

On the Origin of Human Nature
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(translation by B.W. Van Norden; January 13, 2006)

"Nature" is that which is completely created at birth. "Passion" is that which is born when one encounters other things. There are three grades of human nature. What constitutes the nature are five things. There are three grades of passion. What constitutes the passions are seven things. Someone may ask: "What are these?" I reply: "The grades of human nature are the higher, the middle and the lower. The higher among them has goodness in it and nothing else. The middle among them can be led higher or lower. The lower among them has badness in it and nothing else." The five things that constitute the nature I say are benevolence, propriety, faith, righteousness and wisdom. In relation to these five, the higher nature is dominated by one and puts it into practice with the other four.ⁱ In relation to these five, the middle nature does not lack any one, but it sometimes acts against it, and in relation to the other four it is confused. In relation to these five, the lower nature turns against one and is perversely opposed to the other four. The grades of human nature follow the grades of the passions. The grades of passion are the higher, the middle and the lower. I say that the seven things that constitute the passions are joy, anger, fear, love, dislike and desire.ⁱⁱ In the higher kind of passion, each of these seven, when it is active, finds the mean. In the middle kind of passion, these seven are sometimes excessive and sometimes lacking, but nonetheless they seek to accord with the mean. In the lower kind of passion, they are lacking or excessive, simply acting without guidance. The grades of the passions follow the grades of the natures.

Mengzi's doctrine of the nature was, "Human nature is good." Xunzi's doctrine of the nature was, "Human nature is bad." Yang Xiong's doctrine of the nature was, "Goodness and badness are mixed in human nature." Now, to say that one begins good but can become bad, or that one begins bad but can become good, or that one begins mixed – these all hold up the middle and leave

aside the highest and lowest, getting one and losing the other two. When Shu Yu was born, his mother looked at him and knew that he would definitely die as a result of bribery. When Yang Siwo was born, Shu Xiang's mother heard his cry and knew that he would definitely destroy his clan. When Yue Jiao was born, his elder brother Ziwen regarded it as very sad, because he knew that the ghosts of the Ruo Ao clan would no longer eat (because the ancestral sacrifices would end when the clan was wiped out). Is human nature actually good then?

When Hou Ji was born, his mother was in no pain. By the time he began to crawl, he already had understanding and knowledge. When King Wen was in his mother, his mother had an easy pregnancy. After he was born, his caretakers did not have any difficulties with him. After he began his studies, his teachers had no troubles with him. Is human nature actually bad then?

Yao's son Dan Zhu, Shun's son Shang Jun, King Wen's sons Guan Shuxian and Cai Shudu – it is not that the habits they were raised in were not good, but in the end they became licentious. (So Yao and Shun passed their sons over for the succession to the throne, and Guan and Shu plotted against their brother, the Duke of Zhou.) Shun's father, the Blind Man, and Yu's father, Gun (were both notoriously bad fathers) – it was not that the habits they raised their sons with were not bad, but in the end their sons became sages. Is human nature actually a mixture of good and bad? ⁱⁱⁱ

Hence, I say that when those three Masters (Mengzi, Xunzi and Yang Xiong) discussed the nature, they held up the middle kind but set aside the higher and lower grades, getting one but losing the other two.

Someone may ask: "That being the case, can those whose natures are of the highest or lowest grade not ultimately change?" I reply: "Those of the highest grade can learn and become more enlightened. Those of the lowest grade can be in fear of the awesome and seldom do wrong. For this reason, those of the highest grade can be taught and those of the lowest grade can be regulated. But as for their quality, Kongzi said that it could not be changed" (*Analects* 17.3).

Someone may ask: "How do those who discuss the nature nowadays differ from this?" I reply: "Those who discuss it nowadays do so by mixing in Buddhism and Daoism. If one discusses it mixing in Buddhism and Daoism, how could their teachings not be different?"

ⁱ Han Yu most likely means that benevolence dominates every good nature, and propriety, faith, righteousness and wisdom put benevolence into effect. However, it is possible that he means some good people are dominated by benevolence, while others are dominated by righteousness, still others by propriety, etc.

ⁱⁱ This list of seven passions comes from the *Record of Rites*, chapter 9. The question of the exact relationship between these passions and the four Mengzian virtues is the topic of the "Four Seven Debate" among Korean Neo-Confucian philosophers.

ⁱⁱⁱ On Yang Siwo, Yue Jiao and King Wen, see *Discourses of the States*, "Discourses of Jin." On Yang Siwo, see also the *Zuo Commentary*, Duke Shao, Year 28. On Hou Ji, see Ode 245. On Dan Zhu and Shang Jun, see *Records of the Historian*, "Basic Annals of the Five Emperors." On "the Blind Man" see *Mengzi* 5A1 ff.