IN 700–500 BCE, THE ancient feudal system of small states broke down as they became absorbed into what is now China. During this “Warring States” period, individual thinkers began criticizing the past and recommending new ways of understanding reality. Kongzi (Kung Tzu, Confucius; sixth century BCE) was the first of these original thinkers—the first person in China to teach, advise governments, and write in a private capacity. His thoughts are preserved in a book, the *Lun Yu (Analects)*, which was probably written by students of his students, many years after his death. Kongzi had many followers, as well as many critics—other philosophers who challenged his position and advanced what they thought were better theories of why the feudal order had broken down and how people might strive for a better future.

Philosophers during the “Warring States” period tended to be either conservatives who wanted to preserve the old values of the dying feudal system, or revolutionaries who wanted to start afresh with new ideas and values. Kongzi, a conservative, sought to revive the values of the last of the feudal dynasties—but on a new foundation. Kongzi never claimed to be an original thinker; he always said that he was just preserving the past. But because the feudal order had virtually disappeared by the time he was born, he realized that the old values could be preserved only by being modified to address new conditions. In this effort, Kongzi was certainly an originator.

Historically, the feudal values of China’s aristocracy had been informally handed down from members of the nobility to their children. Kongzi was the first person in China to suggest that these values could be universalized; that is, formally taught to everyone. If everyone learned and practiced the ancient virtues of loyalty to elders and rulers, moral righteousness (*yi, i*) and human-hearted love of others (*ren, jen*), then China would surely enjoy a new age of peace and prosperity. Indeed, Kongzi insisted that if all persons simply fulfilled the roles assigned to them by society, they would behave virtuously. For example, the ruler—someone who has been chosen to protect and care for his people—should not take advantage of them to enrich himself. Only if they fulfilled their assigned roles should they be called a
“ruler” or a “father.” And a father, whose role is to care for his children, should not abandon them. Kongzi called this principle the “rectification of names”—things should be called by their correct names, and people should live up to the roles associated with these designations.

Although he assumed a universal basis for extending these old feudal values, Kongzi never developed a theory of a universal human nature. This was left to his followers. Still, we can extract something of his ideas from his sayings, as recorded in the *Lun Yu*. Kongzi not only sought to preserve the traditional virtues of righteousness, human-hearted love, propriety, and knowledge. He also strived to frame them in a more accessible manner to appeal to a broader audience in a new age. Of these values, moral righteousness (*yi* or *i*) and human-heartedness (*ren* or *jen*) were the most important, in his view.

*Yi*, or *i*, is the value of doing the right thing for the morally right reason; that is, doing it *because* it is right. For example, if I owe the IRS taxes on my last year’s income, then the right thing to do is to pay it. I will do so, but not necessarily because it is the right thing to do. Instead, I may pay my taxes because I don’t want to be audited or have my assets seized or, worse, go to jail. In this case, I am motivated more by self-interest than by any moral considerations. The difference between the two might become important only if I have the opportunity to cheat on my taxes. If my only motive in paying my taxes is the self-interested motive of not getting caught, then I may very well cheat if I think I can get away with it. Who would pay their taxes if they knew they could avoid paying and not get caught? The answer is: only the person who acts out of *yi*, doing the right thing because it is right.

*Ren*, or *jen* is sympathetic understanding of and concern for others. The criterion for *ren* is the obverse of what we know as the Golden Rule: “Don’t do anything to others which you wouldn’t like done to you.” In other words, generalize from your own self-regard to a similar regard and concern for others. By *ren*, Kongzi didn’t mean that we should love everyone equally. That would have conflicted with the ancient traditional value of filial piety: privileging one’s own family over other people. Instead, Kongzi believed that we should first develop respect toward our families and then expand this regard outward to others. We should treat rulers with the same loyalty and respect we pay our families, and expect from them an analogous sort of concern for our well-being. However, we should always put our families first.

The superior person, Kongzi held, does the right thing even though he knows it will not bring about the intended result. Success in this endeavor depends on *ming* (fate or good fortune), and to “know *ming*” means to know
the limits of your own abilities. This doesn’t mean that you should adopt a
fatalistic attitude. It means that, after you have tried as hard as possible to do
what you honestly think is right, you may or may not succeed. Kongzi’s the-
ory of ming is that you should do what is in your power and not worry about
what is outside your power.

In this respect, Kongzi’s thinking foreshadowed that of the eighteenth-
century German philosopher Immanuel Kant. Kant argued that a moral act is
defined entirely in terms of the good intentions of the person committing the
act, and not at all in terms of the consequences of the act. In one respect,
however, Kongzi’s position differed from Kant’s and resembled the ethical
position of Aristotle. This ancient Greek philosopher held that moral righ-
teousness should be internalized through training and practice. In this way,
the person who has been properly raised actually wants to do the right thing,
rather than just go through the motions. Even where Kongzi urged the cor-
rect observance of customary acts of politeness and propriety, he insisted
that these should be performed joyfully, out of a sense of genuine concern
for others.

As you read the following selections from the Lun Yu, ask yourself
whether you agree with Kongzi that we should always do the morally right
thing simply because it is right—and not for personal gain or even to benefit
others. Do you agree with Kongzi that we should perform our moral duty
joyfully? Is that always possible? If not, can we still be moral?

Confucius said, “Is it not a pleasure to learn and to repeat or practice
from time to time what has been learned? Is it not delightful to have
friends coming from afar? Is one not a superior man if he does not feel hurt
even though he is not recognized?”

Yu Tzu said, “Few of those who are filial sons and respectful brothers
will show disrespect to superiors, and there has never been a man who is not
disrespectful to superiors and yet creates disorder. A superior man is devoted
to the fundamentals (the root). When the root is firmly established, the moral
law (Tao) will grow. Filial piety and brotherly respect are the root of humanity
(jen).”

_A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy_, Translated and edited by Wing-Tsit Chan, 1963, Prince-
ton University Press.
Confucius said, “A man with clever words and an ingratiating appearance is seldom a man of humanity.”

Young men should be filial when at home and respectful to their elders when away from home. They should be earnest and faithful. They should love all extensively and be intimate with men of humanity. When they have any energy to spare after the performance of moral duties, they should use it to study literature and the arts (wen).

Confucius said, “If the superior man is not grave, he will not inspire awe, and his learning will not be on a firm foundation. Hold loyalty and faithfulness to be fundamental. Have no friends who are not as good as yourself. When you have made mistakes, don’t be afraid to correct them.”

Confucius said, “The superior man does not seek fulfillment of his appetite nor comfort in his lodging. He is diligent in his duties and careful in his speech. He associates with men of moral principles and thereby realizes himself. Such a person may be said to love learning.”

Tzu-kung said, “What do you think of a man who is poor and yet does not flatter, and the rich man who is not proud?” Confucius replied, “They will do. But they are not as good as the poor man who is happy and the rich man who loves the rules of propriety (li).”

Confucius said, “[A good man] does not worry about not being known by others but rather worries about not knowing them.”

Confucius said, “A ruler who governs his state by virtue is like the north polar star, which remains in its place while all the other stars revolve around it.”

Confucius said, “All three hundred odes can be covered by one of their sentences, and that is, ‘Have no depraved thoughts.’”

Confucius said, “Lead the people with governmental measures and regulate them by law and punishment, and they will avoid wrongdoing but will have no sense of honor and shame. Lead them with virtue and regulate them by the rules of propriety (li), and they will have a sense of shame and, moreover, set themselves right.”

Confucius said, “At fifteen my mind was set on learning. At thirty my character had been formed. At forty I had no more perplexities. At fifty I knew the Mandate of Heaven (T’ien-ming). At sixty I was at ease with whatever I heard. At seventy I could follow my heart’s desire without transgressing moral principles.”

Tzu-yu asked about filial piety. Confucius said, “Filial piety nowadays means to be able to support one’s parents. But we support even dogs and horses. If there is no feeling of reverence, wherein lies the difference?”
Confucius said, “A man who reviews the old so as to find out the new is qualified to teach others.” . . .

Confucius said, “Yu, shall I teach you [the way to acquire] knowledge? To say that you know when you do know and say that you do not know when you do not know—that is [the way to acquire] knowledge.” . . .

Confucius said, “If a man is not humane (jen), what has he to do with ceremonies (li)? If he is not humane, what has he to do with music?” . . .

Confucius said, “One who is not a man of humanity cannot endure adversity for long, nor can he enjoy prosperity for long. The man of humanity is naturally at ease with humanity. The man of wisdom cultivates humanity for its advantage.” . . .

Confucius said, “Wealth and honor are what every man desires. But if they have been obtained in violation of moral principles, they must not be kept. Poverty and humble station are what every man dislikes. But if they can be avoided only in violation of moral principles, they must not be avoided. If a superior man departs from humanity, how can he fulfill that name? A superior man never abandons humanity even for the lapse of a single meal. In moments of haste, he acts according to it. In times of difficulty or confusion, he acts according to it.”

Confucius said, “I have never seen one who really loves humanity or one who really hates inhumanity. One who really loves humanity will not place anything above it. One who really hates inhumanity will practice humanity in such a way that inhumanity will have no chance to get at him. Is there any one who has devoted his strength to humanity for as long as a single day? I have not seen any one without sufficient strength to do so. Perhaps there is such a case, but I have never seen it.”

Confucius said, “In the morning, hear the Way; in the evening, die content!”

Confucius said, “A superior man in dealing with the world is not for anything or against anything. He follows righteousness as the standard.”

Confucius said, “The superior man understands righteousness (i); the inferior man understands profit.” . . .

Tzu-kung said, “What I do not want others to do to me, I do not want to do to them.” Confucius said, “Ah Tz’u! That is beyond you.”

Tzu-kung said, “We can hear our Master’s [views] on culture and its manifestation, but we cannot hear his views on human nature and the Way of Heaven [because these subjects are beyond the comprehension of most people].” . . .
Confucius said, “To know it [learning or the Way] is not as good as to love it, and to love it is not as good as to take delight in it.”

Tzu-kung said, “If a ruler extensively confers benefit on the people and can bring salvation to all, what do you think of him? Would you call him a man of humanity?” Confucius said, “Why only a man of humanity? He is without doubt a sage. Even (sage-emperors) Yao and Shun fell short of it. A man of humanity, wishing to establish his own character, also establishes the character of others, and wishing to be prominent himself, also helps others to be prominent. To be able to judge others by what is near to ourselves may be called the method of realizing humanity.”

Confucius said, “I transmit but do not create. I believe in and love the ancients. I venture to compare myself to our old P’eng.”

Confucius never discussed strange phenomena, physical exploits, disorder, or spiritual beings.

Confucius said, “The common people may be made to follow it (the Way) but may not be made to understand it.”

Chi-lu (Tzu-lu) asked about serving the spiritual beings. Confucius said, “if we are not yet able to serve man, how can we serve spiritual beings?” “I venture to ask about death.” Confucius said, “If we do not yet know about life, how can we know about death?”

Chung-kung asked about humanity. Confucius said, “When you go abroad, behave to everyone as if you were receiving a great guest. Employ the people as if you were assisting at a great sacrifice. Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you. Then there will be no complaint against you in the state or in the family (the ruling clan).” Chung-kung said, “Although I am not intelligent, may I put your saying into practice.”

Duke Ching of Ch’i asked Confucius about government. Confucius replied, “Let the ruler be a ruler, the minister be a minister, the father be a father, and the son be a son.” The duke said, “Excellent! Indeed when the ruler is not a ruler, the minister not a minister, the father not a father, and the son not a son, although I may have all the grain, shall I ever get to eat it?”

Chi K’ang Tzu asked Confucius about government. Confucius replied, “To govern (cheng) is to rectify (cheng). If you lead the people by being rectified yourself, who will dare not be rectified?”

Chi K’ang Tzu asked Confucius about government, saying, “What do you think of killing the wicked and associating with the good?” Confucius replied, “In your government what is the need of killing? If you desire what is good, the people will be good. The character of a ruler is like wind and
that of the people is like grass. In whatever direction the wind blows, the grass always bends.”

Fan Ch’ih asked about humanity. Confucius said, “It is to love men.” He asked about knowledge. Confucius said, “It is to know man.”

Tzu-lu said, “The ruler of Wei is waiting for you to serve in his administration. What will be your first measure?” Confucius said, “It will certainly concern the rectification of names.” Tzu-lu said, “Is that so? You are wide of the mark. Why should there be such a rectification?” Confucius said, “Yu! How uncultivated you are! With regard to what he does not know, the superior man should maintain an attitude of reserve. If names are not rectified, then language will not be in accord with truth. If language is not in accord with truth, then things cannot be accomplished. If things cannot be accomplished, then ceremonies and music will not flourish. If ceremonies and music do not flourish, then punishment will not be just. If punishments are not just, then the people will not know how to move hand or foot. Therefore the superior man will give only names that can be described in speech and say only what can be carried out in practice. With regard to his speech, the superior man does not take it lightly. That is all.”

Confucius said, “If a ruler sets himself right, he will be followed without his command. If he does not set himself right, even his commands will not be obeyed.”

The Duke of She asked about government. Confucius said, “[There is good government] when those who are near are happy and those far away desire to come.”

The Duke of She told Confucius, “In my country there is an upright man named Kung. When his father stole a sheep, he bore witness against him.” Confucius said, “The upright men in my community are different from this. The father conceals the misconduct of the son and the son conceals the misconduct of the father. Uprightness is to be found in this.”

Fan Ch’ih asked about humanity. Confucius said, “Be respectful in private life, be serious (ching) in handling affairs, and be loyal in dealing with others. Even if you are living amidst barbarians, these principles may never be forsaken.”

Confucius said, “The superior man is conciliatory but does not identify himself with others; the inferior man identifies with others but is not conciliatory.”

Confucius said, “The superior man is dignified but not proud; the inferior man is proud but not dignified.”
Confucius said, “A man who is strong, resolute, simple, and slow to speak is near to humanity.”

Confucius said, “The superior man understands the higher things [moral principles]; the inferior man understands the lower things [profit].”

Confucius said, “The superior man is ashamed that his words exceed his deeds.”

Confucius said, “The way of the superior man is threefold, but I have not been able to attain it. The man of wisdom has no perplexities; the man of humanity has no worry; the man of courage has no fear.” Tzu-kung said, “You are talking about yourself.”

Confucius said, “He who does not anticipate attempts to deceive him nor predict his being distrusted, and yet is the first to know [when these things occur], is a worthy man.”

Someone said, “What do you think of repaying hatred with virtue?” Confucius said, “In that case what are you going to repay virtue with? Rather, repay hatred with uprightness and repay virtue with virtue.”

When Tzu-lu was stopping at the Stone Gate for the night, the gate-keeper asked him, “Where are you from?” Tzu-lu said, “From Confucius.” “Oh, is he the one who knows a thing cannot be done and still wants to do it?”

Confucius said, “A resolute scholar and a man of humanity will never seek to live at the expense of injuring humanity. He would rather sacrifice his life in order to realize humanity.”

Confucius said, “The superior man regards righteousness (i) as the substance of everything. He practices it according to the principles of propriety. He brings it forth in modesty. And he carries it to its conclusion with faithfulness. He is indeed a superior man!”

Confucius said, “The superior man seeks [room for improvement or occasion to blame] in himself; the inferior man seeks it in others.”

Confucius said, “The superior man (ruler) does not promote (put in office) a man on the basis of his words; nor does he reject his words because of the man.”

Tzu-kung asked, “Is there one word which can serve as the guiding principle for conduct throughout life?” Confucius said, “It is the word altruism (shu). Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you.”

Confucius said, “It is man that can make the Way great, and not the Way that can make man great.”

Confucius said, “In education there should be no class distinction.”
Confucius said, “. . . I have heard that those who administer a state or a family do not worry about there being too few people, but worry about unequal distribution of wealth. They do not worry about poverty, but worry about the lack of security and peace on the part of the people. For when wealth is equally distributed, there will not be poverty; when there is harmony, there will be no problem of there being too few people; and when there are security and peace, there will be no danger to the state . . .

Confucius said, “There are three kinds of friendship which are beneficial and three kinds which are harmful. Friendship with the upright, with the truthful, and with the well-informed is beneficial. Friendship with those who flatter, with those who are meek and who compromise with principles, and with those who talk cleverly is harmful.”

Confucius said, “The superior man stands in awe of three things. He stands in awe of the Mandate of Heaven; he stands in awe of great men; and he stands in awe of the words of the sages. The inferior man is ignorant of the Mandate of Heaven and does not stand in awe of it. He is disrespectful to great men and is contemptuous toward the words of the sages.”

Confucius said, “Those who are born with knowledge are the highest type of people. Those who learn through study are the next. Those who learn through hard work are still the next. Those who work hard and still do not learn are really the lowest type.”

Confucius said, “The superior man has nine wishes. In seeing, he wishes to see clearly. In hearing, he wishes to hear distinctly. In his expression, he wishes to be warm. In his appearance, he wishes to be respectful. In his speech, he wishes to be sincere. In handling affairs, he wishes to be serious. When in doubt, he wishes to ask. When he is angry, he wishes to think of the resultant difficulties. And when he sees an opportunity for a gain, he wishes to think of righteousness.”

Confucius said, “By nature men are alike. Through practice they have become far apart.”

Confucius said, “Only the most intelligent and the most stupid do not change.” . . .

Tzu-lu asked, “Does the superior man esteem courage?” Confucius said, “The superior man considers righteousness (i) as the most important. When the superior man has courage but no righteousness, he becomes turbulent. When the inferior man has courage but no righteousness, he becomes a thief.”
“Who are you, sir?” Tzu-lu replied, “I am Chung-yu (name of Tzu-lu).”
“Are you a follower of K’ung Ch’iu of Lu?” “Yes.” Chieh-ni said, “The whole world is swept as though by a torrential flood. Who can change it? As for you, instead of following one who flees from this man or that man, is it not better to follow those who flee the world altogether?” And with that he went on covering the seed without stopping. Tzu-lu went to Confucius and told him about their conversation. Confucius said ruefully, “One cannot herd with birds and beasts. If I do not associate with mankind, with whom shall I associate? If the Way prevailed in the world, there would be no need for me to change it.”