

Sophists, who could make a convincing case for the most impossible propositions. Socrates was no Sophist, but Athenians who had not experienced his method would probably have been unable to distinguish between his relentless undermining of received opinion and the Sophists' denial of absolute truth. Aristophanes presented Socrates in his "logic shop," where, arguing that wrong was right, he instructed people to worship the clouds instead of Zeus. Eventually the protagonist, a loyal Athenian citizen, was so outraged that he burned the school down. The comedy turned out to be prophetic in a way that Aristophanes could never have imagined.

By this time, Athens faced defeat in the Peloponnesian War. Many saw this imminent catastrophe as a divine punishment for the irreligion of the philosophers. They regarded Socrates' teaching as blasphemous, even though he was traditionally devout and attended the public rituals as scrupulously as he performed his military service. But anxiety was about to turn into hysteria. In 416, Alcibiades made an emotional speech in the assembly, arguing that Athens should go to the aid of its ally Segesta, in Sicily, which was being attacked by the nearby city of Selinus. The general Niceas (Socrates' sparring partner) was against the expedition, but Alcibiades and the younger generation carried the day. It was a disastrous decision, since most of the citizens who voted for the war had no idea of the size and power of Sicily. Just before the fleet disembarked, somebody vandalized the Herms, the phallic statues of the god Hermes that were placed throughout the city to protect streets and houses. Nobody knew who was responsible, but the incident shook Athens to the core. People were convinced that this blatant sacrilege would call down divine vengeance. There were witch hunts, suspects were executed, and eventually Alcibiades himself was recalled from Sicily to answer charges of blasphemy.

There ensued a series of disasters. The Athenian navy was blockaded in the harbour at Syracuse, and the troops were incarcerated in nearby stone quarries. At a stroke, Athens lost about forty thousand men and half its fleet. In 411, a pro-Spartan cabal overturned the democratic government in Athens. The coup was short-lived, and democracy was restored the following year, but it was a sign of Athens's new vulnerability. The war with Sparta continued until 405, when the Spartan general Lysander forced Athens to surrender. Yet again, an oligarchy was established under a government of thirty pro-Spartan aristocrats, who killed so many citizens in the ensuing reign of terror that it was overthrown, and democracy reestablished after only a year. Athens had regained its independence, its democracy, and its fleet, but its power was broken, the empire dismantled, and Pericles' great defensive wall demolished.

Against this terrifying backcloth, two great tragedies were enacted in Athens. Just before Athens conceded defeat in 406, Euripides died, and his final dark, bitter plays, lurid with a sense of looming catastrophe, were performed posthumously. The last was *The Bacchae*, presented in 402.<sup>42</sup> As the play opened, the god Dionysus arrived incognito in Thebes, the city that had rejected his mother, Semele, when she had fallen pregnant, and had consistently prohibited his cult. But now most Thebans were enchanted by the fascinating stranger who had suddenly turned up in their midst. The women of the city, who had not been properly initiated into the Dionysian mystery, abandoned themselves to unbridled frenzy, roaming through the woods, clad in animal pelts. The young king Pentheus tried to restore order, but to no avail. Eventually he allowed himself to be dressed in women's clothes so that he could spy on these revels unobserved. But in their hysteria, the women tore him to pieces with their bare hands, thinking that they had killed a lion. Agaue, Pentheus's mother, triumphantly carried her son's head into Thebes at the head of a demented procession.

The tragic dramas had often depicted the slaying of kinsfolk, but by making Dionysus, the patron of tragedy, responsible for this unnatural murder, Euripides seemed to be calling the entire genre into question. There was no glimmer of hope at the end of the play. The royal house had been shattered, the women reduced to animals, enlightened reason defeated by savage *mania*, and Thebes—like Athens at this juncture—seemed doomed. What had been the value of the annual release of emotion in honour of a god who killed, tortured, and humiliated human beings without giving any plausible explanation?

Athens was beginning to grow beyond tragedy, and in so doing, was also parting company with the Axial Age. The play warned the polis that it was dangerous to refuse admittance to the outsider. In *Oedipus at Colonus* (406), Sophocles had shown Athens receiving with honour the polluted, sacred figure of the dying Oedipus, an act of compassion that would be a blessing for the city. But in *The Bacchae*, Pentheus rejected the stranger and was destroyed. Not only was it politically disastrous, but individuals also had to recognize and accept the stranger that they encountered within themselves during the mystery celebrations. By giving Dionysus his due in the annual festival, Athens had given the alterity that he represented an honoured place in the heart of the city; but over the years it had failed to respect the inviolable separateness of the other poleis, had exploited and attacked them, and in the process had fallen prey to hubris.

In this last play, Euripides approached the heart of the Axial vision. The

chorus of Maenads, the regular worshippers of Dionysus, had been correctly initiated into his cult; they experienced a vision of peace, rapture, and integration. But the women of Thebes, who were unschooled in the disciplines of transformation, were simply out of control, driven mad by the darker regions of their psyche that were unknown to them. As she entered the city, holding aloft the ghastly trophy of her son's head, Agaue did not achieve *ekstasis*, but was enchanted only by her own achievements:

*Great in the eyes of the world,  
Great are the deeds I have done  
And the hunt I've hunted there.*<sup>43</sup>

The apotheosis of this barren selfishness was an act of unspeakable, unnatural violence.

In this play, Euripides also presented one of the most moving and truly transcendent Greek experiences of the divine. Dionysus might seem amoral, cruel, and alien, yet he was incontrovertibly present onstage, and could neither be willed nor driven away. In his human disguise as the stranger, he seemed uncanny. Dionysus had always been the masked god—the mask a constant reminder that he was other than he appeared. His supreme epiphany was not an anthropomorphic apparition but a sudden disappearance when, hiding himself from all who believed only in what they could see, he vanished abruptly from the stage. A great silence immediately descended upon earth, in which his presence was felt more strongly than ever before.<sup>44</sup> The older Olympian vision was reaching beyond itself to the ineffable reality behind the symbols.

The second great tragedy of this period was the death of Socrates in 399. At his trial, he was accused of failing to recognize the gods of the state, of introducing new gods, and of corrupting the young. The young Plato was at the trial, and it made a profound impression upon him. From a legal point of view, Socrates' defence was inept. He could not have corrupted the young, he said. He did not know enough to teach anybody anything. He had worked for the good of Athens, but the polis had failed to appreciate this. Yet he could not abandon his mission. The very best thing a man could do was "to let no day pass without discussing goodness and all the other subjects about which you hear me talking."<sup>45</sup> He failed to convince his judges and was condemned to death.

Socrates had long been the object of suspicion and fear. Some of his associates, such as Alcibiades, had been involved in Athens's military disasters, and Socrates became a scapegoat. He had said the right things at the

wrong time. Devoted to Athens, he obeyed its laws to the end, refusing to escape from prison, even though the sentence was unjust, and turning down the option of exile: he was almost seventy years old, he said simply, and did not wish to live anywhere else. He was a champion of truth, and would die a witness (*martyr*) to the untruth that was currently in the ascendant. Yet he died without anger or blame. There was nothing tragic about death, he told his pupils. Nobody knew what it was; it might even be a great good. Throughout his life, he believed that he had been accompanied by a *daimon*, a divine presence, which had spoken to him at crucial moments. It had never told him what to do, but had only warned him *against* a particular action. He found it encouraging that his inner voice had not spoken to him during his trial. He must be on the right track and going to the Good.

His friends gathered around his bed while he drank the prescribed poison. Before he took the hemlock, Plato says, he washed his body, to save the women the trouble after his death. He thanked his jailer courteously for his kindness, and even made some mild jokes about his predicament. He was able to look death calmly in the face, forbade his friends to mourn, and quietly and lovingly accepted their companionship. Instead of destructive, consuming sorrow, there was a quiet, receptive peace. Throughout the Axial Age, sages had been preoccupied with death. Socrates showed that it was possible for a human being to enjoy a serenity that transcended his circumstances, in the midst of pain and suffering.

Shortly after the death of Confucius, China entered a disturbing and frightening era, which historians call the period of the Warring States. It marked a decisive transition in Chinese history. In 453, three families rebelled against the prince of Jin, and created three separate states in Jin territory: Han, Wei, and Zhao. This was the real end of the long-declining Zhou dynasty: hitherto all the rulers of China had been enfeoffed by the Zhou king; these new states, however, were established simply by military force, and the Zhou king could do nothing about it. From this moment the larger and more powerful states were engaged in a desperate struggle for the sole domination of China. The chief contenders were the state of Chu in the south, which was only half Chinese; Qin, a rough, warlike state in western Shensi; the rich, maritime kingdom of Qi; the "three Jin"—the new states of Han, Wei, and Zhao; and Yan, near the northern steppes. At first the little principalities in the central plain tried to preserve themselves

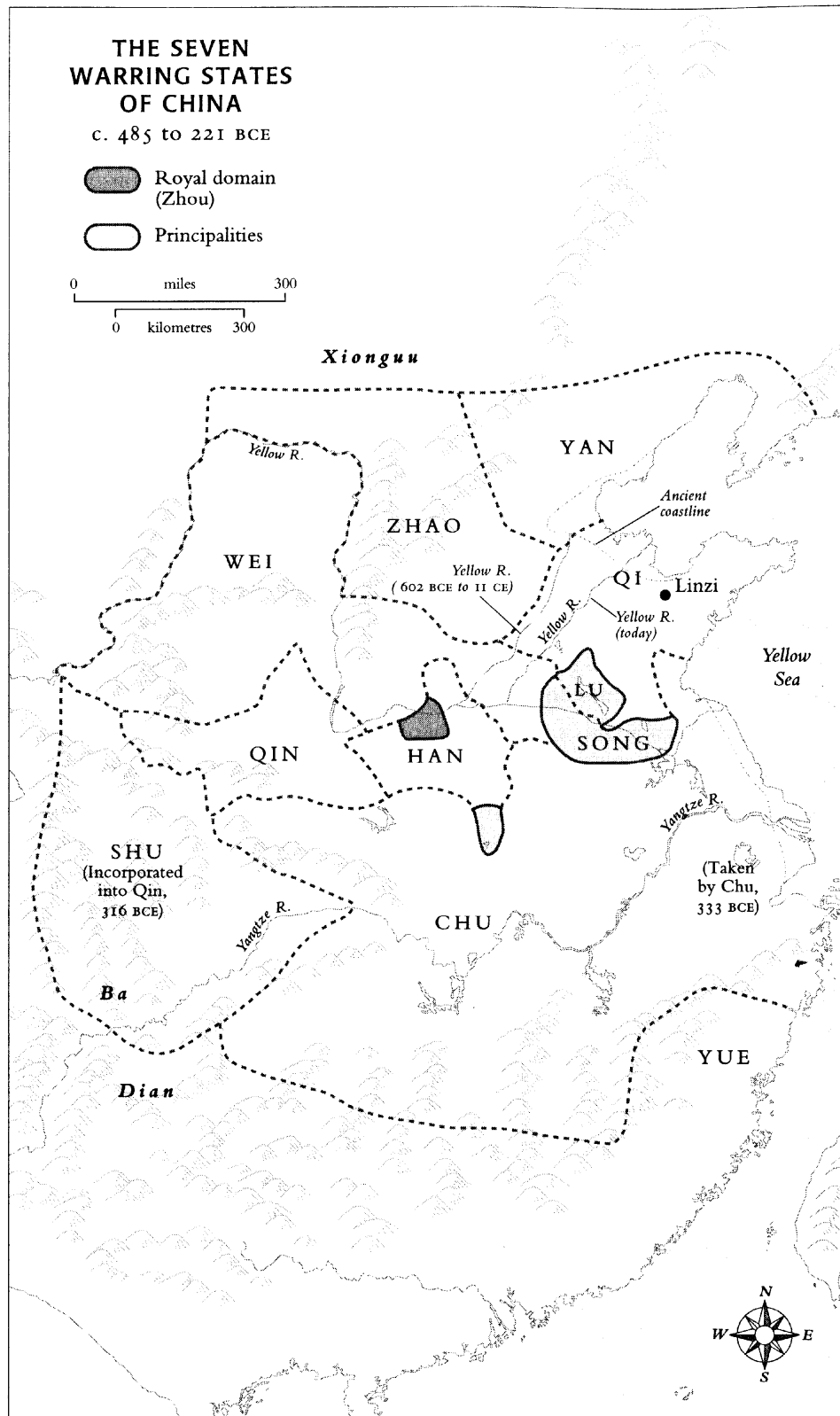
by diplomacy, but in the course of the next two hundred years, they were eliminated, one by one, and absorbed into the larger, more competitive kingdoms.

The Warring States era was one of those rare periods of history when a succession of changes, each reinforcing the other, accelerates the process of development, and leads to a fundamental alteration of society.<sup>46</sup> When these struggles finally came to an end in 221, the political, religious, social, economic, and intellectual life of China was entirely different. But in the early years of the Warring States, most people would only have been aware that life on the central plain had suddenly become more violent than ever before. The horror of this experience intensified the quest for a new religious vision.

Warfare itself had been transformed.<sup>47</sup> There were no more ritualized confrontations between courtly charioteers, each vying to outdo the others in generosity and courtesy. The militarized states fought to gain new territory, subjugate the population, and wipe out the enemy. Campaigns lasted longer and went farther afield. The fighting was characterized by deadly efficiency, which demanded unity of command, strategy, trained troops, and abundant resources. Warfare was now masterminded by military experts, and order, discipline, and effectiveness were far more important than honour and prestige. In the old days, nobody would have dreamed of killing women, children, the wounded, or the infirm. But now "all who have or keep any strength are our enemies even if they are old men," said one of the modern generals. "Why should we refrain from wounding a second time those whose wounds are not mortal?"<sup>48</sup>

Already in the late sixth century, the states had started to develop a new military technology. Specialists constructed mobile towers and wheeled ladders to attack city walls; they dug mines and underground passages, and devised bellows to drive smoke into the tunnels of the enemy. The landscape itself was mobilized for warfare: Chu and Qi built the first defensive walls in Honan and Shantung; Qin fortified the dikes of the Yellow River. Fortresses were built along frontiers and manned by professional garrisons. More land was drained, and the first canals were dug in order to increase agricultural production to fund these expensive campaigns.

More and more of the population was mobilized. In the old days of courtly feudal warfare, the peasants had been peripheral players, taking no real part in the action. Now hundreds of thousands of peasants were drafted into the infantry, which had become the most important part of the army. The defunct state of Jin had been the first to use infantry troops,



in the late sixth century, when fighting in mountainous regions that were unsuitable for chariot warfare. Yue and Wu, whose swampy territory had too many lakes and waterways for chariots, followed suit. Gradually the warrior-peasant became a major factor in social and political life. The aristocratic chariot teams were phased out, and soldiering became a lower-class activity. The military specialists learned from the nomads of the steppes. In the fourth century they would introduce cavalry, which were more mobile than the cumbersome chariot armies, and could sweep down on a community in a surprise attack with devastating results. The new warriors also used the nomads' weapons: the sword and the crossbow, which was more accurate than the old retroflex bow and could kill at a distance of half a mile.

The kings of the large, aggressively expanding states had thrown aside the ideals of moderation and restraint. Funerals once again became cruel, lavish displays. One king buried vast riches with his daughter, and sacrificed troops of dancers and boys and girls of common stock.<sup>49</sup> Modern rulers now had colourful, extravagant households, filled with women, musicians, dancers, jugglers, clowns, and gladiators. Sophists, who had originally advised princes and vassals about the ritualized court palavers, now developed clever debating skills and gave advice on public relations and diplomacy. Impoverished wandering *shi* also clustered around the courts, showing off their talents in the hope of a job. Some of them were scholars. Duke Wen (446–395) of the new state of Wei became a patron of learning, supporting a circle of literati to advise him on matters of protocol and ethics. These kings no longer trusted the aristocrats, who had become their competitors, and turned increasingly for advice to these “men of worth.” One of Duke Wen’s protégés was Confucius’s disciple Zixia.

But in these pragmatic times, the rulers tended to find Confucians too idealistic, and they turned increasingly to the *xie*, the bands of peripatetic military experts who, like other members of the *shi* class, had lost their foothold in the cities and roamed the countryside in search of employment. By the Warring States period, however, many of the *xie* were recruited from the lower classes. They were mercenaries, prepared to fight in any army, as long as they were rewarded adequately. Unlike the more aristocratic Confucians, they were aggressive men of action. According to a historian of a later period, “Their words were always sincere and trustworthy, their actions quick and decisive. They were always true to what they promised and without regard to their own persons they would rush into danger, threatening others.”<sup>50</sup>

But towards the end of the fifth century, one of the *xie* turned his back on this militancy and preached a message of nonviolence. His was called Mozi, “Master Mo” (c. 480–390). We know very little about him, because the dialogues recorded in the book that bears his name are far more impersonal than the Analects, and Mozi the man disappears behind his ideas.<sup>51</sup> He headed a strictly disciplined brotherhood of 180 men.<sup>52</sup> Unlike Confucius’s loosely organized band of disciples, Mozi’s school resembled a sect. It had strict rules, followed a rigorously egalitarian ethic, and its members dressed like peasants or craftsmen. Instead of fighting as mercenaries, Mohists intervened to stop wars and defend cities in the smaller and more vulnerable states.<sup>53</sup> Nine chapters of the Mozi deal with the techniques of defensive warfare and the construction of equipment to protect city walls. But Mozi was also a philosopher. He did not stop at disciplined action, but travelled from court to court, preaching his highly original ideas to the rulers.

From the evidence of the Mozi, it seems that Master Mo could originally have been an artisan or craftsman. He used the imagery of a working man, comparing Heaven’s organization of the world to the compasses and L-square of the wheelwright and the carpenter, who employed these instruments “to measure the round and the square throughout the world.”<sup>54</sup> Unlike the graceful style of the Analects, Mozi’s prose was somewhat humourless and ponderous, suggesting that he may have been a self-educated man who took up the pen with difficulty.<sup>55</sup> Despite his impressive grasp of tradition, a residual awkwardness of style indicates that Mozi was not wholly at ease with the high culture of the nobility. Mo and his followers were arrivistes, impatient with the aristocracy’s preoccupation with prestige and status. He wanted a uniform control of expenditure, a curbing of extravagance, and a society that reflected the more frugal ethos of his own class.

Mozi was, for example, highly critical of the Zhou dynasty and had little time for Confucius’s hero the duke of Zhou. He had very little interest in the Zhou ritual, music, and literature, which was so inspiring to Confucius. The poorer folk had never taken part in these elaborate court ceremonies, and the *li* seemed a complete waste of time and money to the Mohists. Mozi was deeply religious and believed that it was important to sacrifice to Heaven and the nature spirits, but he was disgusted by the extravagance of the elaborate ceremonial rites in the ancestral temples. He was especially incensed by the expensive funerals and the long, three-year mourning period. This was all very well for the idle rich, but what would happen if everybody observed these rites? It would ruin the workingman,

bring down the economy, and weaken the state.<sup>56</sup> Mozi took a strictly pragmatic view of ritual. Rulers spent an inappropriate amount of money on these ceremonies, when the ordinary people did not have the wherewithal for food and clothes. The *li* did not elevate the soul; the ritualists had simply retreated from the problems of their time, taking refuge in the discussion of arcane ceremonies and abandoning all hope of redeeming the world.

The situation had already changed dramatically in the short time that had elapsed since Confucius's death. In the fourth and third centuries, as we shall see, Confucians would agonize about the plight of the poor and work indefatigably for the reform of society. But in Mozi's day, some of the ritualists might have been so shocked by the rapid changes in the great plain that they withdrew from public life in the way that Mo described. Mozi, however, was extremely distressed by the predicament of the peasants, who were dragged off to fight in wars, conscripted into the *corvée*, and impoverished by heavy taxation. It was essential to supply their basic need for shelter, clothing, and security. Mozi was not a revolutionary. He did not want to topple the ruling class, but he was convinced that Chinese values needed radical revision. Mozi believed that the sage kings had been content with the bare necessities of life. There must be a return to the ideals of Yao, Shun, and Yu, who had not lived lives of sophistication, luxury, and showy display at the expense of ordinary folk. They had built their houses just high enough to keep out the damp; their walls were just thick enough to keep out sleet and rain, and their inner partitions just high enough to segregate the sexes.<sup>57</sup> Mozi's favourite was Yu, who, despite his lofty status and great wealth, had spent his life developing a technology to control water distribution and prevent flooding, working practically for the good of the people.

Mozi's message was utilitarian and pragmatic, yet he nurtured utopian dreams. He believed that it was possible to persuade human beings to love instead of hate. As with Confucius, the single thread that held his philosophy together was *ren*, but he believed that Confucius had distorted this compassionate ethic by limiting it to the family. In his view, the clan spirit of the aristocracy was at the root of many of the current problems: family chauvinism, competitions for prestige, vendettas, and sumptuary expenses. He wanted to replace the egotism of kinship with a generalized altruism.<sup>58</sup> Everybody must feel towards all others exactly what he felt for his own people. "Others must be regarded like the self," he said; this love must be "all-embracing and exclude nobody."<sup>59</sup> Reform must come from the rulers: the only way to stop the Chinese from killing one another in these appalling wars was to persuade them to practise *jian ai*.

*Jian ai* is often translated as "universal love," but this is too emotive for Mozi's utilitarian ethos.<sup>60</sup> Mozi did not expect the Chinese to develop a warm affection and tenderness for everybody. He was more interested in justice than feelings. *Ai* was a deliberately cultivated attitude of benevolence, so that you wished everybody well, even—and perhaps especially—those who did not belong to your immediate community. *Jian ai* was based on a strong sense of equity, fairness, and an impartial concern for all human beings without exception. This, Mo was convinced, was indispensable for peace and security. At present, rulers only loved their own state and felt no qualms about attacking their rivals. But if they were taught to have as much concern for others as for themselves, this would be impossible. "Regard another's state as you regard your own, another's family as you regard your own, and another's person as you regard your own," Mo urged. "If the lords of the states are concerned for each other they will not go to war." If brothers had no respect for each other, they would quarrel; if the lords had no *jian ai*, they would summon their armies. "In all cases, the reason why the world's calamities, dispossessions, resentments and hatreds arise is lack of *jian ai*."<sup>61</sup>

Mozi's version of the Golden Rule may have been less elegantly expressed than that of Confucius, but it was immediately regarded as more radical. Instead of seeing the family as the place where you learned to love other people, Mozi argued that, on the contrary, *jian ai*, "concern for everybody," made it possible to love your family or state appropriately. If people did not cultivate benevolence towards the whole human race, family love and patriotism would degenerate into collective egotism. In his view, the Confucian family was simply a special-interest group. Even criminals loved their families and robbed other people in order to enrich their kinsfolk. If people did not reach out beyond their family or nation, they became guilty of the potentially lethal selfishness that was the cause of the world's ills.

*Jian ai* led directly to nonviolence. In the chapter of his book entitled "Rejection of Aggression," Mozi carefully weighed the cost of war against its benefits. War ruined harvests, killed multitudes of civilians, wasted weapons and horses, and left the ancestors with no descendants to sacrifice on their behalf. Rulers argued that conquest benefited the state, but the capture of a small town could result in thousands of casualties at a time when men were desperately needed to farm the land. How could that be good for their kingdom? The larger states thought that they would gain by conquering the territory of their smaller neighbours, but their wars benefited only about five people out of ten thousand. Some chapters of

the Mozi, probably written by later generations of Mohists, permitted warfare in self-defence; they included instructions for the defence of a city during a siege. But Mozi himself was probably a strict pacifist, who opposed all violence and travelled from one state to another to persuade rulers to break the cycle of warfare that was beginning to engulf all the states of the great plain.<sup>62</sup>

Many of the Chinese, for whom family values were sacrosanct, were shocked by Mo's ideas, so he developed a method of arguing rationally in support of his beliefs. This is why the Mozi contains the first Chinese essays in logic and dialectic; some of the later chapters, dating from the third century, show a sophisticated grasp of the principles of systematic argumentation, definition, and precise grammar. The approach was entirely different from the impressionistic style of the Analects. Confucius assumed that the *junzi* would acquire his insights and understanding intuitively after a long period of study and reflection. But Mozi's "men of worth" (*xian*) were men of action and argued their way to truth logically.<sup>63</sup> They excelled "in their virtuous behavior, and their skill in argument."<sup>64</sup> Their remarks must be precise in order to convince their opponents of the importance of *jian ai* at this desperate moment in history. The Mohist was more interested in *doing* good than *being* good. For Confucius, *ren* was primarily an interior virtue, but the "men of worth" were outwardly directed to the external world. Mohists were not interested in the slow process of self-cultivation, but wanted to put their practical skills, logic, and will-power at the service of society.

Mozi summed up his vision in ten theses, each of which was presented as a proposition. Should people have "concern for everybody"? Should they "reject aggression"? What did Mohists think about extravagant funerals, liturgical music, and the will of Heaven? Were people's actions determined by fate? How should Mohists approach their superiors? Each proposal was weighed against three criteria. Did it conform to the practice of the sage kings? Was it supported by common sense? And—most important—would it benefit the human race? If it failed any of these tests, it must be rejected. Lavish funerals and music did not benefit society, so they had to go. Nobody had ever seen "Fate," so the determinism that made the Confucians believe that they could not change the world was not a proper attitude for true men of worth.

Mozi's ethical vision was strictly utilitarian. An act was virtuous if it enriched the poor, prevented unnecessary death, increased the population, and contributed to public order. People had to be argued out of their selfishness; human beings were natural egotists, so they had to be convinced

by irrefutable arguments that their well-being was entirely dependent upon the welfare of the whole of humanity and that a fair and just "concern for everybody" was essential for prosperity, peace, and security.<sup>65</sup> Mohists must convince rulers that aggression was not in their best interests. Warfare made their own subjects suffer; it ruined the economy; and victory stirred up hatred and jealousy. They would get the wealth, happiness, and success that they desired only if everybody behaved towards one another with equity and transcended self-interest. Rulers had to "learn not to be concerned for themselves alone."<sup>66</sup>

If they were selfish and violent, they would incur the wrath of Heaven. Unlike Confucius, who preferred not to speak about Heaven, Mozi backed up nearly every one of his arguments with a reference to the High God. Heaven loved all human beings without distinction and was the exemplary model of *jian ai*. "Heaven is all embracing and not selfish," Mozi insisted.

Heaven is generous and ungrudging; Heaven's understanding is eternal and never declines. . . . Heaven displays its love of all men by giving them all life and sustaining them. If one flouts Heaven, Heaven will inflict calamities. Because the sages made Heaven their standard, all their actions were effective.<sup>67</sup>

The aristocracy had long been moving towards an impersonal conception of the divine, but Mozi probably expressed the beliefs of the ordinary people, who still saw Heaven as a personalized deity. Yet despite his strong, literal-minded beliefs in God and the Spirits, Mozi had very little religious feeling. Unlike Confucius, Mozi felt no awe or wonder in the presence of Heaven. His theology was as grimly practical as his ethics. Heaven was useful. Heaven could pressure people into the belief that they *must* cultivate a concern for everybody, or suffer the consequences.

If everybody could be persuaded to respect others as they did themselves, there would be peace and harmony throughout the world. Nobody could raze a city to the ground or massacre the population of a village if he practised *jian ai*. Mozi was at his most eloquent when he described this utopia:

Now if we seek to benefit the world by taking *jian ai* as our standard, those with sharp ears and clear eyes will see and hear for others, those with sturdy limbs will work for others, and those with a knowledge of the Way will endeavor to teach others. Those who are old and without wives and children will find means of

support and be able to live out their days; the young and orphaned who have no parents will find someone to care for them and look after their needs.<sup>68</sup>

Mozi did not believe that this was an impossible dream. Throughout this chapter, he repeatedly exclaimed: “When all these benefits may be secured merely by taking *jian ai* as our standard, I cannot understand how the men of the world can hear about this doctrine and still criticize it!”<sup>69</sup> The sage kings had founded an empire based on universal altruism; the ideal had worked in the past, and could do so again. It *was* possible to change the world, he argued, and men of worth must rise to the challenge.

During the Warring States period, Mozi was more widely revered than Confucius, because he spoke directly to the terror and violence of his time. As he watched the whole of China mobilizing for war, it seemed that human beings were about to erase themselves from the face of the earth. If they could not curb their selfishness and greed, they would destroy one another. The only way they could survive was by cultivating a boundless sympathy that did not depend upon emotional identification but on the reasoned, practical understanding that even their enemies had the same needs, desires, and fears as themselves.

Towards the end of the fifth century, a *kshatriya* from the republic of Sakka, in the foothills of the Himalayas, shaved his head and beard, put on the saffron robe of the renouncer, and set out on the road to Magadha. His name was Siddhatta Gotama, and he was twenty-nine years old. Later he recalled that his parents wept bitterly when he left home. We are also told that before leaving he stole into his wife’s bedroom while she was asleep to take one last look at her and their newborn son, as though he did not trust his resolve should she beg him to stay.<sup>70</sup> He had begun to find his father’s elegant house constricting: a miasma of petty duties weighed him down. When he looked at human life, Gotama could see only the grim cycle of suffering, which began with the trauma of birth and proceeded inexorably to “aging, illness, death, sorrow and corruption,” only to start again with the next life cycle. But like the other renouncers, Gotama was convinced that these painful states must have their positive counterparts. “Suppose,” he said, “I start looking for the *unborn*, unaging, deathless, sorrowless, incorrupt and supreme freedom from all this bondage?”<sup>71</sup> He called this blissful liberation *nib-*

*bana*\* (“blowing out”), because the passions and desires that tied him down would be extinguished like a flame. He had a long, arduous quest ahead, but he never lost hope in a form of existence—attainable in this life—that was not contingent, flawed, and transient. “There *is* something that has not come to birth in the usual way, which has neither been created and which remains undamaged,” he insisted. “If it did not exist, it would be impossible to find a way out.”<sup>72</sup>

He believed that he did find it, as did the monks who followed his teachings and transmitted them orally, until they reached their present form about a hundred years after Gotama’s death. They called him the Buddha, the “enlightened” or “awakened” one. These Buddhist scriptures were composed in Pali, one of the Sanskrit dialects of northeast India, and are our main source of information about the Buddha’s life. As in most of the new schools that were springing up in the eastern Ganges plain, Buddhist teachings and practices (*dhamma*)<sup>†</sup> were based on the life experience of the founder, and the Pali texts therefore emphasize those aspects of his biography that would help others to achieve *nibbana*. If people wanted to become enlightened, they too had to leave home and family, as well as all their preconceptions, far behind, just as the Buddha had done.

Later Buddhists told a mythical story that brought out the deeper significance of Gotama’s departure. When he was born, his father invited some Brahmins to examine the baby and tell his fortune. One of them predicted that Gotama would see four disturbing sights that would convince him to become a renouncer and discover a new spiritual truth. Gotama’s father had more worldly ambitions for his son, so to shield him from these painful spectacles he posted guards around the palace to keep all distressing reality at bay. Thus, even though he lived in carefree luxury, the boy was a virtual prisoner. Gotama’s pleasure palace is a striking image of a mind in denial. As long as we persist in closing our hearts to the sorrow that surrounds us on all sides, we remain incapable of growth and insight. But when Gotama was twenty-nine years old, the gods, who needed the Buddha’s *dhamma* as much as human beings, decided to intervene. They sent four of their number past the guards, disguised as an old man, a sick man, a corpse, and renouncer. Gotama was so shocked by these images of pain that he put on his yellow robe and left home that very night. Once the suffering that is an inescapable part of the human condition has broken through the cautionary barricades that we have erected against it, we can

\*In Sanskrit, the Pali *nibbana* becomes *nirvana*.

†In Pali, the Sanskrit *dharma* becomes *dhamma*.

never see the world in the same way again. Gotama had allowed the knowledge of *dukkha* to invade his life, and his quest could begin.

As he walked down the road to Magadha, Gotama probably hailed other renouncers in the usual way, asking who their master was and what *dhamma* they followed, because he was looking for a teacher to instruct him in the rudiments of “homelessness.” First he studied in Vaishali with two of the greatest yogins of the day, Alara Kalama and Uddalaka Rama-putta. He was an excellent pupil, and to the delight of his teachers soon achieved the very highest states of trance, but he could not accept their interpretations of these experiences. They followed the teachings of Samkhya, and believed that once they had entered these peak planes of the psyche, they had liberated the *purusha* from the bonds of nature. But Gotama, all his life, had been sceptical of metaphysical doctrines: How could this trance be the unconditioned and uncreated *purusha* when he knew perfectly well that he had manufactured it for himself, by his yogic expertise? Further, when he returned to himself, he found that there had been no real transformation. He was still his unregenerate, greedy, yearning self. His trance was not *nibbana*, because *nibbana* could not be temporary. Gotama had no problem with yoga, but he would not accept interpretations that did not coincide with his own experience.<sup>73</sup>

Gotama left his teachers and joined a group of ascetics. With them he practised severe extremities that gravely damaged his health. He lay on a mattress of spikes, ate his own urine and faeces, and fasted so rigorously that his bones stuck out “like a row of spindles . . . or the beams of an old shed.” At one point, he became so weak that he was left for dead beside the road.<sup>74</sup> But all to no avail. However severe his penances—perhaps even because of them—his body still clamoured for attention, and he continued to be plagued by the lust and cravings that bound him to the grim cycle of rebirth. There was no hint of the peace and liberation he sought.

Nevertheless, Gotama did not give up. Henceforth he would rely only on his own insights. This would become one of the central tenets of his spiritual method. He constantly told his disciples that they must not accept anybody’s teachings, no matter how august, if those teachings did not tally with their own experience. They must never take any doctrine on faith or at second hand. Even his own teachings must be jettisoned if they failed to bring followers to enlightenment. If people relied on an authority figure, they would remain trapped in an inauthentic version of themselves and would never attain the freedom of *nibbana*. So in a moment of mingled despair and defiance, his health broken down by excessive penance, and at a spiritual dead end, Gotama resolved to strike out on his own. “Surely,” he

cried, “there must be another way to achieve enlightenment!” And as if to prove that his declaration of independence was indeed the way forward, the beginnings of a new solution declared itself to him.<sup>75</sup>

He suddenly recalled an incident from his early childhood. His nurse had left him under the shade of a rose apple tree while she watched the ceremonial ploughing of the fields before the spring planting. The little boy sat up and saw that young shoots of grass had been torn up by the plough, and insects had been killed. Gazing at the carnage, Gotama had felt a strange pang of grief, as though his own relatives had died.<sup>76</sup> The surge of selfless empathy brought him a moment of spiritual release. It was a beautiful day, and the child had felt a pure joy welling up within him. Instinctively, he had composed himself in the yogic position, and entered a tranced state, even though he had never had a yoga lesson in his life.

As he looked back on this childhood event, Gotama realized that the joy he had felt that day had been entirely free of craving and greed. “Could this,” he asked himself, “possibly be the way to enlightenment?” If an untrained child could achieve yogic ecstasy and have intimations of *nibbana*, perhaps the liberation of *moksha* was built into the structure of our humanity. Instead of starving his body into submission, and making yoga an assault on his psyche, maybe he should cultivate these innate tendencies that led to *cetovimutti*, the “release of the mind” that was *nibbana*. He should foster helpful (*kusala*) states of mind, such as the disinterested impulse of compassion that had surfaced so naturally, and at the same time avoid any mental or physical states that would impede this liberation.<sup>77</sup>

Like the Jains, Gotama realized that the traditional five “prohibitions” of the “unhelpful” (*akusala*) states of violence, stealing, lying, intoxication, and sex must be balanced by their positive counterparts. Instead of merely avoiding aggression, he must behave gently and kindly to everything and everybody, and cultivate thoughts of loving-kindness. It was important not to lie, but also crucial to ensure that whatever he said was “reasoned, accurate, clear, and beneficial.”<sup>78</sup> Besides refraining from stealing, he must rejoice in possessing only the bare minimum. From now on, he was going to work *with* his human nature and not fight against it. For the first time in months, he took solid food and started to nurse himself back to health. He also began to develop a special type of yoga. First came the practice of “mindfulness” (*sati*), in which, as a prelude to meditation, he scrutinized his behaviour at every moment of the day, noting the ebb and flow of feelings and sensations, together with the fluctuations of his consciousness, and making himself aware of the constant stream of desires, irritations, and ideas that coursed through his mind in the space of a single hour. This

introspection was not designed to induce a neurotic, self-regarding guilt. Gotama was simply becoming acquainted with the workings of his mind and body in order to exploit their capacities and use them to best advantage, in the same way as an equestrian seeks an intimate knowledge of the horse he is training.

Like many other renouncers, Gotama was convinced that life was *dukkha*, and that desire was responsible for our suffering. The practice of mindfulness made him even more acutely aware of the impermanence and transitory nature of human existence and of its countless frustrations and disappointments. It was not simply the big traumas of old age, sickness, and death that made life so unsatisfactory. "Pain, grief and despair are *dukkha*," he explained later. "Being forced into proximity with what we hate is suffering; being separated from what we love is suffering; not getting what we want is suffering."<sup>79</sup> He also observed the way one craving after another took possession of his mind and heart, noticing how he was ceaselessly yearning to become something else, go somewhere else, and get something that he did not have. In this endless stream of desire, it seemed as though human beings were continually seeking a new kind of existence—a new life, or rebirth. He could see it in his physical restlessness, the way he constantly shifted his position or set off for another part of the forest. "The world, whose very nature is to change, is constantly determined to become something else," he concluded. "It is at the mercy of change, it is only happy when caught up in the process of change, but this love of change contains a measure of fear, and this fear is itself *dukkha*."<sup>80</sup>

These were not simply logical reflections. Gotama was a very skilled yogin, and practised this mindfulness with the disciplined concentration that enabled him to see these truths more "directly," without the filter of self-protecting egotism that distorts them. But he did not stop at contemplating these negative truths; he also fostered the more "skilful" (*kusala*) states while performing his yogic exercises, sitting cross-legged, and practising the breathing rituals of *pranayama*. He was not only eliminating hatred from his mind, but making sure that it was also "full of compassion, desiring the welfare of all living beings." He was not only freeing himself of laziness and inertia, but cultivating "a mind that is lucid, conscious of itself, and completely alert." By systematically banishing one anxious thought after another, he found that his mind became "calm and still . . . had outgrown debilitating doubt," and was no longer plagued by "unprofitable [*akusala*] mental states."<sup>81</sup> If performed at sufficient depth, in

the yogic manner, these mental exertions could, he believed, transform the restless and destructive tendencies of the unconscious and conscious mind.

In later years, Gotama claimed that this yogic mindfulness brought to birth a different kind of human being, one that was not dominated by craving, greed, and selfishness. He had almost killed himself by undergoing excessive mortification, and was convinced that disciplined, systematically acquired compassion could take the place of the old punitive asceticism, and give the aspirant access to hitherto unknown dimensions of his humanity. Every day, while practising yoga, he entered into an alternative state of consciousness, fusing each successive trance with a feeling of positive benevolence towards the entire world.

He called these meditations "the immeasurables" (*appamana*). At each stage of his yogic journey into the depths of his mind, he deliberately evoked the emotion of love—"that huge, expansive and immeasurable feeling that knows no hatred"—and directed it to the four corners of the world, not omitting a single plant, animal, friend, or foe from this radius of sympathy. It was a fourfold programme. First, he cultivated a disposition of friendship for everything and everybody. Next he learned to suffer with other people and things, empathizing with their pain, as he had felt compassion for the grass shoots and insects under the rose apple tree. In the third phase of his meditation, he summoned up a "sympathetic joy" that delighted in the happiness of others, without envy or sense of personal impairment. Finally, when he entered the deepest trance of all, so immersed in the object of his contemplation that he was beyond pain or pleasure, Gotama aspired to an attitude of total equanimity towards others, feeling neither attraction nor antipathy. This was extremely difficult, because Gotama had to divest himself completely of the egotism that constantly looks to see how other things and people might benefit or detract from the self. Where traditional yoga had built up in the yogin a state of impervious autonomy, Gotama was learning systematically to open his whole being to others, and thus transcending the ego in compassion and loving-kindness to all other creatures.<sup>82</sup> When these positive, skilful states were cultivated with yogic intensity, they could more easily take root in the unconscious and become habitual. The "immeasurables" were designed to pull down the barricades that we erect between ourselves and others in order to protect our fragile egos. As the mind broke free of its ordinary, self-oriented constriction, it felt "expansive, without limits, enhanced, without hatred or petty malevolence."<sup>83</sup> If taken to the very highest level, this yoga of compassion brought the aspirant the "release of the mind," or *nibbana*.<sup>84</sup>

