Chapter 11: Human Nature

In the *San Zi Jing* it is written:

> In its original state, human nature is kind and pure.
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> In the beginning everyone has a similar nature, but because we all live under different conditions, our characters soon become widely divergent.

Everyone's original nature is like the purity and innocence of a child. Surrounded by positive influences, we become positive; surrounded by negative influences, we become negative. Over time, these patterns become so pronounced it is hard to believe we were once alike.

Some argue that while most children seem innocent, some are mean, selfish, or greedy even before they know what these traits are. If so, how can we claim that original human nature is pure and kind?

This chapter examines our original nature, beginning with three ancient Chinese scholars.

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1. The Viewpoints of Three Ancient Scholars

Xun Zi believed a person's original nature is evil. He pointed to children who refuse to share, are jealous of siblings, and self-centered. In his view, careful teaching and guidance are needed so people can learn courtesy, respect, generosity, sincerity, and other virtues.

Gao Zi argued that a person's nature is neither good nor bad. If taught to be good, people become good; if taught to be bad, they become bad. He cited the proverb:

> If you get too close to red ink, you'll be stained red; if too close to black ink, you'll be stained black.

Hence, he emphasized role models and keeping good company.

Mencius believed human nature is pure and kind. He observed that babies naturally love their parents, respect elders, feel shame for wrongdoing, and show compassion even before moral instruction. With proper guidance, inherent wisdom can manifest fully, enabling achievements like those of past saints.

Three Types of Nature

These views correspond to three aspects of human nature: **physical nature**, **dualistic nature**, and **true nature**.

Physical Nature

Also called conditional or habitual nature, it exists only with the body. Interaction with the material world creates desires—basic needs like food, clothing, and shelter can grow into greed and attachment. Without restraint, greed and indulgence overshadow the true nature, enslaving us to materialism.

Dualistic Nature

Also known as inherited nature, it derives from *chi* and karmic seeds from countless incarnations. Lao Zi said:

> Act positively, and positive stars will follow; act negatively, and negative stars will follow.

Thus, some are born kind, others stubborn, based on past actions. Gao Zi's neutral view refers to this dualistic nature, which can be good, bad, or mixed. We carry it from birth to death. Realizing this, we can work to avoid creating negative karma and to accumulate merit.

True Nature

Also called heavenly nature, it is God-given, existing before heaven and earth. It embodies benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trustworthiness—pure, truthful, kind, perfect, and virtuous. This is the nature Mencius described. It is the aspect we use to emulate saints and sages. When obscured by duality and physical desire, it loses its purity.

Buddha taught us to "see the inner nature"; Confucius to "nurture the inner nature"; Lao Zi to "purify the inner nature." All recognized our innate purity.

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2. Our Original Nature Is Complete

Gao Zi compared human nature to flowing water—directionless, shaped by its channel. Mencius replied:

> Water cannot distinguish east from west, but it knows up from down. Flowing downhill is intrinsic to water, just as purity is intrinsic to human nature.

External forces—like splashing or pumping—can make water flow upward, but this is unnatural. Similarly, negativity in people is caused by external forces.

Within all of us lies a pure, wise conscience. Yet through countless lifetimes, karmic seeds are planted, causing repeated rebirth. The six senses—sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and thought—entangle us, and karmic seeds sprout when conditions arise, influencing our behavior.

Under peaceful conditions, we are naturally kind. But in conflict over personal gain, greed can overwhelm kindness, and worldly desires can eclipse our true, selfless nature. Integrity is often sacrificed for material benefit.

Buddhism urges “seeing the inner nature” to keep karmic nature from leading us astray. Confucianism teaches “nurturing the inner nature” to strengthen it against physical and karmic pressures. Taoism stresses “purifying the inner nature” to filter out impurities.

Transforming Nature

To “transform physical nature, relinquish inherited nature, and return to complete heavenly nature” is to restore the Buddha nature given by God. Few attain this level, for conscience often disappears in life’s struggles. Without unlocking the Heavenly Gate, our true master—our pure nature—remains imprisoned by karma.

Now that we have received Dao, our true nature is free. Let it govern our lives, giving us integrity and guiding the transformation of our physical and inherited natures into heavenly nature.

Conclusion

Our original nature is pure and complete. If it were inherently negative, cultivation would be pointless—like trying to turn rock into gold. If it were neither good nor bad, we would be at the mercy of environment alone.

Buddha taught that we are all Buddhas, but we must find our root source to manifest our Buddha nature. Though karma and physical conditions make each person’s character different, understanding our original nature enables us to return to the realm of truth, the embrace of our Heavenly Mother—the great homecoming sought by saints, sages, and cultivators throughout history.

Revision #2
Created 2025-08-10 01:28:43 UTC by Phil
Updated 2025-08-10 01:29:47 UTC by Phil