Dong Zhongshu (Tung Chung-shu; first century BCE) was a follower of China’s first philosopher, Kongzi (Kung Tzu, or Confucius; sixth century BCE). The central question for the Confucianists was whether all people shared a universal human nature, and if so, what defined that nature. Another Confucianist, Mengzi (Meng Tzu, Mencius; fourth century BCE), had thought that human nature is essentially good. Mengzi’s fellow Confucianist Xunzi (Hsun Tzu) pronounced it essentially evil. Dong Zhongshu posed a third possibility: that human nature is composed of both good and evil. He 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 no more good, he said, than a tomato seed is a tomato, or an egg is a chicken. In order to blossom into true goodness, that “seed” must be nurtured. In this sense, Dong Zhongshu shared Xunzi’s emphasis on the need for government to educate people on how to become worthy citizens.

While Mengzi had proclaimed that goodness is a natural “tendency” in people, Dong Zhongshu called it a mere “potential.” That is, children are not good until they have been socially trained to behave correctly. Dong Zhongshu said that when Mengzi claimed that people are innately good, he was contrasting them with the lower animals. Compared to animals, people do have more capacity for moral goodness. But Dong Zhongshu believed that we should instead judge people according to the high moral ideal we demand of our own species.

Dong Zhongshu also thought that the good part of our nature competes with our innate tendencies to greed and selfishness. Like Plato, he developed a model of human psychology in which opposing forces are in constant conflict. Unlike Xunzi, who believed that our good qualities come from heaven and our bad qualities come from the Earth, Dong Zhongshu thought that both good and evil come from Heaven.

Dong Zhongshu’s ideas echoed those of the Yin/Yang school of thought (which Confucianism had absorbed around 200 BCE). Yin and yang are considered universally complementary forces. Yin is the submissive, yielding
force; yang, the aggressive, active force. Dong Zhongshu considered both yin and yang as derived from Heaven. Moreover, everything and everyone consists of a blend of these two forces. Just as Heaven consists of both yang and yin, so does every human being contain yang, which makes us want to be socially cooperative, giving, and caring, and yin, which causes our more selfish feelings.

Dong Zhongshu’s theory is clearly more complex than Mengzi’s and Xunzi’s. In one sense, however, the difference between Dong Zhongshu’s 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.

After reading this selection, ask yourself how well Dong Zhongshu reconciled the views of Mengzi and Xunzi. Do you think that Dong Zhongshu’s theory that people are born with conflicting tendencies is stronger than either Mengzi’s or Xunzi’s? What difference is there, if any, between saying that people have the “seeds” of goodness (Dong Zhongshu) within them and claiming that they are born with the “sprouts” or “beginnings” of goodness (Mengzi)?

The present generation is ignorant about human nature. Speakers on the subject differ from each other. Why not try to go back to the term “nature” (hsing)? Does not the term “nature” mean what is inborn (sheng)? If it means what is inborn, then the basic substance naturally endowed is called man’s nature. Nature is the basic substance. If we inquire into the basic substance of nature by applying the term “good,” will that be correct? If not, why still say that the basic substance is good? The term “nature” cannot be separated from the basic substance. When it is separated from the basic substance, as in the case of hair, it will no longer be nature. This should be clearly understood.

It is the mind that keeps the various evil things weak within so that they cannot be expressed outside. Therefore the mind (hsin) is called the weak (jen). If in the endowment of material force (ch’i) one is free from evil, why should the mind keep anything weak? From the name of the mind I know the real character of man. In his real character man has both humanity (jen) and greed. The material forces responsible for both humanity and greed are found in his person. What is called the person is received from Heaven (T’ien, Nature). Heaven has its dual operation of yin and yang (passive and active cosmic forces), and the person also has his dual nature of humanity and greed. There are cases when Heaven restricts the operation of yin and yang, and there are cases when the person weakens his feelings and desires. [The way of man] and the Way of Heaven are the same. Consequently as yin functions, it cannot interfere with spring or summer (which correspond to yang), and the full moon is always overwhelmed by sunlight, so that at one moment it is full and at another it is not. This is the way Heaven restricts the operation of yin. How can [man] not reduce his desires and stop his feelings (both corresponding to yin) in order to respond to Heaven? As the person restricts what Heaven restricts, it is therefore said that the person is similar to Heaven. To restrict what Heaven restricts is not to restrict Heaven itself. We must know that without training our nature endowed by Heaven cannot in the final analysis make [the feelings and desires] weak. If we examine actuality to give names, when there has been no training, on what ground can nature be so called (as good)?

Therefore man’s nature may be compared to the rice stalks and goodness to rice. Rice comes out of the rice stalk but not all the stalk becomes rice. Similarly, goodness comes out of nature but not all nature becomes good. Both goodness and rice are results of human activity in continuing and completing the creative work of Heaven, which is outside of Heaven’s own operation, and are not inherent in what Heaven has produced, which is within its operation. The activity of Heaven extends to a certain point and then stops. What stops within the operation of Heaven is called human nature endowed by Heaven, and what stops outside the operation of Heaven is called human activity. Man’s activity lies outside of his nature, and yet it is inevitable that [through training] his nature will become virtuous. The term “people” (min) is derived from the term “sleep” (ming, ignorant, literally, closing one’s eyes). If nature is already good [at birth], why are people so called? Take the case of meteorites. If they were not supported in place, they would be rolling wild. How can they be good?
Man’s nature may be compared to the eyes. In sleep they are shut and there is darkness. They must await the awakening before they can see. Before the awakening it may be said that they possess the basic substance (quality) to see, but it cannot be said that they see. Now the nature of all people possesses this basic substance but it is not yet awakened; it is like people in sleep waiting to be awakened. It has to be trained before it becomes good. Before it is awakened, it may be said to possess the basic substance to become good but it cannot be said that it is already good. It is the same as the case of the eyes being shut and becoming awakened. If we leisurely examine this matter with a calm mind, the truth becomes evident. Man’s nature being in sleep, as it were, and before awakening is the state created by Heaven (Nature). To follow what Heaven has done and give it a name, we call the creatures “people” (min). By that is meant that they are in sleep (ming). If we inquire into principles according to their names and appellations, we shall understand. Thus names and appellations are to be rectified in accordance with [the principles] of Heaven and Earth. Nature and feelings are produced by Heaven and Earth. Both nature and feelings are the same in a state of sleep. Feelings are [part of] nature. If we say that nature is already good, what can we say about feelings [which are sources of evil]? Therefore the Sage never said that nature is good, for to say so would be to violate the correctness of the name.

That the person possesses nature and feelings is similar to the fact that Heaven has yin and yang. To say that there is no feeling in man’s basic substance is like saying that there is yang in Heaven but no yin. Such absurd ideas are never acceptable. What we call nature does not refer to the highest type of man nor to the lowest, but to the average. The nature of man is like a silk cocoon or an egg. An egg has to be hatched to become a chicken, and a silk cocoon has to be unravelled to make silk. It is the true character of Heaven that nature needs to be trained before becoming good. Since Heaven has produced the nature of man which has the basic substance for good but which is unable to be good [by itself], therefore it sets up the king to make it good. This is the will of Heaven. The people receive from Heaven a nature which cannot be good [by itself], and they turn to the king to receive the training which completes their nature. It is the duty of the king to obey the will of Heaven and to complete the nature of the people.

Now to claim on the basis of the true character of the basic substance of man that man’s nature is already good [at birth] is to lose sight of the will of Heaven and to forgo the duty of the king. If the nature of all people were
already good, then what duty is there for the king to fulfill when he receives the mandate from Heaven? To give an incorrect name and as a consequence to abandon one’s solemn duty and to violate the great Mandate of Heaven is not to use any word in an exemplary way. In using terms the *Spring and Autumn Annals* approaches from the external aspect of a thing if its internal aspect depends on the external aspect [for its full meaning]. Now the nature of all people depends on training, which is external, before it becomes good. Therefore goodness has to do with training and not with nature. If it had to do with nature, it would be much involved and lack refinement, and everyone would become perfect by himself and there would be no such people as worthies and sages. This is an erroneous doctrine of highly respected people of our time but not the way in which terms are used in the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. Unexemplary words and unfounded doctrines are avoided by the superior man. Why utter them?

Someone says, “Since nature contains the beginning of goodness and since the mind possesses the basic substance of goodness, how can nature still not be regarded as good?”

I reply, “You are wrong. The silk cocoon contains [potential] silk but it is not yet silk, and the egg contains the [potential] chicken but it is not yet a chicken. If we follow these analogies, what doubt can there be? Heaven has produced mankind in accordance with its great principle, and those who talk about nature should not differ from each other. But there are some who say that nature is good and others who say that nature is not good. Then what is meant by goodness differs with their various ideas. There is the beginning of goodness in human nature. Let us activate it and love our parents. And since man is better than animals, this may be called good—this is what Mencius meant by goodness. Follow the Three Bonds and the Five Relationships. Comprehend the principles of the Eight Beginnings. Practice loyalty and faithfulness and love all people universally. And be earnest and deep and love propriety. One may then be called good—this is what the Sage meant by goodness.”

Therefore Confucius said, “A good man it is not mine to see. If I could see a man of constant virtue, I would be content.” From this we know that what the Sage called goodness is not easy to match. It is not simply because we are better than animals that we may be called good. If merely activating the beginning and being better than animals may be called goodness, why is it not evident [from the beginning]? That being better than animals is not sufficient to be called goodness is the same as being wiser than plants is not suf-
ficient to be called wisdom. The nature of people is better than that of ani-
mals but may not be regarded as good. The term knowledge (wisdom) is
derived from the word sageliness. What the Sage ordered is accepted by the
world as correct. To correct the course of day and night depends on the polar
star, and to correct suspicions and doubts depends on the Sage. From the
point of view of the Sage, the generation without a king and people without
training cannot be equal to goodness. Such is the difficulty to match good-
ness. It is too much to say that the nature of all people can be equal to it. If
evaluated in comparison with the nature of animals, the nature of man is of
course good. But if evaluated in comparison with the goodness according to
the way of man [as it should be], man’s nature falls short. It is all right to say
that human nature is better than that of animals, but it is not all right to say
that their nature is what the Sage calls goodness. My evaluation of life and
nature differs from that of Mencius. Mencius evaluated on the lower level the
behavior of animals and therefore said that man’s nature is good [at birth]. I
evaluate on the higher level what the Sage considers to be goodness, and
therefore say that man’s nature is not good to start with. Goodness is higher
than human nature, and the sage is higher than goodness. The Spring and
Autumn Annals is concerned with the great origin. Therefore it is very care-
ful in the rectification of names. If a name does not come from its proper ori-
gin, how can we talk about nature not being good or already being good? . . .

What the Spring and Autumn Annals regulates are others and the self.
The principles with which to regulate others and the self are humanity and
righteousness. Humanity is to give others peace and security and righteous-
ness is to rectify the self. Therefore the word “humanity” (jen) means others
(people, jen) and the word “righteousness” means the self. The distinction is
made in the terms themselves. . . . The principle of humanity consists in
loving people and not in loving oneself, and the principle of righteousness
consists in rectifying oneself and not in rectifying others. If one is not recti-
fied himself, he cannot be considered righteous even if he can rectify others,
and if one loves himself very much but does not apply his love to others, he
cannot be considered humane. . . .

Love without wisdom means love without discrimination. Wisdom
without humanity means knowledge not translated into action. Therefore
humanity is to love mankind and wisdom is to remove its evil.

What is meant by humanity? The man of humanity loves people with a
sense of commiseration. He is careful and agreeable and does not quarrel.
His likes and dislikes are harmonized with human relations. He does not har-
bor the feeling of hate or a desire to hurt. He has no intention to conceal or to evade. He has no disposition of jealousy. He has no desires that lead to sadness or worry. He does not do anything treacherous or cunning. And he does not do anything depraved. Therefore his heart is at ease, his will is peaceful, his vital force is harmonious, his desires are regulated, his actions are easy, and his conduct is in accord with the moral law. It is for this reason that he puts things in order peacefully and easily without any quarrel. This is what is meant by humanity. . . .