

Selected Passages from the *Lunyu* (*Analects*)

The structure, or apparent lack of structure, of the Lunyu makes treating its teachings topically rather than serially the most fruitful approach. Among the many important topics and terms mentioned in the text, the ones singled out here are perhaps the most notable, but choosing the passages that treat them is a highly subjective undertaking, leaving much that is important untouched. There are several excellent English-language translations now available, including those by D. C. Lau, Robert Eno, and Edward Slingerland, but do not be surprised at the variation of language and interpretation you will find among them. Translation requires making decisions about every sentence, often robbing the text of deliberate ambiguities or multiple, overlapping meanings. Even in its native language, the almost telegraphic style of Confucius's pronouncements, collected by his students many years after their master's death, affords ample room for variation and disagreement in interpretation. Keep in mind that the Chinese have been plumbing these scant passages for meanings for over two millennia now!

CONFUCIUS, A TRANSMITTER OF THE PAST

7.1 The Master said: "I transmit but I do not create. Believing in and loving the ancients, I venture to compare myself with our old Peng."

7.5 The Master said: "How extreme is my decline! I have not dreamt of the Duke of Zhou for a long time now."

7.19 The Master said: "I am not one who was born in the possession of knowledge; I am one who is fond of antiquity and earnest in seeking it there."

8.18 The Master said: "How sublime was the manner in which Shun and Yu handled the empire, without lifting a finger!"

8.19 The Master said: "The rulership of Yao was so magnificent! He was so sublime that even though there is nothing as great as Heaven, he could accord with it. His greatness was so boundless it is beyond description. His efficacy was amazing; his writings were enlightening."

8.21 The Master said: "Yu was flawless in character. Surviving on the simplest food and drink, yet perfect in his piety to the ancestral spirits. Normally wearing coarse clothing, he looked magnificent in his ceremonial cap and gown. Living in a humble abode, he exhausted himself in the excavation of drainage ways and canals. I cannot find a flaw in his character!"

15.11 Yan Yuan asked about governing the state. Confucius said: "Use the calendar of Xia; ride in the state carriage of Yin; wear the ceremonial cap of Zhou; for music, play that of Shao and Wu. Get rid of the music of Zheng and keep distance from flatterers; the music of Zheng is lewd; flatterers are dangerous."

7.20 The Master said: "I was not born with wisdom. I love the ancient teachings and have worked hard to attain to their level."



Often, and inadequately, translated as “goodness,” “benevolence,” “humaneness,” “fellow-feeling,” and like virtues, ren is deeper—and more elusive—than that. At root, it means that to be fully and authentically human is to devote fundamental attention to and sympathy toward other people, to fully see them, to know that the concerns of the other are the concerns of oneself. The practice of ren thus entails both the notion of reciprocity, of doing unto others and so forth, and the importance of correct ritual behavior (li), which orients one to the moral order of Heaven. Ren is difficult to practice and at the same time is so near and accessible as to be a very part of the human personality.

9.1 The Master seldom spoke about profit, destiny, and *ren*.

6.28 If you wish to establish yourself, then help others to establish themselves. If you want to develop yourself, then help other to develop themselves. Being able to recognize oneself in others, one is on the way to being humane.

4.5 A noble person never leaves his fundamental *ren* for even the time of a single meal. In moments of haste he acts according to it. In times of difficulty or confusion he acts according to it.”

6.5 The Master said: “Hui went for three months without his mind departing from *ren*. Others are lucky if they can do it for one day out of a month.”

7.29 The Master said: “Is *ren* far away? As soon as I want it, it is here.”

4.6 The Master said: “I have not seen a person who loved *ren*, or one who hated what was non-*ren*. He who loved *ren* would esteem nothing above it. He who hated non-*ren* would practice *ren* in such a way that he would not allow anything that is not *ren* to approach his person. Is anyone able for one day to apply his strength to *ren*? I have not seen anyone who lacked the strength to do so. There might be such a case, but I have not seen it.”

6.20 Fan Chi asked about the nature of wisdom. Confucius said: “Devote yourself to what must rightly be done for the people; respect spiritual beings but keep them at a distance, this you can call wisdom.” He then asked about the nature of *ren*. The Master said: “The *ren* person first does what is difficult and only thereafter concerns himself with success. This may be called *ren*.”

12.1 Yan Yuan asked about the meaning of *ren*. The Master said: “To completely overcome selfishness and keep to *li* is *ren*. If for a full day you can overcome selfishness and keep to *li*, everyone in the world will return to *ren*. Does *ren* come from oneself, or from others?”

Yan Yuan asked: “May I ask in further detail how this is to be brought about?” Confucius said: “Do not watch what is improper; do not listen to what is improper; do not speak improperly and do not act improperly.” Yan Yuan said: “Although I am not so perspicacious, I will apply myself to this teaching.”

12:2 Zhong Gong asked about the meaning of *ren*. The Master said: “When you are out in the world, act as if meeting an important guest. Employ the people as if you were assisting at a great ceremony. What you don’t want done to yourself, don’t do to others. Live in your town without stirring up resentments, and live in your household without stirring up resentments.” Zhong Gong said: “Although I am not so smart, I will apply myself to this teaching.”

12.3 Sima Niu asked about the meaning of *ren*. Confucius said: the *ren* man is hesitant to speak.” Niu replied, “Are you saying that *ren* is mere hesitancy in speaking?” Confucius said: “Putting it into practice is so difficult, how can you not be hesitant to speak about it?”

15:33 The Master said: “If your wisdom can grasp it, but your *ren* is incapable of maintaining it, even though you have grasped it, you will certainly lose it. If your wisdom grasps it and your *ren* is sufficient to maintain it, but you don’t manifest it, the people will not revere you. If your wisdom grasps it, your *ren* is sufficient to maintain it, and you manifest it but don’t act according to *li*, you are still not perfect.”

3:3 The Master said: “If a person has no *ren* what can his *li* be like? If a person has no *ren* what can his music be like?”

19.6 Zi Xia said: “In broadly learning, in being genuinely dedicated, in earnestly inquiring, in reflecting on things at hand, *ren* lies right here.

RECIPROCITY 恕

Shu, often translated as “reciprocity,” is the ability to regard the conduct and intentions of others in the same way as one’s does one’s own. By extension, it is the ability to treat others as one wishes to be treated oneself.

15.24 Zi Gong asked: “Is there a single concept that we can take as a guide for the actions of our whole life?” Confucius said: “What about reciprocity? What you don’t like done to yourself, don’t do to others.”

6.28 If you wish to establish yourself, then help others to establish themselves. If you want to develop yourself, then help others to develop themselves. Being able to recognize oneself in others, one is on the way to being humane.

LI 礼

Rite or ritual. In his attention to li, particularly those ritual forms practiced in the Zhou period, Confucius emphasized the liturgical dimension of human experience. The rites represent sacralized patterns of relationships between the celebrants and Heaven and between the celebrants themselves. The observance of li aligns human experience with the rhythms of Heaven, formalizing everything from political protocol and court ceremony to local festivals and personal behavior.

2.3 The Master said: “If you govern the people legalistically and control them by punishment, they will avoid crime but have no personal sense of shame. If you govern them by means of *de* and control them with *li* they will gain their own sense of shame, and thus correct themselves.”

3.12 “Sacrificing as if present” means sacrificing to the spirits as if they were present. Confucius said: “If I do not personally offer the sacrifice, it is the same as not having sacrificed at all.”

4.13 The Master said: “If you can govern the country by putting *li* first, what else will you need to do? If you can’t govern your country by putting *li* first, how could you even call it *li*?”

15.4 The Master said: As for governing through non-action, was not Shun an example of this? What did he do? All he did was make himself reverent and face south in a correct posture, that is all.

3.3 The Master said: “If a person has no *ren* what can his *li* be like? If a person has no *ren* what can his music be like?”

20.3 The Master said: “Without knowing what is ordained by Heaven (Heaven’s Mandate), one has no way to become a noble person (*jūnzǐ*). Without knowing the rites (*lǐ*), one has no way to take one’s stand. Without knowing words, one has no way to know other people.”

8.8 The Master said: “Be aroused by poetry; structure yourself with *li*; refine yourself with music.”

XIAO 孝

Filial piety. More than an element of conventional morality, filial piety—typically, devotion to one’s parents—is fundamental to a moral life and is the basis of an ordered society, inasmuch as the family is the model for the state. The obligations do not stop with the living. Sacrifices to and ritual observances on behalf of departed parents and ancestors propitiate their spirits, which (who?) are still active in human affairs.

1.2 You Zi said: “There are few who have developed themselves filially and fraternally who enjoy offending their superiors. Those who do not enjoy offending superiors are never troublemakers. The noble person concerns himself with the fundamentals. Once the fundamentals are established, the Way appears. Are not filial piety and obedience to elders fundamental to the actualization of fundamental human goodness?”

1.6 The Master said: “A young man should serve his parents at home and be respectful to elders outside his home. He should be earnest and truthful, loving all, but become intimate with his innate good-heartedness. After doing this, if he has energy to spare, he can study literature and the arts.”

1.9 Ceng Zi said: “When they are careful (about their parents) to the end and continue in reverence after (their parents) are long gone, the virtue of the people will return to its natural depth.”

DAO 道

Perhaps the most fundamental term in all of classical Chinese thought, the Way (dao) has various (related) meanings according to the thinker or school describing it, but all derive from its root meaning as a path or road. Metaphorically, then, dao is the true nature of reality, the Way of things, the Way you should go, the Right Path, and so forth, and by extension, the norms of individual morality and proper governance, as exemplified by, e.g., the Sage Kings.

6.17 The Master said: “Who can go out without using the door? So why doesn't anybody follow the Way?”

[really, what else is there to say?]

4.8 The Master said: “Having heard the Way in the morning, one may die content in the evening.”

4.5 Confucius said, “Riches and honors are what all men desire. But if they cannot be attained in accordance with the Way they should not be kept. Poverty and low status are what all men hate. But if they cannot be avoided while staying in accordance with the Way, you should not avoid them.”

8.13 The Master said: “Be of unwavering good faith and love learning. Be steadfast unto death in pursuit of the good Way. Do not enter a state which is in peril nor reside in one which people have rebelled. When the Way prevails in the world, show yourself. When it does not, then hide. When the Way prevails in your own state, to be poor and obscure is a disgrace. But when the Way does not prevail in your own state, to be rich and honored is a disgrace.”

DE 德

The common translation of this term as “virtue” is misleading. De refers only derivatively to a quality of moral goodness. More fundamentally, it is a power, a sometimes magical potency that represents the actualization of the Way (dao) in the world. It is a power generated or conferred by Heaven as the result of righteous activity. If it then connotes virtue, the virtue is more like what we mean when we say, “by virtue of,” where the term refers to the specific power inherent in a substance or person. In such cases, de is sometimes translated as “moral force.”

2.1 The Master said: “If you govern with the power of your *de*, you will be like the North Star. It just stays in its place while all the other stars position themselves around it.”

2.3 The Master said: “If you govern the people legalistically and control them by punishment, they will avoid crime, but have no personal sense of shame. If you govern them by means of *de* and control them with *li*, they will gain their own sense of shame, and thus correct themselves.”

7.22 The Master said: “Heaven gave birth to the *de* within me. What can Huan Tui do to me?”

12.19 If you desire good, the people will be good. The *de* of the noble man is like the wind, the *de* of the inferior man is like the grass. When the wind blows over the grass, it always bends.”

4.25 The Master said, “*De* is not solitary; it always has neighbors.

WU-WEI 無為

Associated most prominently with the thought of Laozi, wu-wei, literally “absence of action” or “absence of doing,” refers to spontaneous and/or effortless action, that is, activity that is natural and pre-reflective, that happens “all by itself.” Its use in the Lunyu demonstrates that the gulf between Confucian and Daoist thought is not so broad as is sometimes assumed.

17.19 The Master said: “I wish I could avoid talking.” Zi Gong said: “Master, if you didn’t speak, what would we disciples have to pass on?” Confucius said: “Does Heaven speak? Yet the four seasons continue to change, and all things are born. Does Heaven speak?”

2.1 The Master said: “If you govern with the power of your *de*, you will be like the North Star. It just stays in its place while all the other stars position themselves around it.”

15.4 The Master said: “As for governing through non-action, was not Shun an example of this? What did he do? All he did was make himself reverent and face south in a correct posture. That is all.”

13.6 The Master said: “When you have gotten your own life straightened out, things will go well without your giving orders. But if your own life isn't straightened out, even if you give orders, no one will follow them.”

8.18 Confucius said: “How sublime was the manner in which Shun and Yu handled the empire, without lifting a finger!”

TIAN 天

The high deity of the Zhou, by Confucius's time tian had also acquired a more abstract meaning, closer to Nature or an impersonal moral and cosmological order. Since the character also means sky, it is often translated as Heaven. The ongoing tension between the two—impersonal force or high divinity—is clear from the passages below.

The Zhou justified their usurpation of Shang rule by claiming that the Shang had, through its corruption and misrule, lost tian-ming, the “mandate” (“decree,” “will,” etc.) of Heaven, i.e., the right to rule granted by Heaven. Thereafter, invoking Heaven's mandate became an important vehicle of regime change and the legitimization of political power.

2.4. “By the age of fifty, I knew Heaven's decrees.”

7.22 The Master said: “Heaven gave birth to the *de* within me. What can Huan Tui do to me?”

16.8 The Master said: “The *junzi* stands in awe of three things: He is in awe of the decree (Mandate) of Heaven. He is in awe of great men. He is in awe of the words of the sages. The inferior man does not know the decree of Heaven; he takes great men lightly and laughs at the words of the sages.

11.8 When Yan Yuan died, the Master cried: “How cruel! Heaven is destroying me! Heaven is destroying me!”

17.19 The Master said: “I wish I could avoid talking.” Zi Gong said: “Master, if you didn't speak, what would we disciples have to pass on?” Confucius said: “Does Heaven speak? Yet the four seasons continue to change, and all things are born. Does Heaven speak?”

THE RULER

2.1 The Master said: “If you govern with the power of your *de*, you will be like the North Star. It just stays in its place while all the other stars position themselves around it.”

15.4 The Master said: “As for governing through non-action, was not Shun an example of this?”

What did he do? All he did was make himself reverent and face south in a correct posture, that is all.”

3:19 Duke Ding asked how a ruler should employ his ministers and how a minister should serve his ruler. Confucius replied, saying: “The prince employs his ministers with *li*; the ministers serve their prince with good faith.”

13.6 The Master said: “When a prince’s personal conduct is correct, his government is effective without the issuing of orders. If his personal conduct is not correct, he may issue orders, but they will not be followed.”

12:7 Zi Gong asked about government. The Master said: “Enough food, enough weapons and the confidence of the people.” Zi Gong said: “Suppose you had no alternative but to give up one of these three, which one would be let go of first?” The Master said: “Weapons.” Zi Gong said “What if you had to give up one of the remaining two which one would it be?” The Master said: “Food. From ancient times, death has come to all men, but a people without confidence in its rulers will not stand.”

12.19 If you desire good, the people will be good. The nature of the noble man is like the wind, the nature of the inferior man is like the grass. When the wind blows over the grass, it always bends.”

THE JUNZI 君子

Originally a person of noble birth, a nobleman, Confucius’s junzi is a noble person, one who perfects himself through learning and observance of li. From Confucius’s time on, the term will come unmoored from its hereditary connotations and will, increasingly, refer to a person, regardless of social station, who exemplifies a developed moral stance, a “superior person.”

1.2 You Zi said: “The noble person concerns himself with the fundamentals. Once the fundamentals are established, the proper way appears. Are not filial piety and obedience to elders fundamental to the actualization of fundamental human goodness?”

2.12 The Master said: “The *junzi* is not a tool.”

4.5 A noble person never leaves his fundamental *ren* for even the time of a single meal. In moments of haste he acts according to it. In times of difficulty or confusion he acts according to it.”

4.16 The Master said: “The noble person is aware of fairness; the inferior one is aware of advantage.”

12.4 Sima Niu asked about the qualities of the *junzi*. Confucius said, “The *junzi* is free from anxiety and fear.” Niu said, “Free from anxiety and fear? Is that all it takes?” Confucius said, “If you reflect within yourself and find nothing to be ashamed of, how could you have anxiety or fear?”

14.42 Zi Lu asked about the qualities of the *junzi*. Confucius said: “He cultivates himself by comforting others.” “Is that all?” “He cultivates himself by comforting everyone. Now, this is something that even Yao and Shun found difficult.”

15.18 The Master said: “The *junzi* takes fairness as his substance. He actualizes it through propriety, demonstrates it in humility, develops it by trustworthiness. This is the noble person!”

16.7 The Master said: “The *junzi* is on guard against three things. When he is young and his physical energies are not yet settled, he is on guard against lust. When he is mature and his physical energy is solid, he is on guard against being drawn into a fight. When he is old, and his physical power is weakened, he is on guard not to cling to his achievements.”

16.8 The Master said: “The *junzi* stands in awe of three things: He is in awe of the decree (Mandate) of Heaven. He is in awe of great men. He is in awe of the words of the sages. The inferior man does not know the decree of Heaven; he takes great men lightly and laughs at the words of the sages.

16.10 The Master said: “There are nine patterns that are awarenesses of the *junzi*. In seeing, he is aware of clarity; in listening, he is aware of acuity; in faces, is aware of warmth; in the attitude he projects, he is aware of courtesy; in speech, sincerity; in service, reverence. In doubt, he is inclined to question; when angry, he is aware of the difficulties that may ensue. When he sees an opportunity for gain, he thinks of what would be Just.”

RECTIFICATION OF NAMES 正名

Although it is tempting to see in zhengming, the “rectification of names,” a criticism of euphemism that seems especially appropriate today, the term actually concerns the relationship between words and the things they describe. If one is to be called a ruler, for instance, one must act like a ruler. While it is tempting to say, simply, that words must correspond to the things they signify, a closer reading suggests that it is the things, the signified, that must correspond to the words used to describe them. While there is in the Lunyu no theory of realism as we understand it in the West, in 12.11 below we see that Confucius clearly believes that there is an ideal of (for instance) fatherhood or kingship to which one’s behavior must conform in order to be called a father or a king.

12.11 Duke Jing of Qi asked Confucius about government. Confucius replied: “Let the ruler be a ruler, a minister be a minister, a father be a father, a son be a son.” The duke said: “Excellent! Indeed, if the ruler is not a ruler, the ministers not ministers, fathers not fathers, and sons not sons, though I have grain, will I get to eat it?”

13.3 Zi Lu said: “The ruler of Wei is anticipating your assistance in the administration of his state. What will be your top priority?” Confucius said: “What is necessary is the rectification of names.” Zi Lu said: “Are you serious? Why is that so important?” Confucius said: “You are really simple, aren’t you? The *junzi* is cautious about jumping to conclusions about that which he does not know.

“If names are not rectified, then language will not be appropriate, and if language is not appropriate, then affairs will not be carried out successfully. If affairs are not successfully carried out, rites and music do not flourish. If rites and music do not flourish, punishments will not hit the mark. If punishments do not hit the mark, the people will have nowhere to put hand or foot. Therefore, the names used by the *junzi* must be appropriate for speech, and his speech must be appropriate for action. In regard to language, the *junzi* allows no carelessness. That is all.”

LEARNING

2.4 [See Handout]

7.18 Topics which the Teacher regularly discussed were the *Book of Odes*, the *Book of History*, and the maintenance of *li*.

7.17 The Master said: “If I could add several years to my life, I would have studied the *Changes* from the age of fifty and become free of error.”

7.24 The Master taught four things: Culture, correct action, loyalty, and trust

7.20 The subjects on which the Master did not talk, were—extraordinary things, feats of strength, disorder, and spiritual beings.

7.34 The Master said: “I dare not claim to be a sage or a *ren* man. But I strive for these without being disappointed, and I teach without becoming weary. This is what can be said of me.”

7:28 The Master said: “There may be those who can act creatively without knowledge. I am not at this level. I listen widely, select the good and follow their ways. I observe broadly and contemplate.”

16.9 The Master said: “Those who are born knowing it are the best. Those who study to know it are next; those who are limited and yet study are next; those who are limited and do not even study are the lowest among the people.”

7.2. The Master said: The Master said: “Keeping silent and thinking; studying without satiety; teaching others without weariness: somehow I have these abilities.”

7.3. The Master said: “Virtue (*de*) not being cultivated, learning not being discussed, hearing of rightness without being able to follow it, or of what is not good without being able to change it: these are my sorrows.

6:27 The Master said: “The noble person who studies culture extensively and disciplines himself with *li* can keep from error.”

1.14 The Master said: “When the *junzi* eats he does not try to stuff himself; at rest he does not seek perfect comfort; he is diligent in his work and careful in speech. He goes together with people of the Way and thereby corrects himself. This is the kind of person of whom you can say, ‘He loves learning.’”

15:31 The Master said: “I have spent a whole day without eating and a whole night without sleeping in order to think—but I got nothing out of it. Thinking cannot compare with studying.”

15.2 The Master said: “Zi, do you think that I am a person who studies widely and memorizes all of it?” Zi replied, “It seems that way. But perhaps not?” Confucius said: “The answer is *no*. With me there is the one [thread] that runs through it all.”

7.24 Confucius said to his disciples: “You students, do you think I conceal things from you? There is nothing I conceal from you. There is nothing that I do that is not right out in front of you. That is the way I am.”

[Based on the translation of A. Charles Muller]