Chinese Philosophy: A General Overview

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Like most disciplines, Chinese philosophy has a rich, complex history. For anyone wishing to delve into it for the first time, a general introduction is a helpful first step. Accordingly, the selection below provides a thorough overview of this fascinating discipline. In it, Gene Blocker traces the evolution of Chinese thought and poses some provocative questions about the risks inherent in studying the thought system of a culture that is not our own. Blocker begins by suggesting that, as in the West, Chinese philosophy experienced both an ancient and a scholastic period. The ancient period (the “Warring States” era of 500-200 BCE) witnessed intense innovation, as many different individual thinkers offered their opinions about a wide range of topics and vied for attention from government leaders and other scholars. Out of this competitive age grew a number of schools of thought, which we can think of as egoism, relativism, utilitarianism, skepticism, naturalism, platonic realism, hedonism, political realism, among others.

The scholastic period, again as in the West, saw a shift toward consolidation of the many disparate schools. During these years (500–1500), Chinese scholars offered fresh interpretations of the old philosophical positions, synthesizing them wherever possible, and harmonizing them with Buddhism, an Indian religion that had gained much influence in China in the second and third centuries CE.

Then, at the time of the Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE), an event occurred that would forever change the shape of Chinese philosophy. In an attempt to pacify previously warring states, Qin Shih Huang Di, China’s first emperor, instituted a brutal program of book burning throughout China. In the resulting conflagrations, all philosophy books in private hands went up in flames, and Legalism became the official state philosophy. By the time of the Han dynasty, a few years later, only two major schools existed—the official, reinstated school of Confucianism, which emphasized government service, and the unofficial, private school of Taoism, which stressed inner reflection and which was strongly linked with Buddhism. Within years, Confucianism and Taoism had absorbed the remaining schools that had flourished during the ancient period.
After this pivotal time, Blocker explains, the history of Chinese philosophy alternated between periods of political unity among various Chinese ethnic groups and times of disintegration. During the more peaceful episodes, Confucianism dominated in official recognition and support. During times of political turmoil, Taoism gained the upper hand.

In the West, the scholastic era was followed by the modern period (post-seventeenth century)—a time of revolutionary developments such as advances in the sciences, the Industrial Revolution, and the birth of nation-states. These developments led to what some people see as a split in Western thought and culture—between science and technology, and moral and social thought. Even today, Western philosophers are struggling to decide which two cultural strands most characterize the West—though the scales seem generally to tip in favor of science and technology.

As Blocker explains, Chinese philosophy does not have a corresponding modern period, because China did not experience the kinds of fundamental political, technological, and social shifts that occurred in the West during those same centuries. Indeed, Chinese thought, with its emphasis on moral and social themes, has evolved along distinctly different lines compared with Western philosophy. For any Westerners studying Chinese philosophy, the temptation is all too real to interpret the Chinese situation through the “lens” of Western thinking. For example, if China wishes to nudge its economy from one based on centralized planning to one based on market capitalism, many Westerners might conclude that it is necessary for that country to embrace Western-style democracy. But is it?

As you read the selection below, ask yourself whether you think Blocker inappropriately compares Chinese and Western thought. Specifically, has he exaggerated the similarities between the two thought systems and ignored important cultural differences? Are Chinese and Western (as well as Indian) peoples all fundamentally different in the kinds of questions and issues they explore through their thought systems? If Western philosophy expresses the unique worldview of Western peoples, then wouldn’t Chinese philosophy express the equally unique worldview of the Chinese people? What kinds of risks do we take in emphasizing the similarities between the two thought systems?
Like Western philosophy, Chinese philosophy has a creative, formative, “ancient” period (500 BCE–200 CE), which witnessed a rich fermentation of original ideas. It also has a consolidating, synthesizing, “scholastic” period (200–1500 CE). During this era (known as the “medieval” period), scholars criticized, refined, and synthesized the original concepts. They also strived to integrate philosophical theory with a newly emerging religion, Buddhism, which had originated in India and had begun exerting influence in China. (This phenomenon parallels the introduction of Christianity into Western thought in the fifth century.)

Unlike with Western philosophy, however, Chinese philosophy has had no “modern” period. The idea of “modern philosophy” was developed by Westerners in response to a wave of innovations in Europe; specifically, scientific advances, the Industrial Revolution, and the emergence of modern capitalist, democratic nation-states. Together, these phenomena signal a kind of historical mega-shift that never occurred in China. The nearest equivalent to “modern philosophy” in China is that country’s reaction to Western thought from the seventeenth century to the present.

Still, the ancient period in Chinese philosophy was extremely fertile. Individual philosophers established a host of different schools of thought—the Confucianists, the Moists, the Logicians, the Taoists, the Legalists—all of whom debated profound questions about human nature, the essence of reality, ethics, and right living. The leading thinkers of this age are shown below.

- Kongzi (Kung Tzu, Confucius) (551–479 BCE)
- Mozi (Mo Ti) (479–438 BCE)
- Gong-Sun Lung (Kung-Sun Lun) (born 380 BCE)
- Hui Shih (380–305 BCE)
- Mengzi (Meng Tzu, Mencius) (371–289 BCE)
- Laozi (Lao Tzu) (third century BCE)
- Zhuangzi (Chuang Tzu) (399–295 BCE)
- Xunzi (Hsun Tzu) (298–238 BCE)
- Han Feizi (Han Fei Tzu) (died 233 BCE)
- Dong Zhongshu (Tung Chung-shu) (179–104 BCE)

During the scholastic period, the pendulum swung between Confucianism and Taoism-Buddhism. Confucianism, which emphasized public service, tended to be officially recognized during periods of political unity (the Han, Tang, Song, and Ming dynasties). Taoism-Buddhism, which
stressed inner reflection and more personal goals, gained power during the intervening periods of political disunity, as diverse Chinese ethnic groups reasserted their national and regional identities. Leading thinkers of this period are shown below.

- Wang Chung (born 27 CE)
- Wang Bi (Wang Pi) (226–249 CE)
- Kuo Xiang (died 312 CE)
- Seng Zhau (Seng Chau) (384–414 CE)
- Chi Tsang (549–623 CE)
- Zhu Xi (Chu Hsi) (1130–1200 CE)
- Wang Yangming (1472–1529 CE)

For convenience and greater ease of understanding, we can group the above two sets of philosophers into schools arranged in rough chronological order:

- Kongzi (sixth century BCE)
- the Logicians (Gong-Sun Lung, Hui Shih) (fourth century BCE)
- the ancient Confucianists (Mengzi, Xunzi, Dong Zhongshu) (fourth century through second century BCE)
- the Moists (Mozi and the “later Moists”) (fifth century BCE)
- the Taoists (Laozi, Zhuangzi) (fourth through third century BCE)
- the Legalists (Han Feizi) (third century BCE)
- the Neo-Taoists (Wang Chung, Kuo Xiang, Wang Bi) (first through third century CE)
- the Buddhists (Chi Tsang, Seng Zhau) (fourth through sixth century CE)
- the Neo-Confucianists (Zhu Xi, Wang Yangming) (twelfth through sixteenth century CE)

**Kongzi (Confucius): Rethinking and Broadening Feudal Values**

In 700–500 BCE, the ancient feudal system of small states in what is now China broke down as smaller states were absorbed into larger ones through military conquest. During this “Warring States” period, individual thinkers began criticizing the past and recommending new ways of understanding reality. Kongzi (Kung Tzu, Confucius) 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 numerous 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 failed and how people might strive for a better future.

During this turbulent era, philosophers tended to be either conservatives who yearned 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. However, the feudal order had virtually disappeared by the time he was born. For this reason, he realized that the old values could be preserved only if people modified them to address new conditions. In this effort, Kongzi was certainly an originator.

But what were these old ways, exactly? 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. As he saw it, 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, a ruler—someone who has been chosen to protect and care for his people—should not take advantage of them to enrich himself. 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 the old feudal values, Kongzi never developed a theory of a universal human nature. This was left to his followers. But when the Taoists and other competing schools of philosophy criticized the Confucianists for trying to revive the values of a defunct era, Kongzi’s followers responded with an innovative argument. As they explained, the traditional values were essential for everyone—not just the nobility—to express their full human nature. In other words, all people have the same basic nature, aristocrats and peasants alike. And in order to be
happy and successful, everyone must fulfill his or her nature. This effort, the Confucianists maintained, required honing one’s understanding and practice of the virtues of the ancient feudal nobility.

Although Kongzi had not refined his ideas about human nature and ethics in the systematic, logically rigorous manner of his followers and their critics, we can extract something of his thoughts from his sayings, as recorded in the Lun Yu. Kongzi not only sought to preserve the traditional virtues of yi (righteousness), ren (human-hearted love), li (propriety), and zhi (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, human-heartedness (ren or jen) and moral righteousness (yi or i) were the most important, in his view.

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. Yet 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 for 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.

Yi, or i, is the value of doing the right thing for the morally right reason; that is, doing it because it is right. A well-known story about Kongzi aptly illustrates his views of righteousness. Before he became a private teacher, Kongzi served as an adviser to monarchs on how best to rule their small countries. He thought that if rulers lived lives of virtue, the people would follow their example—and the whole country would prosper. However, as has often been the case throughout human history, many rulers at this time in China used their position only to enrich themselves and to extend and maintain their power. They listened politely to Kongzi—and then continued as before. One day, as the philosopher made his way to the royal palace for another session of advice-giving, a hermit by the side of the road asked him why he persisted in pursuing an objective that he knew was doomed to failure. Kongzi replied that a person must do what he thinks is right, regardless of the consequences. This is the essence of yi.
Indeed, Kongzi believed that the superior person does the right thing even though he knows he will not achieve the results he seeks. Success in this endeavor depends on ming (fate or good fortune), and to “know ming” means to know the limits of our own abilities. This doesn’t mean we should adopt a fatalistic attitude. It means we should realize that, after we have tried as hard as we possibly can to do what we honestly think is right, we may or may not succeed. Fate may prevent even our best efforts from bearing fruit. Kongzi thus believed that we should do what is in our power, and not worry about what lies outside our 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. That ancient Greek philosopher held that moral righteousness 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 correct 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.

THE LOGICIANS: ADDRESSING PHILOSOPHICAL PARADOX

As you may have sensed in reading about Kongzi, philosophers pay close attention to how they define their terms in presenting their theories. Indeed, as Arthur Danto, a contemporary American philosopher, claimed, philosophy concerns itself with the “space between language and reality,” or the relationship between the world and the ways in which we describe the world.

Ordinarily, we don’t pay much attention to this distinction between words and reality. Further, we naively assume that the world is just as we believe it to be. And often reality seems to confirm this assumption. But when we begin to reflect on the relationship between names and things, we focus on words and ideas apart from actual things. For example, suppose someone asks you, “What’s that you’re holding?” And you answer, “A pen.” The word “pen” can refer to both the actual pen that you are holding (in other words, a particular object that exists in the world) and to the general idea (a “universal”) of pens. Particulars exist in the external world; universals, in the world of ideas.
In the act of philosophical reflection, we separate particulars from universals. Then, strange things begin to happen. The particulars begin to appear so impermanent that they no longer seem to exist as distinct objects (For example, Hui Shih and the sixth-century-BCE Greek philosopher Heraclitus pointed out that “you can’t step in the same river twice.”) At the same time, the universals seem so eternal that they appear to be utterly irrelevant to ordinary, everyday human life. (As Plato and Gong-Sun Lung explained, “Perfect justice is an ideal which does not exist in this world.”)

Some philosophers (Hui Shih, Gong-Sun Lung; the fourth-century-BCE Greek thinker Zeno) have enjoyed these sorts of paradoxes and the power they have to confound common sense. Others (Aristotle, Xunzi, later Moists) have come forward to defend common sense against the “paradox mongers.” In the crossfire, the study of logic was born. In Chinese philosophy, it emerged in the school of the Logicians; in Western philosophy, as formal symbolic logic. Although the field of logic did not develop as fully in China as it did in the West, it shows more depth and complexity than earlier Western scholars realized, especially in the work of Xunzi and the later Moists.

Both Chinese and Western philosophers—whether in the study of logic or of other topics—have long taken an interest in the relationship between universals and particulars. For example, the Chinese Logician Gong-Sun Lung argued that particular objects perceptible to us through our five senses consist of abstract universals that are fundamentally different from their corresponding particular physical objects. Moreover, each universal, he claimed, is unique and distinct from all other universals, as well as from particular physical objects. To illustrate, he said that “a white horse is not a horse,” meaning that the universal of “whiteness,” when combined with the universal of “horse,” was not the same thing as the universal of “horse.”

Gong-Sun Lung objected to other philosophers’ view that all distinctions are ultimately illusory; that is, only in our minds and irrelevant to daily life. According to him, the distinctions between universals, and between universals as a group and particulars as a group, are very real. Moreover, they are fundamental to our understanding of reality and our approach to life, because virtually all thought and perception involve our classifying individuals as members of universal classes (this is a cow, that is a tree). At the same time, Gong-Sun Lung acknowledged that his theory generated some thorny questions; namely, if all universals are distinct from one another and from particular objects, how can the same whiteness in one particular white
thing also exist in some other white object? Or, if “whiteness” is different in each case, then how can we say that different particulars share the same universals? Western philosophers, for their part, grappled with a similar set of semantic and logistical problems.

The Chinese Logicians recognized that universals and particulars are different sorts of things. Accordingly, what could be said of one group could not be said of the other. But because the same words can refer to both (remember the double meaning of “pen”?), paradoxes arise in our use of language that require special logical analysis to correct. In ancient Greece, several philosophers worried about similar problems and began developing logic techniques to address them. Some Chinese Logicians’ paradoxes resemble those of the Greek thinker Zeno; for example, “The wheel never touches the ground,” “The shadow of a bird never moves,” “The arrow is flying so fast there are moments when it is neither in motion nor at rest,” and “Take a stick one foot long and cut it in half everyday and you will never exhaust it even after ten thousand generations.”

Gong-Sun Lung’s white-horse paradox became especially well known for its power to generate lively debate. Philosophers argued for hours over questions such as, is “white horse” synonymous with “horse”? Is the concept “horse” identical with the mixture of the two concepts “whiteness” plus “horseness”? Is the mixed concept “white horse” an actual horse (i.e., a particular?), and so on.

In a philosophical sense (and with a little creative playing with semantics), we can see how a white horse may not be a horse. However, in everyday, real life, a white horse obviously is a horse. This kind of paradox has generated controversy within the world of philosophy. For example, ancient critics of the Logistics accused Gong-Sun Lung of trickery, of using logic to confuse people. But in his book Gong-sun Lungzi, he clearly is using logic for a much higher purpose; specifically, to support Kongzi’s concept of “rectification of names.” In several passages, for instance, Gong-Sun Lung criticizes the rulers of his day for making serious political mistakes by failing to keep the meaning of words clear. He even uses the white-horse paradox as an analogy to make his case. For example, one ruler claims that he wants to find scholars to help run the country—but then explains that the reason he hasn’t actually hired any is that he can’t find any. Gong-Sun Lung and the ruler agree on the definition of a scholar (one who possesses the traditional virtues of ren, yi, etc.). But the ruler says that he insists on finding “bold scholars.” Gong-Sun Lung points out that this statement introduces confu-
A scholar is a scholar, he says. If you want a scholar, then you should be happy to accept any genuine scholar. In short, “a bold scholar is not a scholar.”

In another example, a king embarking on a day of hunting accidentally leaves his hunting bow behind. He decides to let the local people (the Chu) have it. But then criticize the king for preferring the Chu people. “Why not let anyone have it who finds it?” they ask. Again, there is a difference between “people” and the “Chu people,” just as there is a difference between “horse” and “white horse.” As Gong-Sun Lung explains, “The Chu people are not the people.” In the American Declaration of Independence, a similar question over terminology exists. Specifically, certain unalienable rights are attributed to “all men.” Was the idea of “all men” intended to include slaves? women? children? The language is unclear, Gong-Sun Lung would have said, because it doesn’t acknowledge the important difference between adult white males and the idea of people in general.

Gong-Sun Lung’s fellow Logician Hui Shih offered another interesting paradox: “Love all things equally; the universe is one.” Hui Shih believed that we err when we use words to try to differentiate individual things. In his view, everything in the universe is all part of one larger entity, and should not be seen as separate. He used the analogy of a seed sprouting into a plant to explain. Because the seed is in the process of turning into a plant, there really is no difference between the two. Indeed, Hui Shih claimed that we would be hard pressed to identify a dividing line between a seed and the plant it becomes.

Clearly, we human beings can’t resist trying to divide the world into manageable units that we can think and talk about. In fact, we depend on our ability to differentiate things for our very survival. (Who would argue that it’s not important to differentiate between a hungry, man-eating lion and our loving parents?) It’s difficult even to imagine what life would be like if we really believed and acted as if everything were the same one thing. From this standpoint, Hui Shih seems to be thumbing his nose at common sense and challenging us to adopt a viewpoint and an approach to life that just isn’t realistic—and that may even endanger us. On the other hand, he seems to have a more serious, deeper purpose in mind. Recall his claim: If there are no real divisions between things, then all is one. We should therefore not discriminate but love all things equally. Seen in this context, Hui Shih’s theory holds out hope for a world in which we can each feel ourselves to be part of all that exists and, in turn, feel that all that exists is part of us as well. Such a
THE ANCIENT CONFUCIANISTS: REBUILDING AND REFINING A FOUNDER’S IDEAS

Around 500 BCE, the time of Kongzi’s death, the political and philosophical landscape had shifted dramatically since the great thinker had first advanced his ideas. Many competing schools of philosophy had emerged in China—as had various brands of Confucianism itself. Yet political events would soon eclipse this disagreement. In 221 BCE, the small “warring states” were finally united for the first time under a military dictatorship. Seeing an opportunity, a school of philosophers called the Legalists, who held that states are best ruled by a strict set of laws upheld by rewards and punishment, convinced the emperor that the only way to truly unite the country was to eliminate all the divisive schools (except, of course, for Legalism). In 213 BCE, the government searched out and burned all the philosophy books it could find. The works of Mengzi (Meng Tzu, Mencius; fourth century BCE), a key follower of Kongzi, and his interpreters went up in flames. Worse, any philosopher who refused to abandon his ideas was executed.

During the Han dynasty (roughly 200 BCE–200 CE), the political scene shifted yet again. Early Han Emperors reversed the Legalist position and attempted to revive the ancient schools of philosophy. Nevertheless, the emperor adopted Confucianism as the official philosophy of the state. The only other school to survive this new age was Taoism, which many members of the educated elite practiced privately while publicly behaving as Confucianists.

Because many Confucianist texts had been destroyed and serious discrepancies marred the surviving documents, Kongzi’s followers found it difficult to reconstruct one “true and authentic” Confucianism. But that wasn’t their only problem. As these centuries unfolded, Confucianism was changing. New ideas, including the Buddhist beliefs that had been filtering into China from India since the first century, were reshaping the face of Confucianism.

You may recall that Kongzi had advocated broadening the old feudal values of the Chinese aristocracy, such as moral righteousness and family respect, to the general population. And his critics, especially the Taoists, had questioned why he would want to revive a set of values from a now-defunct era. To defend their position, Kongzi’s followers knew they would have to
show that the values they espoused were based on an unchanging human
to nature shared by all people, of all classes, and at all times and places.

But is there a universal human nature? And if so, what exactly is it? Here, Kongzi’s followers could not reach agreement. Mengzi held that
human nature was essentially good. Another follower, Xunzi (Hsun Tzu; third century BCE) argued that it was basically evil. Dong Zhongshu (Tung
Chung-shu; first century BCE) believed that human nature consisted of both
good and evil in opposition to one another. Let’s take a closer look at their
theories, below.

MENGZI: THE “SPROUTINGS” OF HUMAN GOODNESS

Like Kongzi, Mengzi divided his time between offering (mostly unwanted)
advice to the rulers of his day and teaching students in a private capacity. In
the book *The Mengzi* (The Mencius), which was probably written by his stu-
dents, Mengzi is portrayed as a courageous soul who criticized those rulers
whom he thought were immoral. In one episode of the book, the king comes
out to greet Mengzi as the philosopher arrives at the palace. The monarch
asks, “Well, what have you brought me that will profit me in my rule?” Very
much in the spirit of Confucius, the philosopher replies, “Why do you ask
about profit when you should be concerned with ruling in a righteous and
humane manner?”

Also like Kongzi, Mengzi believed in the “rectification of names.” As
we’ve seen, this is the idea that individuals should behave according to their
correct titles or names (such as “king”). People who do not live up to their
titles should not be called by those names or treated with the respect that the
titles might imply. For example, Mengzi was once asked whether it was
morally permissible for the invading armies of the Zhou dynasty to kill the
king of the defeated Shang dynasty. He replied that if the defeated king was
truly a king—that is, he cared for his people and sought in all ways to bene-
fit them—then of course it was wrong to kill him. However, if he was a king
in name only and ignored the responsibilities defined by the word *king*, then
killing him was morally permissible.

But in some ways Mengzi deviated from the path followed by Kongzi
and most other Confucianists. Specifically, he emphasized the morality of
following our human nature rather than social convention. In terms of the
familiar nature-nurture debate, Mengzi leaned far more to the “nature” side
than any other Confucianist did. In that respect, his worldview closely
resembled that of those avid critics of Confucianism, the Taoists. In one
episode recorded in his book, Mengzi tells a comical story about a man from Sung. (For some reason, during this time, the people of the small Sung kingdom were constantly portrayed through jokes as naïve and stupid.) In the tale, the man wants to help his rice plants grow taller, so he pulls on them—which of course only kills them! Mengzi points out that the farmer should have let nature take its course. Obviously, a farmer has to plant the rice, then transplant it, and weed, water, and protect it from birds and other animals. Beyond these tasks, however, he should leave the rice plants alone to grow and develop by themselves. By extending Mengzi’s analogy to the question of human nature, we can conclude that we should help children to cultivate their innate characteristics rather than impose “unnatural” socialization processes on them.

As China’s first philosopher, Kongzi had had some critics, but they had not yet coalesced into distinct, dissenting schools of thought during his lifetime. Mengzi did not have it that easy. Indeed, he often bemoaned the enormous popularity of what he regarded as two extremist schools of thought: the followers of Mozi, or Mo Ti (Mo Tzu, fifth century BCE) and Yang Zhu (Yang Chu, fifth-fourth centuries BCE). Mozi had argued that we should love all people equally; Yang Zhu, that we shouldn’t be required to lift a finger to help anyone but ourselves. Mengzi took a middle path between these two extremes. He emphasized the traditional Chinese virtue of family respect and loyalty (thereby opposing Yang Zhu) but did not believe that such feeling should be extended indiscriminately to everyone (thereby opposing Mozi).

How did this “middle path” manifest itself in Mengzi’s thinking? As he saw it, all human beings have the “beginnings” or “sprouting” of goodness within them. That is, all people are born with the potential and tendency to be virtuous. Mengzi believed that this potential can be developed, so that the individual becomes a good person, or neglected, so that he or she becomes a bad person. Mengzi wasn’t implying that children are born moral. He realized that they must be taught how to live morally. He also realized that children who are neglected or mistreated usually turn out badly. Nonetheless, his theory holds that in either case there is an innate tendency toward goodness. In the right environment, he pointed out, an acorn will grow into an oak tree; that is its nature. If robbed of water, sunlight, and proper soil, the seedling will shrivel up and ultimately die.

In Mengzi’s most famous example, he asks, “What is the spontaneous response of any person upon seeing a child about to fall into a well?” In his
opinion, most people would immediately and without thinking rush to help the child. This response doesn’t mean that everyone is a morally good person, however; it only means that everyone is born with the “beginning” (the “sprouting”) of the Confucian virtue of human-heartedness, as well as other traditional Chinese virtues.

In Mengzi’s debate with the philosopher Gaozi (Kao Tzu), Gaozi took a stance that foreshadowed that of Jean-Paul Sartre, the twentieth-century French philosopher. Gaozi argued that there is no universal human nature; that is, people do not have a tendency to be more one way than another. Instead, he thought of human beings as infinitely pliable—they can be made to become anything. According to Gaozi, each person is molded and shaped by the society in which he or she happens to be born.

Gaozi used the flow of water as an analogy. Water, he explained, can be made to flow east, west, south, or north. All you have to do is dig a channel from a lake in an eastward direction to get the water to flow east. But if someone blocks that channel and digs another southward, then the water will just as easily flow south. The water itself, Gaozi insisted, has no built-in tendency to flow in any particular direction. According to Gaozi, human beings are similarly molded and shaped by the society in which they happen to be born.

What did Mengzi think of all this? He replied that although water can be made to flow with equal ease in any direction, it naturally tends to flow downward. To make lake water flow to the west, for example, you must dig the westward channel deeper than the surface of the lake. Of course, we can also force water to flow upward—such as when we splash handfuls of it up into the air. However, this requires constant work. As soon as we relax, the water naturally flows downward once more.

In another debate between the two thinkers, Gaozi offered additional support for his viewpoint. Just as willow-tree wood can be carved into any desired utensil, he said—from a cup to a basket—human beings can be molded into whatever kind of persons their society wants or needs, such as farmers or philosophers. Therefore, human beings have no innate nature of their own. Mengzi countered that the willow tree does have its own nature—which is to continue growing as a willow tree. By cutting the tree down and carving it up, he said, we are actually violating its nature. In a similar vein, we would be violating the nature of human beings by imposing “unnatural” standards of behavior on them.

Though Mengzi agreed that we can—and should—shape human behavior through education, he insisted that we will succeed at this only if we
work with an existing tendency. For example, every human society has rules for regulating sexuality. However, because the sex drive is innate within human beings, attempts to force people into life-long sexual abstinence would require enormous effort—and would ultimately fail. We can’t squelch this drive; we can only regulate or shape it. In fact, whenever we find ourselves exerting huge amounts of energy to force people to do something or stop doing something else, this is usually a clue that we’re going against nature.

Here’s another way to look at this. We can distinguish between an “inner” force, which arises within a living thing, and an “outer” force, which operates on the living thing from the outside. In Mengzi’s opinion, the “inner” force of water is to flow down; an “outer” force operating on it might be the action of splashing the water upwards. The “inner” force of the willow tree is to continue growing as a willow tree, while “outer” forces acting on it might come in the form of insects or animals who eat it, a drought that stunts its growth, or a woodsman who cuts it down.

Mengzi treasured what he saw as the distinctively human quality within us, and urged his listeners to honor, preserve, and develop that quality above all else. “To know one’s nature is to know Heaven,” he said. He further believed that, among all the species on the planet, only we human beings have the capacity to understand our nature and to choose whether to follow it.

Gaozi didn’t share Mengzi’s reverence for human nature. In fact, he dismissed it as simply something that we are born with—we really can’t take pride in it, he said, and we certainly needn’t cherish it. Indeed, Gaozi suggested that, because the instincts of various animals are the same at birth, human nature must therefore be the same as the nature of lower animals. Aren’t dogs, people, and horses all born with the same instincts for hunger, sex, and self-preservation? he asked. The only reason people become different from dogs and horses is that they are educated, not that they have a different nature.

Once again, Mengzi turned the argument around on Gaozi. He pointed out that, if all animals are born with the same set of instincts, as Gaozi claimed, then the dog’s nature must be the same as that of the cow. Mengzi dismissed this as absurd. The instincts of both animals may be similar, he conceded, and indeed they may even resemble those of a person. However, dogs and cows have very different abilities, and so must have very different natures. Likewise, human beings have capacities that dogs and cows do not have; therefore, we have our own nature.
But what are these unique capacities? Unlike Plato and Aristotle, Mengzi did not identify rationality as distinctively human. Instead, he pointed to the capacity of what he called the human heart-mind to think. (In Chinese, the same word—xin—means both mind and heart and is therefore best translated as “heart-mind.”) Mengzi argued that even though our first response to anything comes from our senses, our intellect must judge the correctness of that response. And, we are the only species to perform both of these functions.

Like his predecessor, Mengzi eventually applied his theory to practical matters, particularly politics. Indeed, he is often called the most democratic of the Chinese philosophers. Although he defended the ancient feudal traditions, he radically reinterpreted them to conform to his own political ideas. For example, he noted that in feudal times, everything about the political order was arranged to benefit the aristocracy. Further, nobles claimed that that very order was mandated by Heaven. But according to Mengzi, only regimes that satisfied their subjects earned this “mandate” from Heaven. Thus governments and economic policy should exist for the express purpose of serving the people. Also, in feudal times, the division of political and economic duties was hereditary; for example, warriors came from military families, merchants from a business class. In Mengzi’s view, the division of labor should be made according to merit—let each person serve according to his innate ability, whether as a farmer, teacher, or government official.

**XUNZI: THE DARK SIDE OF HUMAN NATURE**

Whereas Mengzi presented human nature in a basically admirable light, Xunzi, another ancient Confucianist, wasn’t as optimistic. In Xunzi’s view, human nature is essentially evil; that is, people are born selfish and aggressively antisocial. It is only through education, training, discipline, and the threat of punishment that people become socially cooperative. Xunzi speculated that, originally, people were free to follow their own selfish drives without fear of recrimination. But when they realized that they were as often the victims of abuse as its perpetrators—that they were getting robbed as often as they were taking what they wanted from others—they welcomed the authority of a ruler who could maintain order and punish transgressions.

Like the seventeenth-century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, and other Western “social contract” thinkers, Xunzi urged the maintenance of a strong central authority to control undesirable human behavior through education and a system of rewards and punishment. What do you suppose would
happen, Xunzi asked, if such a governmental authority were removed? Could anyone doubt that chaos would reign as the strong freely trampled the weak?

Xunzi’s theories of human nature differed from Mengzi’s in another fundamental respect: Mengzi defined human nature as that which is uniquely and distinctively human, whereas Xunzi defined it as that which all people are born with—even if it is also shared by the lower animals. Relating his theory to ancient Chinese traditions, Xunzi claimed that human nature derives from two sources: the contribution of Heaven, which gives us the intelligent capacity to be civilized, cultured, and virtuous, and the contribution of Earth, which gives us the capacity to feel emotions. But whereas Mengzi said that we receive from Heaven the “beginnings” of actual virtue, Xunzi maintained that Heaven gives us only the potential for virtue and civilized life. Thus, for Xunzi, a person at birth is just like one of the lower animals—except that he or she has the capacity to become civilized. For Mengzi, a newborn baby is already good, though on a small scale; for Xunzi, a newborn has only the promise of becoming so.

In a sense, the difference between Xunzi’s and Mengzi’s ideas is very small. Both thinkers admitted that we have natural desires for food and sex, and both agreed that we have the capacity to resist those desires when it is dangerous or inappropriate to indulge them. The difference really comes down to the innate “tendency” to do good versus the “potential” to become good—in other words, “nature” versus “nurture.”

Xunzi thought that human beings have the intelligence to control their baser desires when they see the problems that rampant indulgence spawns. But if this rational setting of limits is typical of human behavior, Mengzi asked, then isn’t it part of our nature? In other words, isn’t it a tendency more than a mere potential? Certainly the particular form of restraint (let the elders eat first; don’t have sex with your first cousin) is different for each society—but every society does put restrictions on behavior.

Let’s follow Xunzi’s argument one step further: If human nature is originally evil, he said, then any goodness demonstrated by us must come from human culture. Unique among the animals, we possess the intelligence that makes it possible to become good. “Every man on the street has the capacity of knowing ren, li, yi, and the means to carry out these principles,” Xunzi wrote. But how do we become good through our culture? And what motivates those among us who are inherently evil? Xunzi offered several answers to these questions. First, he said that we human beings know that we need
some kind of social organization, cooperation, and mutual support. To secure such organization, we need rules of conduct (li) and ceremonial rites. These rules and rites set limits on the satisfaction of our baser desires. In addition, these rules help us to cultivate our sense of morality and humanity.

Like Kongzi, Xunzi saw an important benefit to elaborate ceremonies. Even though we might realize that colorful prayer rites won’t guarantee a better harvest, emotionally we need to feel hopeful. Through our rituals, we simultaneously believe and disbelieve. Ordinary people might take rituals literally, while educated people can appreciate the same ceremonies on both aesthetic and symbolic grounds. Art and music also play an important role, in that they help us express our intense emotions in a civilized, acceptable way.

Like Mengzi, Xunzi also had ideas about the role of the senses and the mind in human thinking. Our “faculty of knowing,” he said, consists of two parts: the senses, which receive impressions, and the mind itself, which interprets those impressions. And like Kongzi, with his focus on the “rectification of names,” Xunzi believed that many philosophical problems stem from the misunderstanding of language. Although the names we give things are entirely conventional, he said, once a society adopts those conventions, the meanings of the names become fixed. Like the Logicians, Xunzi devoted much time to exploring logistical fallacies, which he detected in other schools of philosophical thought. He emphasized three of these: (1) confusing names with names, (2) confusing names with actualities, and (3) confusing actualities with names.

An example of confusing names with names is the Moists’ claim that “to kill a robber is not to kill a man.” Since Mozi held we should love everyone equally, his critics wondered if Moists could consistently punish criminals. Xunzi argued that, to be a robber, one must also be a man (person). He accused the Moists of failing to see the logical connection between the names themselves.

As an example of confusing names with actualities, Xunzi cited Hui Shih’s statement that “mountains and abysses are on the same level.” Although a particular abyss could actually be at a higher altitude than a mountain, in general mountains are higher than abysses. The fallacy, Xunzi explained, comes with confusing the general term with a particular exception to the general rule.

And as for confusing actualities with names, Xunzi targeted Gong-Sun Lung’s statement that “a white horse is not a horse.” The name “white horse,” he explained, is not identical with the name “horse.” However, a
particular horse (an actuality) can be correctly classified within the group of white horses; that is, it falls within the meaning of the name “white horses.”

**DONG ZHONGSHU: WALKING A MIDDLE PATH**

Dong Zhongshu offered a third viewpoint on the human nature debate. In his opinion, human nature consists of two opposing elements, one good and the other evil. In this sense, he walked a middle path between the views of Mengzi and Xunzi (though his thinking was probably closer to Xunzi’s). Dong Zhongshu agreed with Mengzi that human nature contains the “seeds” of goodness, but he disagreed that this means that human beings are *by nature* good. The “seed” of goodness is not *actual* good any more than a tomato seed is a tomato, or an egg is a chicken. In order to become good, that “seed” must be cultivated. From this standpoint, Dong Zhongshu shared Xunzi’s emphasis on the necessity of government.

Dong Zhongshu used another analogy—the capacity of the eye to see—to explain his thinking. The ability of the eye to see is a dispositional property, meaning [??]. Dong Zhongshu asked: Can a person see when she is asleep? In one sense, we would have to answer no. If we put something in front of this sleeping person, she would not be able to see it. But in another sense, the person *can* see. All we have to do is wake her up! Even when she is asleep, she is not blind. Here’s another example: Can you speak Swedish? Again, the answer is both yes and no. You may not, at this moment, be able to carry on a conversation in Swedish. But if you were offered a billion dollars to learn Swedish in the next five years, you probably could – and in that sense you can speak Swedish.

Dong Zhongshu further refined his thinking about goodness by exploring what he saw as an inherent tension within us between good and evil (or greed and selfishness). Unlike Xunzi, he believed that both forces make up “human nature.” He also claimed that both came from Heaven. His ideas reflected the Yin/Yang school of thought, which Confucianism had incorporated during the Han dynasty (roughly 200 BCE to 200 CE). *Yin* and *yang* are universally complementary forces, *yin* being the submissive, yielding aspect of reality and *yang* the aggressive, active aspect. Everything and everyone, Dong Zhongshu believed, is made up of a blend of *yin* and *yang*. Just as Heaven consists of both positive (*yang*) and negative (*yin*) forces, so we each have a dimension (*yang*) that wants to be socially cooperative, giving, and caring, as well as another dimension (*yin*) that wants to be selfish.
Of course, if both these tendencies are innate, then aren’t they both parts of human nature? Like Mengzi, Dong Zhongshu would have said that human nature is the higher and better part of human beings, that morally good, yang part that human beings alone are capable of. The instinctive, emotional, physical, yin part, which we all have but which we also share with the lower animals, is just as innate, but it is not the standard against which we should judge what it means to be human.

According to Dong Zhongshu, Mengzi was comparing human beings with the lower animals when he claimed that we are good by nature. Compared to animals, people do at least have the capacity for moral goodness. But Dong Zhongshu maintained that we should not compare ourselves to animals; instead, we should compare ourselves to the high moral ideal we demand of all humanity.

Dong Zhongshu’s theory is clearly more complex than Mengzi’s and Xunzi’s. Although he likened the better part of our nature to a “seed,” as opposed to Mengzi’s idea of a “sprout,” the difference between his and Mengzi’s thought was a matter of degree. Specifically, Mengzi saw more good in people than Dong Zhongshu did. For Mengzi, the “beginnings” of goodness are actually good, if meager; for Dong Zhongshu, the “seeds” of goodness are not themselves good at all—they only have the potential to become so. Dong Zhongshu and Mengzi also differed in their view of the role of government in fostering moral goodness. Mengzi envisioned a government that took a relatively nonintrusive role, merely cultivating the beginnings of moral goodness that already exist. Dong Zhongshu, like Xunzi, believed that government must assertively mold human beings’ moral capacity.

**The Moists: Is Unconditional Love Possible?**

Mozi, or Mo Ti (Mo Tzu) was China’s second philosopher, after Kongzi. In Mozi’s own lifetime (fifth century BCE) and for two hundred years following his death, Moism was at least as influential as Confucianism or any other early Chinese school of philosophy had been. But for nearly two thousand years after the Han dynasty, during which Confucianism and Taoism absorbed all the other schools, little was heard about Mozi. However, in the nineteenth century, Chinese scholars began to research pre-Han writing. They rediscovered Mozi and several other long-forgotten but important early schools of philosophy.

Many scholars believe that the Moists emerged from the feudal warrior class. Certainly Mozi’s philosophy is much more practical, and less elitist,
than Confucianism is. To illustrate, Mozi opposed Kongzi on several grounds, but three stand out as most important. First, he said that right action is determined by its practical consequences and not only, as Kongzi had claimed, by duty. He also insisted that one should not privilege only members of one’s own family. Finally, he believed that we should not base our ethics on the assumption that there is an eternal, universal human nature, but on our ability to transform people into moral individuals through education and law.

Mozi argued that the world’s problems stem from the fact that people love each other “partially”; for example, you love your mother and your countrymen more than you love my mother and my countrymen. The cure for the world’s ills is therefore embracing universal, “impartial” love, in which everyone loves everyone else equally.

Mozi’s Confucianist critics, who, as we’ve seen, strongly supported the traditional Chinese virtue of filial [or family] piety, vigorously opposed Mozi’s views on “impartial love.” This feeling does not come naturally to people, they pointed out; therefore, no one could follow Mozi’s advice even if he were right. Nonetheless, Mozi maintained that, through a system of reward and punishment, people can learn to practice universal love.

Specifically, Mozi insisted that if a ruler urged people to love one another impartially, they would strive to do so. Moreover, because God had created human beings and loves them all impartially, God wants us to love each other impartially. God will reward us if we succeed in loving this way, and punish us if and when we fail. It’s not that Mozi believed that we are born with a capacity for universal love of humanity—he thought only that we can be trained to feel it. In this regard, Mozi viewed human beings as infinitely pliable.

Contrary to Kongzi, Mozi also believed that we ought to do the right thing because of the rewards we will receive in this life and the next. By emphasizing the possibility of reward and punishment in the afterlife, Mozi provided a partial answer to the question, why be moral? Yet at times this great thinker also said that we ought to do what will produce the best results for everyone, not just for ourselves. Here, he foreshadowed the nineteenth-century British Utilitarians (Jeremy Bentham, and James and John Stuart Mill), who stressed the importance of producing the greatest good for the greatest number of people.

Still, the same question arises: Why should I do something to benefit other people? I might agree that the world would be a better place if every-
one did whatever would benefit everyone else generally. But why should I act to promote the general good, as opposed to my own personal good? Perhaps the answer has something to do with common attitudes toward egoism. Because every society has a moral code that puts limits on selfish behavior, egoism is seldom considered a legitimate foundation for moral theory. Not surprisingly, altruism garners a lot more attention. But who exactly are the “other people” I am supposed to help through my altruism? Do they include everyone in the world, or only my family, friends, and close associates? How far beyond myself should my altruism extend?

According to Mozi, we can be taught to extend our altruism infinitely. But is it truly possible to love everyone equally? And even if it is possible, should we love everyone equally? Suppose on pay day I give my entire month’s salary to various needy strangers I meet on my way home from work. What do you think my family would say to me? Would they be right to object to my generosity to others? Do they have a stronger claim on my salary than the needy strangers I tried to help? Compared with Kongzi, who believed that you do have a special obligation to your own family before all others, Mozi was far less traditional. Kongzi’s support of the traditional feudal virtue of family piety had extended by analogy to support for one’s ruler. This outlook favored the aristocratic elite, who strove to keep their families in power at all costs. Mozi, by contrast, represented the interests of the common person, for whom family status contains no benefit. Mozi foreshadows “utilitarian” thinking in the sense that he judged a philosophical position on whether it would benefit the people in general—not just the well to do and powerful. Moreover, like John Stuart Mill, Mozi offered a theory that was more social and political than moral. That is, he was less interested in explaining why people ought to love their neighbors as much as they love themselves than he was in telling government leaders how they could motivate ordinary people to practice universal, impartial love—and pointing out how this would benefit the people as a whole.

Zhuangzi (Chuang Tzu), a Taoist thinker whom we’ll meet in the next section, would later criticize Mozi’s view of human nature. As Zhuangzi saw it, Mozi’s vision of pure human selflessness and a simple, modest life is too difficult for people to realize because it doesn’t take into account our natural desires for music, dance, decoration, and other delights. Xunzi also criticized the frugal, bare-boned aspect of Mozi’s theory, arguing that people need arts and culture in order to moderate and contain their selfish, aggressive nature. Indeed, Mozi’s failure to acknowledge the human desire for pleasure is perhaps his
greatest weakness. If he truly wanted to motivate ordinary people to practice impartial love, his critics argued, he should have considered their feelings.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Mozi also had a strong spiritual streak. He objected to Kongzi’s and the Confucianists’ preaching atheism. In his view, atheism would anger the gods, who would then take out their ire on the people. He also lamented the lavish state ceremonies and the emphasis on fate that characterized the Confucianist age. Mozi believed that a reliance on the idea of fate made people lazy. As he explained, how can we motivate people to become their best selves if they think that fate has already determined their destiny?

In addition to their theories on ethical behavior, Mozi and his followers also contributed much to the exploration of the nature of human knowledge and logic. According to the Moists, the emergence of new knowledge requires two things: a knowing mind, and an object of knowledge; that is, the thing, idea, or question that the knowing mind is interested in. When we begin to “know” something, we first take in information about it through our senses, and then we interpret that information with our minds.

The Moists further identified three sources of knowledge: direct experience; authority of another person; and inference (or drawing a conclusion based on one’s assessment of evidence). They then defined four categories of knowledge objects: names; actual entities; the correspondence of names and actual entities; and practical, or action-oriented knowledge. Indeed, like the Logicians, the Moists strove to distinguish words from the objects they represented, and emphasized the importance of precision in the use of language. They went as far as to further classify names into three categories: general names (e.g., “thing”), classifying names (e.g., “horse”), and private, or proper names (e.g., “Mozi”).

They also distinguished between two kinds of causes of events. A minor cause is a necessary condition for an event to happen. For example, a necessary condition for a car to start is that there be gasoline in the tank. A major cause is a necessary and sufficient condition. For example, a necessary and sufficient condition for someone’s being a bachelor is that he be an unmarried male. From there, they outlined seven kinds of argument, or methods for gaining knowledge:

1. “particular judgment” (“some, but not all, swans are white”)
2. “hypothetical judgment” (“if today were Saturday, there would be no classes”)

3. “categorical judgment” (“all men are mortal”)
4. “disjunction” (“either A or B will happen”)
5. “contradiction” (“A and not A will not happen”)
6. “conditional judgment” (“if A, then B”)
7. “biconditional judgment” (“A if and only if B”)

These methods provided a framework for logical reasoning and argumentation, which was further developed by the Mohists and other schools of thought in ancient China.
3. “comparative method” (using one thing to explain another; the ruler should treat his subjects as a father treats his children)

4. “parallel treatment” (comparing two series of propositions, e.g., judging a ruler by an other famous ruler of the past)

5. “argument by analogy” (“human nature is like the flow of water; one can direct it any way one wishes”)

6. “imitation” (a form of deduction; e.g., if clouds are a major cause [necessary and sufficient] of rain, then clouds in the sky today will bring rain)

7. “extension” (a form of inductive argument; e.g., if whenever it has rained, there have been clouds in the sky, we can assume that whenever it rains, there must be clouds present)

The Moists’ theories about logic—especially categories of things—allowed a deeper analysis of the controversy over Mozi’s concept of impartial love. If you recall, some of Mozi’s critics had challenged his vision of all-embracing love. To “love men,” they asked, “do we really need to love all men? After all, to ride horses we don’t have to ride every single horse in the world! How can Mozi’s claim that we can love all people be physically possible, if there are countless men in the world?” The Moists answered that the number of men is not in fact infinite. Even if the world is infinite in space, at any moment in time there are a finite number of people in it. Critics of Moism tried another tack: “How can we love all men if we kill a robber?” (By killing a robber, one also kills a man.) The Moists countered that we don’t kill a robber because he is a man, but only because he is a robber. The intention of the act is to punish a robber; it is only a further implication that he is a man. Similarly, when a young man serves his parents, it logically follows that he is also serving people. However, his intention is not to serve people per se (for then he might be expected to serve other or even all people). He is merely serving his parents—who happen to be people. So we hate the robber as a robber; and we serve our parents as parents.

The Moists also criticized the Logicians on several points. As we’ve seen, Hui Shih had argued for the “unity of similarity and difference.” Thus in his ten paradoxes he explained that if “all things are similar to each other,” then we should “love all things equally. Heaven and Earth are one body.” The Moists dismissed this line of reasoning as a fallacy based on the ambiguity of the word tong, which they explained as follows: Everything is similar to every other thing, in the sense that they all belong to one very large
generic class of “things.” However, the idea that Heaven and Earth are “one” works differently. They are “one” in the sense that they are parts of a single whole, the universe. Therefore, by confusing these different senses of the word a trivial point is made to appear shocking and profound. Western philosophers have similarly tried to remove the paradoxes that arise from failing to distinguish among the various ways in which we can say that something “is.” These thinkers have suggested five different definitions: (1) existence (there “are” homeless people in this country today); (2) identity (George Washington “is” the first American president); (3) predication (George Washington “is” hungry); (4) class inclusion (whales “are” mammals); and (5) definition (justice “is” fairness).

**THE TAOISTS**

The Taoists favored the “natural” over the “artificial” (that is, anything created by human beings). They mercilessly criticized the Confucianists for their emphasis on the “artificial,” civilized culture of art and literature, ritual and custom—all those things one is not born with but must learn through an elaborate process of socialization and acculturation. The Taoists were especially critical of the Confucianists’ attempt to actively foster and promote morality.

To the Taoists, being natural meant living more simply. The Taoists encouraged the practice of *wu wei*, or “nonaction,” by which they meant not acting in too deliberate, purposeful, or self-conscious a way. In other words, they advocated letting things take their natural course. Above all, they warned against forcing things. As the fourth-century neo-Taoist Kuo Xiang (Kuo Hsiang) said in his commentary on the esteemed Taoist Zhuangzi (Chuang Tzu), “‘Nonactivity does not mean folding one’s arms and remaining silent. It means allowing everything to follow what is natural to it, and then its nature will be satisfied.’” Taoists suggested that we be like Nature and avoid trying to strenuously to do anything. In Nature, they pointed out, the seed sprouts and grows into a mature plant without planning, trying, or thinking about how to do this. As was written in the *Dao De Jing* (Tao Te Ching), “Tao invariably does not do, yet there is nothing that is not done.”

Trying too hard to do anything, the Taoists thought, only proves how lacking one is in that regard. For example, striving to be funny only shows how little natural sense of humor one has. Moreover, the harder we try, the less we will succeed. For example, by trying to be relaxed and graceful, I just become even more uptight and awkward! Like humor and light-hearted-
ness, morality cannot be learned or forced, according to Taoist thinking. It
must spring from the heart spontaneously, in the same way that a mother
takes action automatically to protect her infant. But because morality is gen-
erally intended as a constraint on natural impulses, the Taoists were firmly
opposed to it as it is commonly understood.

Of course, one could argue that it is possible to assimilate and internal-
ize the social rules that we have learned so that eventually they seem natural
to us. Kongzi had remarked that when he turned seventy, he could do what-
ever he felt like without fear of doing anything wrong. By age seventy, he
had so internalized the virtues of his day that he actually preferred being vir-
tuous. Through a similar process, the skillful pianist or tennis player seems
to perform naturally, effortlessly, and spontaneously, though we know that
this ability results from many years of practice.

Still, to become a truly righteous person, as the Confucian moralists
want us to, is extremely difficult. It becomes habitual or second nature for
only a handful of individuals. On the other hand, insisting that people merely
follow polite forms of behavior only leads to decadence and a deterioration
of the childlike goodness of the natural person. This kind of morality train-
ing, the Taoists said, can never be more than a culturally relative characteris-
tic of a particular society—or a particular class within a society.

The Taoists also found themselves at the opposite extreme from the
Confucianist moral theory of government. The Taoists’ basic message to
rulers was: Don’t do anything; just let things take their natural course. (The
Legalists, as we will see shortly, countered that the best way to rule a society
is by a system of strict rewards and punishments.) According to the Taoists,
everything happens naturally and spontaneously. The principle that directs
the growth and development of everything in the world is not some cause or
force from outside, but something that comes from within the individual.
Because this is the natural and therefore preferred order of things, the worst
thing government leaders can do is to try to improve on this natural order by
enacting and enforcing laws.

Of course, one could argue that it is also natural for human beings to try
to change and improve things. It seems perfectly natural for people, includ-
ing government leaders, to feel that life is not going as well as it might and to
look for ways (e.g., laws) to make it better. But for the Taoists, it is better for
governments to let people alone. Ordinary people, they pointed out, have
been managing their affairs from time immemorial—not by following for-
mally enacted laws, but simply by following time-honored traditions and
customs. By trying to make things better, the ruler may actually upset these established customs, thereby confusing and angering people, and ultimately making things worse.

Before governments found it necessary to introduce harsh laws to regulate behavior, and punishments to enforce those laws, people lived more simply, without the need for laws. Rulers, the Taoists said, should therefore try to keep things at this primitive level. (It’s better not to give the ordinary people fancy ideas or encourage them to improve their lot, the Taoists advised. Keep them ignorant and simple, because otherwise they may make unreasonable demands, or even rebel. The Confucianists are wrong, therefore, to encourage knowledge and virtue, because this makes people feel that they are ignorant and immoral.

Ironically, even moral education is bad, according to the Taoists, because it tries to force on people something overly sophisticated and difficult that also goes against their nature. In direct opposition to the Confucianists, Taoists even rejected the indoctrination of the traditional virtues, ren, yi, li, etc. If you have to teach morality, they explained, that is a sure sign that things have been allowed to seriously deteriorate. When society is running smoothly, the people know what to do and how to behave in a natural, spontaneous way—without thinking about it and without the need for books, instruction, and formal instruction. And just like children, adults are happier this way. They escape the feelings of inadequacy that comes from constantly being told how ignorant or sinful or uneducated or uncultivated they are.

It is also a mistake, the Taoists argued, to encourage the acquisition of expensive goods and a higher standard of living. The resulting inequity just makes people feel envious of their richer neighbors and start plotting how to lie, steal, and even kill to enrich themselves. The wise ruler keeps the people ignorant of fancy, expensive goods. If they never see such things, they will never want them and never be tempted to stray from their simple, everyday lives to get things they can’t afford. Of course, if a ruler does allow these inflated desires and unnecessary competition to arise, then he must promulgate and enforce laws to prevent people from stealing and taking advantage of one another. But the more laws are passed and enforced, the more people see the laws and the government as their enemy. Therefore, the more they will try to break these laws and overthrow the government—requiring still more laws and even more severe punishments. These patterns become a vicious, downward spiral.
The Logicians had talked about what could be named; in the *Dao De Jing* the Taoist Laozi talks about what cannot be named (“the tao that can be named is not the constant tao; the name that can be named is not the constant name”). To be is to be a thing of a particular kind (a pen, a book, a seed, a tree). To be is therefore to be a determinate kind of thing. It must be something of which we can say, it is a pen and not a book, or a seed, or a tree. So, in order for things to be, there must be distinctions, either in reality or (at least) in thought. At the very least, in order to think about things, to think and say that they exist, that they begin to exist at some point and cease to exist at some later point, there must be mental divisions (concepts, categories—pen, book, seed, tree, log). How many distinct colors are there in the color spectrum? None until we divide the spectrum into convenient divisions, red, orange, yellow, etc. nor will these distinct colors exist until we divide the color spectrum up into distinct colors. How many things are there in the life cycle of a tree from a flower to a log in a lumber mill? Again, as many as we have words (concepts, categories) in our language—“flower,” “seed,” “seedling,” “tree,” “log,” “lumber”; here there are six things (six words; six things). When do these things come into existence and when do they pass out of existence? As soon as they enter or leave the boundaries established by our linguistic categories—as soon as it ceases to match our concept of a sapling and begins to fit our definition of a tree, then we say the sapling ceases to exist and the tree begins to exist—at that point there is one more tree in the world and one less sapling. Whether we go on to say that such mental divisions are reflected in reality, as Aristotle said of essential divisions (real kinds), we must at least make the mental divisions. Otherwise, as Kant said, we cannot talk or think about anything that is existing or not existing.

If that is true, then anything which is not so divisible cannot be said to “be,” that is, to be one kind of thing as opposed to another kind of thing, and therefore to be described or given a name (a pen rather than a book or a seed; to be long rather than short), or to begin to exist at some stage or to cease to exist at a later stage. Strictly speaking, such (indeterminate) “things” cannot be things, cannot be thought about or spoken about (named). They fail to meet the necessary conditions for being an object of thought or speech.

But being divided presupposes something which is undivided. What is divided? Something presumably undivided. Similarly, the determinate presupposes the indeterminate. This is the “pure potentiality” of Aristotle—that which can become anything, but is not itself any (particular kind of) thing. But this pure potentiality, pure indeterminacy cannot be thought or spoken
about (named)—since to think or speak about something is to specify what
class of thing it is and what kinds of thing it is not, which we cannot do of
something indeterminate. This is the “uncarved block” (*bu*). It can’t be
described, or thought about, although from it (once it is “carved”) come all
the things that are said to be, and which can be thought about and described,
which, once “carved,” are now determinate and so “exist” and “are.” For
“idealists” it is “carved” only in our minds, only in human thought, and not
in reality; for “realists” it is carved in reality into real essences (Chinese the
“*de*,” in *Dao De Jing*).

So, if it can’t be described, why say anything at all about it? To discuss
the determinate nature of being we need to discuss it in terms of the indeter-
minate, and so we try to talk about the indeterminate in unusual ways, indi-
rectly, metaphorically, analogically, through negation. If the indeterminate
cannot be said to “be” (Chinese, “*you*”), then neither, strictly speaking, can it
be said to be “nonbeing” (*wu*). And yet Laozi often refers to it as nonbeing
(*wu*). Here “nonbeing” has only the unusual “negative” sense that Tao is not
an ordinary existing object of a particular kind (a determinate being).

Although never presented in a logical, systematic format, here are a
number of recurring themes in the *Tao De Jing*:

1. law of reversal—what goes up must come down, whoever is poor will
   get rich; whoever is strong will become weak; etc.
2. relativity—large can only be understood in terms of small; good in
terms of evil; strong in terms of weak; no mountain without valleys
   and vice versa
3. the utility of emptiness—the empty space inside a cup; the hub of a
   wheel
4. the law of natural growth of each kind of thing (the *de* of horse; the *de*
of a tomato plant
5. the law of naturalness in general (the *tao* of the universe which gov-
   erns the *de* of each kind of thing)
6. natural law as opposed to supernatural intervention; internal causes,
   not external causes; purposeless causes versus purposeful causes (as
   in science)
7. morality of being natural (difficult, perhaps impossible, for human
   beings to “be natural”—don’t force it; go with the flow.
The most widely read Taoist in China has always been Zhuangzi (399–295 BE). In Zhuangzi Taoist attention shifts from the public arena of political philosophy to the personal search for happiness. According to Fung Yulan, Zhuangzi identifies three Taoist degrees of happiness:

1. relative happiness—follow your human nature (de)
2. higher happiness—follow the higher laws of the universe (Tao)
3. absolute happiness—merge your individuality into the One (Tai Yi)

1. Relative happiness consists in rejecting artificiality, embracing what is natural to us as human beings (in Zhuangzi’s examples, don’t lengthen a duck’s legs or shorten a crane’s legs or feed a seabird wine and beef); politically, don’t try to change people into what they are not; don’t enforce artificial uniformity according to some external norm. This is a relative happiness. How protected are we, really? There is disease, disappointments, old age and death—hard to avoid.

2. Greater happiness requires, not only following our human nature (the law of our de), but also understanding and following the way of the universe (tao). Like Western stoics and Spinoza, “replace emotion with reason; see things in the broader perspective, from the standpoint of eternity.” This is a happiness of resignation, acquiescence in the inevitability of the laws of the universe (the Western stoic happiness which “takes things philosophically”).

3. Absolute happiness—because of the extreme relativity of individual things, individual things don’t really exist separately as we imagine them, and all merge into the One (thanks to Hui Shih). The self (ego, wo) is thus united with the universe and there is no longer any separate ego to fear death. So, there is absolutely no insecurity (Zhungzi’s story of the theft of the carefully hidden boat). The Sage is thus more than a perfect human being; he is now an exemplar of the Tao (not just of the human De). This means that there are two moral standards—the relative, human morality of following our human nature (de) and the higher saintly, or sagely morality of following the principle of the Tao.

The Sage is the highest type of human being; but being “highest” he/she in a sense rises above mere humanity (not everyone can be a sage). Knowledge is equally from two points of view—finite and infinite. Absolute knowledge
“is not [ordinary, everyday] knowledge”; reality can’t be discussed (Ming Jia) or experienced in the ordinary way. We can’t talk or think about it or experience it in the usual way which requires, for example, the subject/object distinction (since in the All the object of knowledge/experience can’t be separated from the subject of knowledge/experience). So, Zhuangzi urges us, don’t talk about it, just enjoy being part of it, like a walk in the mountains (The Happy Excursion). In this sense, (absolute) “knowledge is forgetting (ordinary) knowledge,” thus returning to the original nonbeing (wu, indeterminate) character of reality (the color spectrum and the life history of the tree before any human conceptualization (breaking up of the whole). Nothing is denied or taken away; it’s all there—but not compartmentalized. Later, as we will see, this idea is carried over into earlier Chan (Zen) Buddhism—the Buddha nature as the ordinary, mundane world of everyday life.

**THE LEGALISTS (HAN FEIZI, DIED 233 BC)**

Think of three recommended replacements for the dying feudal social order—develop a universal personal morality (Confucianists); return to nature (Taoists); establish and enforce universally applicable law (Fa Jia, Legalists, Han Feizi). In the feudal period social custom was maintained by li as practiced and maintained by the aristocrats (jun zi) and by xing (punishments) applied to the ordinary people, the xiao ren. People did not do the right thing from “the moral point of view,” because they felt it was the morally right thing to do (out of an inner sense of obligation or out of feelings of guilt and responsibility), but simply because this was the prescribed form of behavior for anyone born into a particular class. As the feudal order broke up, Confucianists attempted to convert the customary li of hereditary status into the inwardly felt and inner directed moral imperative for everyone (though initially only for the educated middle-class). The Taoists advocated a “back to nature” simplification in which government does little and simply lets the people do their own thing—as they have traditionally done for centuries. The Legalists, on the other hand, tried to extend the role of punishment (reward and punishment) more broadly to everyone, aristocrat, educated elite, as well as peasant.

Why should I do the “right” thing? In a primitive society, because it is unthinkable to do otherwise (taboo)—the heavens would fall, one would be struck down with lightning. In a feudal society, because my position in the class into which I was born dictates such behavior (otherwise I dishonor myself and my class). In Kongzi’s vision of society, because it is the morally
right thing to do and I want to be a fully developed moral human being. In Taoism, because I want to be natural. In the Legalists’ vision of society, because I will be rewarded if I do and punished if I don’t. Whereas the Confucianists tried to base good government on a moral basis (let the ruler set the proper moral example for the people who will willingly follow the good example set by their morally good ruler), the Legalists tried to construct a foolproof pragmatic method which would enable the military strong man to rule effectively without need of special knowledge or moral ability.

The Legalist (Fa Jia) theory was best expressed by Han Feizi at the end of the Warring States period (3rd century BCE). The Legalists did not think it was enough to just leave the people to their traditional customs, as the Taoists recommended, but they also thought transforming everyone into a moral agent, as the Confucianists proposed, was too much. Neither sort of advice really takes into account what the rulers themselves want. As Thrasymachus pointed out, actual rulers are generally not interested in being morally good, nor are they satisfied in just keeping the people quiet and docile. In fact rulers usually have their own agendas—things which they want to accomplish—either to gain fame by conquering neighboring kingdoms or enriching themselves and their families (or both). Since most of these early philosophers were trying to persuade the rulers of the time how best to govern, the Legalists, or Realists, as they are known in Western philosophy, thought it was better to advise these rulers on how to achieve what the rulers themselves wanted than it was to try to get them to accept the moralistic goals of the philosophers (who had no experience in ruling). The problem Plato and Confucius faced in training kings to be philosophers is that the kings don’t want to be philosophers—they want a life of action, wealth, and power.

Legalists (political realists) therefore drop the more ambitious normative project of formulating the goals or ends which governments ought to strive for, opting instead for a more instrumental approach of how to achieve the goals or ends which the rulers already had. Legalism, or political realism therefore resembles ethical egoism, which seeks to advise individuals how to achieve the goals they already have, rather than normatively advising them on what goals they ought to seek—if you want to get ahead in your career, then you’d better butter up the boss and don’t help younger subordinates too much, and if you have to “cut a few corners” in the process, then by all means do so (but don’t get caught).
To accomplish these political goals, the Legalists advised the rulers to adopt a law and order administration supported by a strict system of rewards and punishments. Like their Western counterparts, the Legalists are “realists,” arguing that it is not necessary for the king to be a morally virtuous person or for the bulk of the population to practice moral behavior. All the king needs to do, the Legalists maintain, is to decide what he wants and then to insure compliance by formulating very clear laws with absolutely certain rewards (for obeying these laws) and punishments (for disobeying them)—and the people will do whatever the king wants. After all, he is the king. He doesn’t have to follow someone else’s moral principles—certainly not those of a philosophy teacher! Like Thrasymachus, the king can propose whatever he wants and call this “justice” and make others call it “justice” as well—however inherently unjust his proposals may in fact be. And since he has the army to back him up, he cannot be seriously challenged.

Most Chinese philosophers were conservatives, revering the past and urging a return to the “good old days,” as Kongzi thought the Zhou dynasty had been. Han Feizi, on the other hand, as a legal and historical realist, argued that different historical epochs face different problems requiring different solutions and that the solutions of the past are not necessarily appropriate for the present. In the new expansionist military dictatorships following the end of the feudal period, a strict system of rewards and punishments for clearly formulated and promulgated laws is a much surer way, the Legalists felt, of ensuring compliance than moral education. Even if we enact a system of universal moral education, how many people are actually going to become moral agents, always doing the right thing simply because it is the morally right thing to do?

The ruler also needs shu, the art of personnel management. He need not do the work himself but simply hold people to their “job description” (rectification of names)—“holding the actualities responsible for their names.” As a strict pragmatist, the ruler is not concerned with methods needed to achieve results but only with the results. If the minister lives up to his job description, he is rewarded; otherwise, punished. After a while, incompetents don’t bother to apply.

In a sense the Legalist ruler follows the Taoist wu wei injunction, “doing nothing, yet there is nothing that is not done” (a good management principle). And all this rests securely on the simple but basic foundation of human self-interest. Like his teacher Xunzi, Han Feizi thought human nature was evil; but unlike Xunzi he did not want to change human nature through education
and training but only to establish a workable system of government built on this evil human nature. Strangely like the Taoists: don’t fight the system; work with it. That is, set up the system and then let the chips fall where they may. Even the Taoist, Zhuangzi, seems to agree with the Legalist principles of management—“The superior must have no activity, so as thus to control of events; but the subordinates must have activity, so as thus to be controlled by events. This is the invariable way.” (Zhuangzi) If someone applies for the position of tax collector, for example, he knows what his duties are. At the end of the year the ruler sees what he has collected. If he is successful the ruler rewards him; if not the ruler punishes (and replaces) him. And of course it may not be his fault if he fails; there may be a period of drought and famine when it is simply impossible to collect the required tax revenue. Thus the tax collector is “controlled by events” (outside of his control), and, whether fair or unfair, like the good football coach of a losing team, he will lose his job—if not his head. Eventually, one way or the other, the job gets done and yet the rulers have done nothing (except employ the right management principles). If there are problems, the tax collector takes the heat—not the ruler who stands aloof.

In another way, however, the Legalists were the complete opposite of the Taoists. The Taoists held that human beings were completely innocent; the Legalists that they were completely evil. The Taoists upheld individual freedom; the Legalists absolute social control. The Taoists regarded the Legalists as shallow pragmatists—they knew that certain methods worked but they had no idea why they worked. So, in a way the Taoists agree with Kongzi and Mengzi (and Plato) that the ruler needs to have fundamental knowledge of the essentials of reality (especially of human nature). Like the Confucianists, the Legalists developed a social and moral philosophy in tune with the breakdown of feudal class distinctions. But the Confucianists were really revolutionary and idealistic—they thought they could transform human nature by developing an inner sense of right and wrong through education, while the Legalists were more realistic and pragmatic, developing methods for controlling people with the evil natures they have and are likely to continue to have.

**Neo-Taoism**

Unification of thought parallels political unification of China in the Qin and Han dynasties, though in different ways. In the Qin dynasty the Legalists (Han Feizi) convinced the emperor to destroy all philosophical books (213
BC) so that the only teacher was the emperor himself. But in the Han dynasty Dong Zhongshu’s advice to Emperor Wu was for the state to regulate and control learning by prescribing advancement in the civil service through success in state examinations based on the Confucian classics. Thus the rise of Confucianism as the state orthodoxy. Nonetheless Confucianism, as the only officially approved philosophy, borrowed extensively from earlier schools of philosophy, especially Taoism, which had itself borrowed from other schools of thought.

Wang Chung (27–100 CE), an early neo-Taoist, developed the more rationalist, scientific side of Taoism, arguing against all anthropomorphic (human centered) explanations (for example, that the floods occurred because the gods are angry with us). Wang Chung opposed all teleological explanations for natural phenomena. Only human beings act purposefully, doing one thing for some reason, to accomplish some end or purpose. Nature acts spontaneously, with no particular concern for the outcome, and certainly without regard for the outcome for human beings.

Hence Wang Chung ridiculed those who thought that Nature punishes and rewards us with bad or good weather and that this can be magically controlled by the actions and thoughts of the ruler. In short, Wang Chung argues, human beings do not occupy any privileged place in the universe—the world does not revolve around and for the sake of us! It is irrational and against nature to think that a plague of insects is a punishment of Heaven against human beings. “Man eats the food of insects and insects likewise eat the food of man. . . . Supposing insects had intelligence, they would scold man saying: ‘You eat the produce of Heaven, and we eat it as well. You regard us as a plague, but are unaware that you yourself are a calamity to us’” (ch. 49).

It is also unreasonably anthropocentric to suppose that only human beings survive death. The Yin Yang magic is ousted from Wang’s philosophical Taoism, but becomes part of religious Taoism, which develops in the 3rd and 4th centuries (period of disunity) in imitation of and as a rival to Buddhism. But while there developed a great rivalry between Taoist and Buddhist religions, there also evolved, at the same time, a great deal of cooperation and mutual support and respect between philosophical Taoism and Buddhism.

What we call neo-Taoism is called in Chinese Xuan Xue (mystery learning) from Laozi’s “mystery of mysteries,” as represented by Wang Bi (226–249 CE) and Kuo Xiang (died 312 CE). Just as older Taoists learned from the older school of names (ming jia, Hui Shih and Gong-Sun Lung), so
the neo-Taoists learn from later dialecticians, the *ming li*. Zuangzi reports followers of Gong-Sun Lung arguing about the *zhi* (finger) which cannot reach the table or if it does, cannot then be removed from the table. This discussion is continued among the neo-Taoists. “The Minister Yueh was asked by a visitor about (the statement): a ‘zhi (concept or finger) does not reach’. (Yueh) Kuang did not analyze the sentence but immediately touched the table with the handle of a deer’s-tail fly-whisk, saying ‘Does it reach or not?’ The visitor answered: ‘It does.’ Yueh then raised the fly-whisk and asked: ‘If there was a reaching, how can it be removed?’” (Contemporary Records) This became very important later in early Chinese Buddhism, e.g., in Seng Zhou’s first essay in which he argues that things from the past do not reach the present and that things in the present have not come to us from the past. The basic idea is that because of change the finger which reaches the table is not the same finger which earlier moved toward the table and this is not the same finger as the one which is later removed from the table. Compare the ancient Greek debate whether one could step into the same river twice (and the rejoinder, that one could not step even once into the same river). This is intimately tied to the logical problem, springing from Gong-Sun Lung, that “reached” is not the same as “removed,” that if something is “reached” then it cannot be “removed.” Wang Bi’s worry is very similar. Also in Chinese there is a clever play on words—first of all there is one Chinese character, pronounced “zhi,” which means both “finger” and “concept” so we can talk about the finger touching the table or we can talk about the concept of the moon as distinct from the moon itself (and then cleverly mix these different senses, e.g., the neo-Taoist and later Chan (Zen) saying, “When you point to the moon, don’t mistake the finger for the moon”); secondly, the characters for “reached” and “removed” are also pronounced “zhi” and are also made out of parts of these same Chinese characters. This is related to Hui Shih’s old paradox that the shadow of a flying bird does not move.

Wang Bi also has a very interesting criticism of the earlier Taoist claim that ultimate metaphysical knowledge cannot be expressed in words. Wang distinguishes words, symbols and ideas—words explain symbols and symbols express ideas. We can express and explain our ideas in words and symbols, Wang claims, and indeed, we need words and symbols in order to communicate our ideas, but he agrees with the earlier Taoists that once we have grasped the idea we can dispense with the word and symbol—Zhuangzi (later picked up by Chan (Zen))—“once the fish is caught, what need have we of the net?”
Ironically, the neo-Taoists still consider Kongzi the greatest sage, the sage proper, while the greatest Taoists, Laozi and Zuangzi, are mere “worthies.” Yet the criteria for sagehood is strictly Taoist, not Confucian! Contemporary Records (ch. 4) says of Wang Bi, “In his young days he paid a visit to Pei Hui, who asked him: ‘Truly, non-being (wu) is the basis of all things. How is it then that the Sage (Kongzi) was never willing to speak about it, whereas Laozi dilated on it endlessly?’ To which (Wang) Bi replied: ‘The Sage, being identified with non-being, realized that it could not be made the subject of instruction and so felt bound to deal with being (you). Lao and Zuang, however, not yet having completely escaped from the sphere of being, constantly spoke of that in which they were themselves deficient.’” The sage realizes that to be one with Nothing, one cannot experience it, speak or think about it as a separate entity among other entities. In Lun Yu (Analects) Kongzi says about his favorite disciple, Yen Hui, “As for Hui, he was near (perfection), yet frequently was devoid (of worldly goods).” But neo-Taoists interpreted this to mean that Hui (and Kongzi) did not constantly (“frequently”) embrace nothingness (“devoid”). As the later neo-Taoist, Ku Huan (420–483 CE) put it, “Not even to have desire for the state of non-desire: this is the constant quality of the sage. To have desire for this state of non-desire: this is the distinguishing quality of the worthy. . . .” Wang Bi also offers an interesting interpretation of the older Taoist view that the sage has no emotions. It is not that the sage has no emotions but that he does not become “ensnared” or “entangled” in the world through his emotions.

Kuo Xiang (died 312 CE) and Xiang Xiu (221–300 CE) both worked on “Commentaries on the Zuangzi” and are often confused with one another, so Fung Yulan refers to both as Xiang-Kuo. Xiang-Kuo deny that the Tao is a thing, that it is a purposeful anthropomorphic creator. Everything is created in the world through the non-action (wu wei) of Zu Jan (spontaneity). Tao is really nothing (no thing, no-thing, nothing); it is simply the principle of spontaneity. Each individual thing occurs by Zu Jan; if one then asks what in general produces all the things in the world one can only state the general principle by which each occurs individually—and so say that each occurs through Zu Jan. This principle of spontaneity is called Tao but it is not another thing behind or beyond or in addition to the individual things; it is simply their inner causal principle of Zu Jan.

So, when we say that all things come from non-being, we must not take our own words too literally to mean that first there was nothing and then from that came being. What is cannot literally come from nonbeing—that is plain
nonsense. What we mean is that the necessary condition, ground, or root of individual beings must be something other than another individual being, and that the condition, ground or root of being itself must be something other than being. So far we have discussed the nonbeing of Tao as indeterminate being from which determinate being arises; the general principle of spontaneity which operates in individual instances; and in religious Taoism a kind of literal emptiness which preceded the world in the order of time.

**Chinese Buddhism**

Is Buddhism philosophy or religion, or both? Chinese scholars distinguish *Fo jia* (philosophical Buddhism) and *Fo jiao* (religious Buddhism)—parallel to *tao jia* (philosophical Taoism) and *tao jiao* (religious Taoism). And this seems to be right. Philosophical issues have arisen around Buddhist religion for the purpose of clarifying difficult, confusing, vague concepts, reconciling apparent contradictions, defending the doctrine against critics and against other religions.

Fung Yulan distinguishes “Buddhism in China” from “Chinese Buddhism” (Indian Buddhism which was imported by Indian missionaries into China and a Chinese style of Buddhism which meshed with Chinese forms of thought and traditions). Whenever any culture tries to learn the thought of another culture they will inevitably understand it in terms of their own culture. This is not just true of Western scholars attempting to understand Indian or Chinese thought in predominantly Western ways, but Indian philosophers trying to read Western philosophers, or Japanese thinkers trying to assimilate Chinese Confucianism and Chinese Buddhism, or Chinese thinkers trying to understand Indian thought.

Buddhism entered China around the 1st century CE during the Han Dynasty primarily through the Silk (trade) Route. The Chinese reception and understanding of Buddhism went through many different stages. At first it was only for foreign businessmen; later Chinese government authorities were interested in the possibilities of utilizing Buddhist magical powers; still later neo-Taoists (Xuan Xue) tried to understand Buddhism in terms of Taoism, especially Zhuangzi, but also Laozi (translating Buddhism into Taoist language); and finally around the 4th and 5th centuries complete translations of Indian Buddhist texts became available and for the first time Chinese monks and nuns could study Indian Buddhism on its own terms. Nonetheless, these more Indian forms of Buddhism were never widely understood nor very popular and when Buddhism was attacked during the
revival of Confucianism in the 9th century (after 1000 years it was still seen as foreign to Chinese institutions), only those forms of Buddhism which had significantly compromised and reconciled with Taoism (primarily Chan-na (Zen) and Pure Land) were able to survive—though thereafter Buddhism was never again the intellectual force it had been from the 4th through the early 9th centuries.

Consider how alien Indian Buddhism was to Chinese traditions—young men and women leaving their families to become monks and nuns, the idea of an organized group of people (the sanga) neither subservient to nor giving allegiance to the emperor; the idea of karma, reincarnation, which in turn presupposes the concept of an immaterial soul (actually Buddhists deny the existence of a soul—the doctrine of \textit{anatman}—but reincarnation in the Indian tradition carried over into popular Buddhism); the idea that common sense physical reality is an illusion; the idea that life is fundamentally (and at best) problematic and full of suffering—all these were totally alien to Chinese traditions. In the end, however, Indian thought made a significant impact on Chinese thought—especially the ideas of salvation through a radical transformation of the self; an emphasis on metaphysics (as opposed to ethics and political thought); and (a return to) intense logical debate. But to some extent Buddhism became Chinese in character, that is, adapted to Chinese forms of thought, especially the emphasis on the equivalence of mundane and ultimate reality and the idea of sudden enlightenment, especially in Chan-na, or Zen—though this is traceable to Nagarjuna (Indian, 2nd century AD—Madhyamika Buddhism).

Buddhism came to China in waves representing 500 hundred years of very different phases and types of Indian Buddhism. Since all the scriptures (\textit{sutras}) were said to be actual reports of discussions by the original Buddha, Sakyamuni, this presented a problem for Chinese Buddhists—supposedly these were all the actual words of the Buddha and yet they were very different, even contradictory. Buddhists talk of upaya (fang-bien)—use of skillful means of teaching—that is, using different methods for different people depending on their level and capability. Chinese Buddhists used this idea to arrange all the different versions of Indian Buddhism they were receiving into a hierarchy—“this doctrine represents the earliest stage when Sakyamuni was just giving the first outlines to beginners; this other one represents a more advanced teaching reserved for full-time monks and nuns,” and so on. The main schools to have lasting impact on Chinese Buddhism were two fairly late forms of Mahayana—Madhyamika and Yogacara. Both
emphasize the “middle way”—not the original notion of the “middle way” between asceticism and gluttony but the middle way between saying the world is real and saying it is unreal (the middle way between you and wu). Madhyamika (tracing back to Nagarjuna and coming to China through Kumarajiva) stressed sunyata, or emptiness of all things (interpreted by Taoists as wu wei) as the middle ground between thinking physical objects and the self are real and thinking they are just nothing—things (dharmas) are essentially devoid of absolute reality—trees, animals, etc. are there but they are fundamentally empty of any real being (i.e., self-subsistent, uncaused, independent—what Descartes and Spinoza call “substance”). Yogacara does not go so far in its denial of absolute reality, but holds that mind (xin) is real and that everything else is a fabrication of mind (like the objects in a dream) as a middle way between saying objects are real and saying they are empty (as the Madhyamikas claim). Yogacara introduces the first full-blown metaphysical Idealism into China though there are hints of this in Zhuangzi and even in Mengzi (one reason Mengzi is later, in the Song Dynasty, elevated above Xunzi). By “real” these Buddhists mean absolutely eternally unchanging, uncaused (or self-caused), and self identical. In that sense no physical object can be said to be fully real—trees change, depend on other things causally, turn into something else (a log, fire wood, etc.) and come from other things (a flower, a seed, etc.). Trees exist but they are not absolutely “real” in this sense. The same is true of our selves (atman, wo).

Both the Madhyamika and Yogacara deny the absolute reality of ordinary physical objects and selves and claim that only the Buddha nature is absolutely real—where they differ is that the Yogacara identify this absolute Buddhist reality with something already familiar to us—mind—whereas Madhyamika refuse to identify this reality with anything we are already familiar with (and therefore claim that in that sense it is “empty”—that is, devoid of any known or identifiable properties or description). What is real in this sense is just the ultimate Buddha nature, and that’s all there is. The implication is that everything is really nothing but the Buddha—you and I and even the paving stones. This is origin of the Chan (Zen) identification of the mundane and the transcendental—the sweat which pops out on your forehead when you gather firewood on a hot day—that is the Buddha. This is a complete denial of any sort of dualism of mundane, everyday reality and Buddha Reality. Since you already are the Buddha there is nothing to be done to achieve this but only to realize what is already the case—no one becomes a Buddha; they just realize that they already are.
Seng Zhao develops the Chinese (Taoist) version of Madhyamika from his teacher, Kumarajiva. His first essay, “On the Immutability of Things,” is very similar to the neo-Taoist discussion of the “zhi cannot reach—or if it does it cannot be removed.” His second essay, “On the Emptiness of the Unreal,” is more centrally Madhyamika—ordinary physical objects exist but not in the absolutely real way common sense supposes (self-subsistent, uncaused, independent). His third essay on “prajna” is a kind of mixture of Indian Buddhist and Taoist thinking on the kind of knowledge which is possible and not possible of absolute reality—in the ordinary sense knowledge presupposes a distinction of a knowing subject and the object of knowledge, but that is precisely what Buddhist “prajna” denies. But then how can that be known (where there is no subject or object of knowledge?). It is a kind of knowing which is not knowing—more a way of being, living, entering into, not really a kind of knowledge, though, nonetheless, involving insight, enlightenment.

Chi-tsang (549–623) developed the doctrine of “double truth” (er ti) combining Buddhist upaya and the Taoist notion of the relativity of opposing concepts. Chi-tsang worked out the “middle way” between saying that all common sense, everyday experience and ordinary language description of the world is totally illusory and false and accepting it all completely at face value (naive realism). Teaching Buddhism to beginners, the teacher has to start where the student is—the stubborn innate gut-level common sense naive realism belief that the world really exists just as we ordinarily perceive it. Against that naive belief-set the Buddhist teacher says that this ordinary world is not real, that such beliefs are ignorance and illusion. But now there is a danger that the young student will start thinking that everything is illusion, non-being, pure nothingness (wu, sunyata). But that’s obviously not the whole story, either. Look around you—there’s lots of stuff out there—and you are surely in some sense or other something and different from other selves and other things. So now the teacher takes the student to the next higher level—up one step—and tells the student that we shouldn’t think of things as sheer nothingness, either. And if the student then begins to think that things are in a sense both real and non-real, the teacher urges them to go up to the next step, denying both being and non-being. And so on, step by step until—what? The realization that all these are mere words, concepts, human constructs, none of which can capture reality. Zhuangzi—when you point to the moon don’t mistake the finger for the moon (remember zhi (chih) means both finger and concept). In the end the student needs to realize
the limitations of language—language has evolved to describe things in
everyday life and it does a perfectly good job with that. What language can-
not do is describe ultimate reality—why? You cannot think of anything or
describe anything without differentiating yourself from the thing you know
and are describing; and you cannot think of anything or describe anything
without differentiating that thing from other things (and kinds of things). But
if these are necessary conditions for thinking, saying, believing anything
whatever then we cannot in that sense think about or talk about something in
which there is no separation of me and the world and no separation of this
kind of thing from that kind of thing and no separation of this individual
thing from that individual thing. So, as Laozi had already said, “the Tao that
can be named is not the constant Tao”; or Zhuangzi, “those who know do not
speak and those who speak do not know” (or so he speaks!). So, there are
two kinds of truth (er ti)—in everyday life it is perfectly correct to describe
garlic as garlic (that’s what it is—even the Buddhist teacher calls it garlic—
in instructing the young Buddhist monk-cook, “next time, add more garlic”),
so long as you realize that at a deeper level words do not capture reality com-
pletely and that at the ultimate, absolute metaphysical level the garlic is not
real (in the sense defined earlier—absolutely unchanging, separate, independ-
ent, self-subsistent, and so on). Why doesn’t the teacher just tell the stu-
dents this from the outset? Pedagogically this is impossible—if people are
hung up about being, you have to correct that and say it is nonbeing. But
then if people get hung up on nonbeing you have to correct that and say it is
neither being nor nonbeing, and if they get hung up on that—and so on. In
the end we have to transcend words altogether—and even that doesn’t mean
to stop talking altogether—the Buddhist teacher still calls for more “garlic.”
At the mundane level we continue to communicate with one another using
language, concepts—we know it’s not ultimately the highest truth but it’s the
best we can do for communicating with other people.

**Neo-Confucianism**

What Western scholars call neo-Confucianism Chinese call Tao Xue Jia, the
School of the Study of Tao. And this name indicates the new metaphysical
and spiritual direction of late Taoism and Buddhism, beginning in the Tang
Dynasty but coming to maturity in the Song Dynasty. Although neo-
Confucianists rejected Buddhism because it was not Chinese either in origin
or in tradition, they absorbed many elements of both Buddhism and Taoism.
Neo-Confucianists also selected those Confucian texts more in line with
Tang Dynasty Buddhist-Taoist spiritualism and interpreted those texts in the new way. It was during this period that the The Great Learning, The Doctrine of the Mean, and the Mencius were lifted from relative obscurity from among many other Confucian texts and added to the Analects to become the central Confucian classics. Mencius (Mengzi) is selected over Xunzi and interpreted spiritually and idealistically—emphasizing the idea in Mengzi that everything lies within us, that we share the goodness of human nature with Heaven, that the spontaneous direct thought is the best insight into reality. Key virtues during this period are not so much the social virtues of propriety and benevolent duties to others, but rather an inner quality of mental tranquility and “sincerity.”

Cosmologically, the ba gua, trigrams, are now added to the older Taoist cosmology of qi, which separates into the yin and yang ethers, becoming the five elements (or changes), which finally produce the ten thousand things. Philosophically the most important element added during this period is the notion of li in opposition to qi. Qi is the material stuff of the world and li is the formative principles which shapes it into relatively stable and predictable forms. Despite constant fluctuations of yin and yang, tomato seeds tend fairly regularly to produce tomato plants which regularly produce tomatoes which look and taste pretty much the same from year to year. What is responsible for this order, regularity in the midst of change? Li. This is similar to the Taoist de (in Tao De Jing). This idea probably comes from Buddhist Tien Tai and Hua Yen metaphysics (which may, in turn, have been influenced by Taoism—and is found still earlier in the I Jing, The Book of Changes). The root idea is that the inner nature of everything is the same, namely the Buddha nature. In neo-Confucianism the emphasis is somewhat more secular—each kind of thing is governed by its own principle, or li. The li of chickens makes chicken eggs hatch into chickens and chicks grow up into chickens, and so on. But like Yogacara Buddhism, an understanding of all the li lies innate in each person’s mind. By quietly reflecting within our own minds we can come to realize the inner li of everything.

Buddhism is rejected because it seeks to selfishly escape the suffering which is a natural part of life, especially when this can only be accomplished by selfishly abandoning one’s family. And Taoism is rejected because it rejects the natural order of life and death by seeking to avoid death altogether (in popular and religious Taoism, Tao jiao).

Zhou Tun-yi, Shao Yung and Chang Cai, are all “fathers” of neo-Confucianism, but it really begins with the Cheng brothers, Cheng Hao and
Cheng Yi (11th century). Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi (late 11th century) form the Cheng-Zhu li xue school (also called the Rationalist school), while Cheng Hao, along with Lu Chiu-yuan (12th century) and Wang Yangming (15th-16th century) form the Lu-Wang xin xue school (also called the Idealistic school, deriving from Yogacara Buddhism—“xin” meaning mind-heart). Li xue held that li exist independently of particular things and also independently of human consciousness (or minds)—somewhat like Plato’s theory of Forms. Xin xue held (like Berkeley) that li do not exist independently of human consciousness (or, like Aristotle, of particular things). So for the li xue we discover li by examining things in the world, whereas for the xin xue we discover li by examining our own minds. Also, for the li xue human nature is li, whereas for xin xue human nature is mind (human consciousness). That is, for li xue human consciousness is part of the qi—part of the material stuff, or body, whereas for xin xue it is the essential characteristic of human beings. Another difference between Wang Yangming and Zhu Xi is that for Wang (as for Plato) knowing the good is enough to do it, whereas for Zhu (as for Aristotle) there is a gap between knowing and doing.

Recall the neo-Taoists debate whether the Sage has no desires or has desires but doesn’t get entangled in them (Zhuangzi’s mind like a mirror—reflecting everything, absorbing nothing; Kongzi, Analects, “Hui did not transfer his anger”—I’m really angry about receiving a rejection letter but I take it out on you.) This is a Buddhist-Taoist inspired virtue—what Fung Yulan calls a “super-moral value.” Older Confucianists were concerned with more human virtues, that is, being the best we can be as human beings, striving to perfect our human nature. But in Buddhism and in Taoism (especially in Zhuangzi) there is a higher ideal of overcoming, transcending ordinary humanity—being more than a human being. But neo-Confucianists nonetheless regard this as Confucianist in that the Buddhists and Taoists are accused of being “selfish,” while Confucianists strive for the ideal of the sage living in society, rather than apart from society (can you live in the world and not be corrupted by the world? can you fulfill your social obligations (e.g., as a public servant) without getting drawn into a personal desire for fame, fortune, power?)

If we really take the Chinese Buddhist (especially Chan-na Buddhist) rejection of dualism seriously, why should we have to give up our families, our public service jobs, our place in society? Is this alien to Reality, the Buddha Nature, the Tao? If so, then we have a dualism. If not, what’s the problem? Only the problem of ignorance—falsely thinking I am a separate
ego, and then building on that selfishness (just as Chi Tsang recognized in his “er ti” (double truth) doctrine that we can realize the ultimate emptiness of everything and still order cloth for monks’ robes and garlic for today’s supper). As the Xi Ming (the Western Inscription) of Chang Tsai says, we are all part of the same qi, from which it follows that we should serve heaven and earth and treat all men as our brothers. In other words, the fact that all is one and each of us is in reality part of a larger whole does not, as the Buddhists claim, mean we should renounce social obligations, but rather that we should see these social relations as parts of the one great whole we all are a part of—and knowing we are a part of that one whole should encourage us to act in a more socially cooperative and less selfish, individualistic way.

Kongzi in Analects said that Yen Hui was happy in the sense that he was perfectly satisfied with little material goods. Cheng Yi was asked what made Yen Hui happy—was it because he enjoyed the Tao? No, said Cheng Yi, “If Yen Hui enjoyed the Tao, he was not Yen Hui.” This is like the neo-Taoists who argued that Kongzi was superior to Laozi and Zhuangzi because Laozi and Zhuangzi felt the need to talk about nonbeing (which indicated they were not yet at one with, comfortable with, a part of, nonbeing), whereas Kongzi was so much a part of nonbeing that he had no need to talk about it. So here, Cheng Yi is saying that to strive to be one with the Tao, to enjoy the Tao, to talk about the Tao, etc. indicates that one is not really a part of the Tao—the person, like Yen Hui, who is really a part of the Tao doesn’t ever think about the Tao—just as the fish never thinks about water (Zhuangzi). That is true happiness.

In a similar way, Cheng Hao interprets the traditional Confucian virtue of ren (human heartedness) as the underlying principle of the entire universe—not just the best way for human beings to treat one another. Ren now becomes more Buddhist-Taoist—all is one, we are a part of the all-embracing one, and so our attitude should be to respect all things, give all things their proper due, cooperate with all things, which we are, after all a part of. Confucianism has come a long way since Kongzi!