In this moment, Confucius positions the rites as tools that are integral to any man who wishes to lead a life that is purposeful and impactful on society at large. All of the traits that he has spoken of in the text contribute to the goal of forming productive members of society.





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