The oldest moral theory, known as Naturalism and dating from the beginnings of philosophy around 500 BCE, explores the subject of human nature. The theory states that we ought to perfect our nature if it is basically good, and control it if it is bad. This theory is also part of a larger philosophical question about universals; specifically, do you and I share the same human essence, or nature? Is there in fact a universal human nature, and if so, what is it? Like Western philosophers, Eastern philosophers (especially Chinese) have taken an interest in these questions.

Of course, you and I are likely very different from one another, and together we’re probably quite different from peoples living in other parts of the world. But philosophers wonder to what degree these differences are due to socialization, environment, and education, and to what degree, if any, we are born with them. Are there any respects in which all human beings are fundamentally alike at birth? How much of the way we are stems from genetic inheritance (“nature”) and how much from the influence of family, teachers, and society (“nurture”)?

In the sixth century BCE, these questions about human nature particularly captivated philosophers such as Kongzi (Kung Tzu, Confucius), China’s first philosopher. Confucius probably descended from a family of elite advisors to the feudal lords, just as the feudal period was coming to an end in China. Kongzi claimed that all people shared the same essence in order to provide a philosophical justification for reviving and popularizing the traditional aristocratic virtues of his own society of the time: ren, or jen (“human heartedness”); li (propriety); yi, or i (righteousness); and zhi, or chih (knowledge).

Critics of the Confucianists pointed out that they were merely defending existing customs and prescribing for everyone the virtues traditionally appropriate only to one particular class: the elite, ruling families of China. The Taoists, in particular, favored what they considered the “natural”; that is,
everything that was not created by human beings. They lambasted the Confucianists for their emphasis on the human-made (and therefore “artificial”) civilized culture of art and literature, ritual, and custom—all those things that one is not born with but that one must learn through an elaborate process of socialization and acculturation. The Moists, followers of the fifth-century-BCE theorist Mozi, or Mo Ti (Mo Tzu), China’s second philosopher, also questioned the conventional nature of Confucianist ethics, but for very different reasons. They felt that Confucianist ethics was too conservative, especially with its emphasis on the ancient Chinese value of filial piety—the special moral duty and obligation that one owes members of one’s own family, particularly one’s parents and children. The Moists argued that we should love, respect, and help everyone equally, regardless of whether they are relatives or even friends.

In response to these criticisms, Kongzi and his followers answered that the traditional virtues of the ruling, warrior-class nobility were equally relevant to and appropriate for all Chinese. Indeed, Kongzi’s grandson, Tzu Ssu (Zu Su), and later the fourth-century-BCE philosopher Mengzi (Meng Tzu, Mencius), would claim that these virtues represented the natural expression and ethical development innate to all human beings.

Of course, all human-nature theorists acknowledge that the way a person actually turns out as an adult depends on both genetics and social influence. Human nature, they remind us, is only a tendency that can be either further developed or constrained by socialization. But as we will see, various Confucianist philosophers assigned different weight to “nature” and “nurture.” For example, Mengzi believed that human nature had a stronger influence on character than socialization did. Xunzi (Hsun Tzu) in the third century BCE and Dong Zhongshu (Tung Chung-shu) in the first century BCE stressed the role of socialization. And Gaozi (Kao Tzu), a contemporary of Mengzi (fourth century BCE) thought that socialization alone shaped human character.

Kongzi himself never offered a theory of human nature. He said only that, at birth, all people are “close” (jin) to one another, but that through education they become “far apart” (yuan). Kongzi may have thought that there was a universal human nature, but he never said what it was. Kongzi’s followers Mengzi and Xunzi later speculated on what characterized human nature, but came up with opposite conclusions. Mengzi held that human nature was basically good, while Xunzi pronounced it essentially evil. Dong Zhongshu developed a more sophisticated theory that said that within each
person raged a conflict between human nature and instinctual feelings—his belief represented a compromise between Mengzi’s and Xunzi’s theories.

As you read these philosophers, ask yourself whether we can ever truly define human nature and identify its influences. If we cannot, how valuable is it to develop a theory of ethics based on human nature? What do you think—is there a universal human nature or not? If there is, what is it like? How would you explain your reasoning to someone else who disagreed?

**Suggested Further Reading**


Chuang Tzu (see Zhuangzi).


Lao Tzu (see Laozi).


