

The Great Unity

English translation of [] . Translated via the distill pipeline.

- [The Great Unity](#)

opposition to 己, the private and partisan. In the age Confucius describes, leadership was not inherited but earned: the virtuous and the capable were chosen to serve, and the people devoted themselves to cultivating trustworthiness and nurturing harmony. These are not passive qualities. The verbs are deliberate — 习 and 建 mean to practice, to build, to develop with sustained effort. Trust and concord do not simply appear; they are constructed, daily, by everyone.

From this foundation, the passage unfolds into a vision of radical mutual responsibility. *No one treats only their own parents as parents, nor only their own children as children.* The aged, the able-bodied, the young — each has what they need to live with dignity. And then the text turns to those who have no one: widowers, widows, orphans, the elderly without families, the disabled and chronically ill. In classical thought, these four groups — the 四民 (guān guǎ gū dú) — represent the people most easily forgotten, those whom King Wen of Zhou was praised for prioritizing above all others. A civilization is measured not by its prosperity but by whether these people are provided for.

The passage then addresses the material economy of such a society with striking precision. People do not hoard goods, but neither are they indifferent to waste — they cannot bear to see resources discarded on the ground. People do not labor for selfish gain, but neither are they idle — they cannot bear the thought of leaving their strength unused. This is not asceticism, nor is it communism in any modern ideological sense. It is an ethic of purposeful stewardship: everything and everyone has a use, and the measure of virtue is whether that use serves the whole or merely the self.

The consequences described at the end are not enforced by law or coercion. *Schemes and intrigues find no occasion to arise. Theft, disorder, and violence do not occur. Outer doors need never be locked.* The image of unlocked doors became one of the most enduring idioms in Chinese civilization — 闾閻 — shorthand for a society so deeply governed by internal moral order that external controls become unnecessary. This is not naivety. It is the claim that when people are genuinely cared for, when no one is abandoned, when resources circulate and labor has meaning, the roots of crime and deception simply wither. The disorder of society is a symptom, not a cause.

Confucius called this vision "Great Unity" — 大同 . The term carries a quiet enormity. It does not promise paradise or transcendence; it promises wholeness. Every person in their place, not through rigid hierarchy but through reciprocal care. Every resource used, not through regulation but through shared purpose. The teaching asks of its reader not belief but examination: in what ways does the world I inhabit fall short of this, and in what ways might I, in my own conduct, begin to close that distance? The doors in this passage are not metaphorical. They are the actual doors of actual homes, left open because no one inside has any reason to fear what is outside. That image — quiet, domestic, almost mundane — is the most radical thing Confucius ever said about what a society could become.