



Reader's Guide

from the ANALECTS

Background

The sayings in the *Analects* range from brief statements to more extended dialogues between Confucius and his students. The sayings express ideas based on Chinese traditions as well as on the ways of the Chinese kings Confucius admired. Confucius declared that he was not really a creator but instead a transmitter of ideas, a man who was not born with special wisdom, but only a love for past tradition. He believed that studying ancient teachings enabled people to join the continuous chain of minds from the past to their own time.

In the *Analects*, Confucius, called “the Master,” speaks about the inherent goodness people should cultivate within themselves. The true self of every person—marked by unselfishness, courage, and honor—is a reflection of *chung-yung*, usually translated as “the Golden Mean,” an ideal of universal moral and social harmony. The *Analects* instructs the individual on how to achieve “moderation in all things” through moral education, the building of a harmonious family life, and the development of virtues such as loyalty, obedience, and a sense of justice.

Throughout the *Analects*, Confucius also emphasizes “filial piety,” the carrying out of basic obligations to one’s living parents or dead ancestors. In addition, the *Analects* stresses Confucius’ concern with social and religious rituals. To Confucius, a person’s inner virtues can be fully realized only through concrete acts of “ritual propriety,” proper behavior toward other human beings.

Writer's Response

Confucius believed that all people could develop good moral character. List five qualities that you admire in people you know. How do these qualities reflect good moral character?

Literary Focus

A **maxim** is a brief, direct statement that expresses a basic rule of human conduct or a general truth about human behavior, as in the statement: “Success is getting what you want; happiness is wanting what you get.” Familiar proverbs such as “The early bird catches the worm” are also maxims. A maxim provides a simple and direct way to capture a profound, complex truth about human conduct and behavior.

from the ANALECTS

Confucius

translated by

ARTHUR WALEY

|| As you read these sayings from the Analects, make a list of the attitudes or beliefs that Confucius appears to be against. Make a separate list of the ideals he is striving to teach.



Bridgeman Art Library/SuperStock, Inc.

Portrait of Confucius, seventeenth century.

The Master said, "He who rules by moral force is like the polestar,¹ which remains in its place while all the lesser stars do homage to it." (II, 1)

1. **polestar**: the North Star, toward which the earth's axis points; also, a directing principle.

The Master said, "If out of the three hundred *Songs*² I had to take one phrase to cover all my teaching, I would say 'Let there be no evil in your thoughts.'" (II, 2)

2. *Songs*: *The Book of Songs*.

The Master said, "At fifteen I set my heart upon learning. At thirty, I had planted my feet firm upon the ground. At forty, I no longer suffered from perplexities. At fifty, I knew what were the biddings of Heaven. At sixty, I heard them with docile ear. At seventy, I could follow the dictates of my own heart; for what I desired no longer overstepped the boundaries of right." (II, 4)

"Zu-yu" asked about the treatment of parents. The Master said, "Ffilial sons nowa-days are people who see to it that their parents get enough to eat. But even dogs and horses are cared for to that extent. If there is no feeling of respect, wherein lies the difference?" (II, 7)

The Master said, "Yu, I shall I teach you what knowledge is? When you know a thing, do not know a thing, to recognize that you do not know it. That is knowledge." (II, 17)

The Master said, "He who seeks only coarse food to eat, water to drink, and bent arm for pillow, will without looking for it and happiness to boot. Any thought of accepting wealth and rank by means that I know to be wrong is as remote from me as the clouds that float above." (VII, 15)

The Duke of She² asked Tzu-lu⁶ about Master K'ung (Confucius). Tzu-lu did not re-

-
3. Tzu-yu (dza yò): one of Confucius' principal disciples, often credited with sayings of his own.
 4. Yu (yò): a disciple of humble birth.
 5. Duke of She (shu): an adventurer and self-styled nobleman, a contemporary of Confucius.
 6. Tzu-lu (dza loò): a disciple of Confucius, known for his outgoing personality.

Tzu-kung asked about government. The Master said, "Sufficient food, sufficient weapons, and the confidence of the common people." Tzu-kung said, "Suppose you had no choice but to dispense with one of these three, which would you forgo?" The Master said, "Weapons." Tzu-kung said, "Suppose you were forced to dispense with one of the two that were left, which would you forgo?" The Master said, "Food. For from of old, death has been the lot of all men; but a people that no longer trusts its rulers is lost indeed." (XII, 7)

Someone said, "What about the saying 'Meet resentment with inner power'?" The Master said, "In that case, how is one to meet inner power? Rather, meet resentment with upright dealing and meet inner power with inner power." (XIV, 36)

The Master said, "A gentleman is distressed by his own lack of capacity; he is never distressed at the failure of others to recognize his merits." (XV, 18)

Tzu-kung asked saying, "Is there any single saying that one can act upon all day and every day?" The Master said, "Perhaps the saying about consideration: 'Never do to others what you would not like them to do to you.'" (XV, 23)

7. Tzu-kung (dza goong): a disciple of Confucius, who also served as a government official.

First Thoughts

Which of the statements in the *Analects* do you find most meaningful? Why? Which would you find the most difficult to put into action in your own life?

Identifying Facts

1. According to the Master, Confucius, what simple rule of conduct summarizes his teaching?
2. To the Master's way of thinking, what is wrong with the "filial sons" of the day?

Interpreting Meanings

1. In Book II, Analect 7, Confucius speaks of filial piety (honoring one's parents) as more than just a form of good behavior. Why do you think he emphasizes such conduct in his teachings?
2. Which of the Master's sayings is most like the Bible's Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you"? What is the main difference between Confucius' saying and the Golden Rule?
3. One of the **maxims** in the *Analects* states: "A gentleman is distressed by his own lack of capacity; he is never distressed at the failure of others to recognize his merits." Translate this maxim into your own words. Do you agree or disagree with it? Why?

Applying Meanings

Many people still quote traditional sayings that state rules of conduct, such as "Look before you leap" and "A penny saved is a penny earned." Why do you think such **maxims** have stood the test of time?

Creative Writing Response

Writing Maxims. Think of one or more rules of conduct and one or more general truths about human experience that you feel are important. Then write these rules

or simple truths in the form of maxims, such as: "The more things you own, the more they own you." Take your favorite maxim and design it as a bumper sticker.

Critical Writing Response

Comparing and Contrasting Maxims. In America, one of the most popular writers of often-quoted maxims was none other than Benjamin Franklin, the great inventor, diplomat, and politician. Franklin wrote humorous but wise maxims. Many of them were taken from proverbs in other languages, folk sayings, and the words of other writers. Here is a sampling of Franklin's wit and wisdom:

If a man empties his purse into his head, no man can take it away from him. An investment in knowledge always pays the best interest.

Glass, china, and reputation are easily cracked and never well mended.

He that composes himself is wiser than he that composes books.

'Tis hard for an empty bag to stand upright.

Nothing brings more pain than too much pleasure; nothing more bondage than too much liberty.

None preaches better than the ant, and she says nothing.

Compare Franklin's maxims to those you have just read by Confucius. What are the similarities and differences in the two writers' views, as expressed in their maxims? Do you think that the two men would agree with each other, or would they have grounds for dispute? Do both of them seem to follow the idea of a Golden Mean—that is, of moderation in all things? Write your ideas in a paragraph or two. Be sure to support your views with specific examples from each writer's works.