

Naturalism and Virtue

One of the most compelling arguments against hedonism emerges from Aristotle's analysis of pleasure, but it would be quite wrong to infer from this that Aristotle rejected hedonism outright. On the contrary, he agreed with the hedonists in believing pleasure to be a highly desirable aspect of life. Their mistake did not lie in valuing pleasure, but in a mistaken conception of what pleasure is. They thought of pleasure as an experience of a special kind produced by certain activities. They thought of pleasure as an experience that explains why we value those activities, just as the fact that some activities cause us pain explains why we view them negatively. In other words, the hedonists construed pleasure as a kind of sensation, the positive counterpart to pain.

However, this is a mistake, though a mistake that later philosophers (e.g., Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832)) have also made. It leads us to think that an activity is valuable if it is pleasure producing. On Aristotle's account, the relationship is the other way round; an activity is pleasure producing if it is valuable. So, I get pleasure from golf, for example, because I think it a good game to play, and I find it even more satisfying when I manage to play it well. If we apply this analysis to the good life in general, then, the focus of our aspiration should not be pleasure in the sense of psychological diversion or bodily gratification, but the pursuit of activities that are worth engaging in. That is why successfully engaging in them gives us pleasure and satisfaction. Taken in combination, the outcome of a good and rewarding human life is not *hedos* but *eudaimonia*.

5.1 *Eudaimonia* and the Good

Eudaimonia comes from Greek words meaning “good” and “spirit.” It is often translated as “happiness,” but this is not an altogether helpful translation. In fact, the English expression “being in good spirits,” which comes closer to a literal translation of *eudaimonia*, conveys its meaning rather better than “happiness” does. It suggests something episodic, however, rather than something more enduring, so perhaps a better translation is “well-being.” But whatever English equivalent we settle on, the point to stress is that the Greek word carries with it the idea of life in the world as one of active engagement, rather than simply passive experience. “The happy man,” on Aristotle's picture, is not the person whose life is filled with pleasurable experiences, but the person who excels at all those activities and aptitudes that are characteristic of human beings. Well-being is misconceived as mere contentment with one's lot. It properly lies in the exercise of healthy appetites, the

imaginative and productive use of one's mental faculties, and the establishment of good personal, professional, and public relationships. It is this concept of human well-being that this chapter will explore.

For Aristotle, human beings are simply one type of animal, the species *homo sapiens*. Now this is incontestably true, however liable we are to forget it, and given this fact, we can expect to learn important things about ourselves by considering our natural constitution and our distinctive place in the natural world. The first step in learning these lessons is to see that the question "What is a good life?" can be asked for a very wide range of living things. Consider, for instance, the simple case of a potted plant. We know that there are conditions under which plants flourish and others under which they wither and die (e.g., too wet, too dry, too light, too dark, too warm, or too cold). Furthermore, just what these conditions are differ according to the type of plant (e.g., conditions that suit a cactus will not suit a tropical orchid). From this it follows that we can say that there are good and bad living conditions for plants.

In a similar way, animals sicken and die under different conditions. A horse cannot live on meat, a lion cannot live on oats, a fish cannot live on land, and a bird cannot survive under the water. But the good life for an animal is not just a matter of survival. A plant or an animal might survive, but in a weak, sickly, or malformed condition, so it is necessary to speak of *flourishing* and not merely surviving, if we are to distinguish what it is for a plant or an animal to live well. Now the conditions under which a plant or an animal flourishes we can call, along with Aristotle, the "good" for that thing, and given those conditions we can describe the thing in question as living well and being a good instance of its kind. A regime in which a lion, for instance, has the right amounts of the right sort of food, exercise, and company will produce a lion that is both physically in excellent shape and one whose behavior is just what is natural to lions. Conversely, as we know from the behavior of animals in zoos and circuses, if a lion is caged, isolated from its own kind, and fed without having to hunt, its physique will deteriorate and its behavior become neurotic.

In just the same fashion, Aristotle thought that we could discover the "good for man," and hence what it is for a person to live well. That is to say, it is possible to delineate both the sorts of activities that constitute human flourishing (i.e., those things in which it is natural for human beings to excel, and the conditions which make this possible). In this way, Aristotle arrives at a view of the good life importantly different from that of his predecessors. Whereas the hedonists and Plato looked for the one thing that was good above all else and good in itself (though of course each came up with a very different answer and also differed about how 'the good' was related to the good life), Aristotle's view carries the implication that there is no *one* good, that what is and what is not good must always be relativized to some natural kind or other. There is no such thing as "good, *period*," we might say, only "good *for*." What is good for a cactus is not good for an orchid, what is good for a horse is not what is good for a lion, and so on indefinitely, including what is good for a human being.

The good, then, is not some abstract object or property that, as it were, radiates its goodness independently of human beings and other creatures. Rather it is a mode of existence determined by the natures of different creatures. At the same time, to make good relative in this way is not to make it subjective in the way that Callicles, Thrasymachus, and so on do, because whether something is or is not good for a horse, a lion, or a sycamore tree is a matter of ascertainable fact. We cannot *decide* that oats are good for a lion, because lions either do or do not flourish on a diet of oats; so too with human beings. There is no need for us to resolve that parental care will be good for children or to reach agreement that

psychologically stable human beings are better than neurotics and psychotics. These are matters of discoverable fact.

Philosophers sometimes mark this difference by distinguishing between attributive and predicative uses of the word “good.” An example of the attributive use is when I say “This cake is good.” Now it is evidently possible to interpret this use (as subjectivists do) as declaratory or expressive; to say “This cake is good” just means “I really like this cake.” On this interpretation, the word “good” very often does no more than to express personal liking or preference. But when I say “Aspirin is a good painkiller,” I am using the word “good” *predicatively*, and what I say makes a claim about the world and does not merely express a preference. I may like the taste of aspirin (if it has a taste), but all the liking in the world will not make it *true* that aspirin is a good painkiller if, as a matter of fact, it is not.

On the Aristotelian conception the expressions “a good person” and “a good life” use the word “good” predicatively. Accordingly, we can ask in any particular case whether it is used truly or not. Our ability to answer the question, however, depends upon our understanding the proper basis for such judgments. Just as a good (specimen of an) orchid is one that exhibits all the things that make for excellence in a plant of that kind, so a good person is someone whose life exhibits those features that are distinctively human excellences. Thus, answering the question “Is x a good person?” requires us to know what human beings at their distinctive best are like, and answering the question “What sort of life ought we to want?” will consist in describing such a human being.

5.2 Human Nature as Rational Animal

But what *is* the good life for a human being? In the *Nichomachean Ethics* it is said to be “activity of the soul in accordance with virtue” (Aristotle, 2002: 1094b), a pious sounding expression scarcely illuminating as it stands. Its meaning, however, is actually not so difficult to discern. Despite the initial impression this phrase may make on modern minds, Aristotle’s conception of the good life for a human being has almost nothing to do with religion or even with morality as we normally understand it. The Greek word translated “soul” is *psyche*, from which we get our word “psychology.” It refers to the mind or rational faculty that human beings possess rather than any spiritual essence. “Virtue” is a translation of the word *arete*, meaning “excellence,” so that “in accordance with virtue” just means “in the best possible way.” Thus, Aristotle’s conception of the good life is one in which we use our minds to make, and act, and think in the best possible ways. This is, of course, the good life in the abstract. It needs to be given content by appeal to the actual nature of human beings.

It is important to emphasize here that Aristotle’s emphasis on “rational” activities does not imply that intellectual endeavor or academic inquiry makes up the good life. Rather, it is intelligence in the full range of human activities that he has in mind, including the sort that potters, politicians, and parents may employ in their respective tasks and occupations, no less than scientists and philosophers. Indeed, Aristotle puts *phronesis* (practical wisdom) rather than intellectual brilliance at the center of a good life, because even the highest forms of intellectual inquiry need to be guided by good sense if they are to be pursued fruitfully and well.

The picture of the ideal human life that emerges from Aristotle’s conception of the good is a moderate conception rather than a heroic one. It is bound to strike us as sound and sensible rather than exciting or inspiring. Aristotle thinks that those who can be shown to lead good lives are middle aged, well educated, financially secure, and socially respected.

Neither slaves, nor the poor, nor the ignorant, nor the stupid could lead good lives, for to be any of these things is to be deficient as a human being, much in the way that a tree may be stunted or an animal deformed. Moreover, those who single-mindedly pursue some one goal or strive to excel in just one thing (e.g., in sport, music, or politics), and who do so to the detriment of prospering economically, making friends, having a family, attaining social standing or getting a rounded education, also lead impoverished lives. Such a life is a distorted one in just the way that an apple tree which has been drastically pruned to produce a higher yield of fruit is distorted. For Aristotle, it is all-round general excellence that matters, not superexcellence in just one or two things.

One obvious implication of the view that the lives of slaves, the poor, and the mentally or physically handicapped are not good lives is that a humanly good life is reserved for the talented and successful. This has an offensive ring to modern ears, because declaring that the lives of the handicapped and so on are not good seems to imply that they lead morally worthless lives. However, the expression “a good life” has a moral connotation in the contemporary world (to be discussed in Chapter 7) that it did not have for Aristotle. If we make the mental effort to think past contemporary assumptions, we will see that Aristotle’s conception implies only what most people would agree upon, namely that it is better to be free than to be someone else’s slave, better to live in reasonable prosperity than in poverty, and better to be talented (or at least accomplished) in some things than in nothing. These judgments, for Aristotle, are neither fundamental moral or evaluative opinions with which others may or may not agree, nor are they the expression of his personal preferences, or even natural preferences of the kind to which the hedonists appealed. Rather they are statements of fact. This raises our next question: On what is this account of the “facts” based?

5.3 Ethics, Ethology, and Evolution

Aristotle, in common with most Greeks, thought that everything has a *telos* or end at which it naturally aims, and that depending upon the mode of existence of the thing in question, this end will be reached more or less well. Thus an oak tree is the end or *telos* of every acorn, and, given the right conditions, an acorn will develop into a tree of a certain shape, size, color, and so on. The *telos* of the acorn, then, is to be found in the sort of picture of an oak tree that appears in botany books. Such a picture does not show us what one particular oak tree looks like, as photograph would, but what *any* oak tree *ought* to look like. Given abnormal conditions (e.g., not enough water, too much exposure to sea breezes, etc.), individual trees will deviate from this end; they will be stunted or deformed in some way.

Judgments about the maturity or deformity of an oak tree are based on the biological nature of the species *quercus*, something about which we think we now know a lot more than Aristotle did, thanks largely to evolutionary biology and the science of genetics. But though we are here in the realms of genetics and biology, we can still refer to the *right* conditions and employ evaluative terms like “stunted” and “deformed.” This gives us a clue to answering normative or evaluative questions about human beings. Facts about right and wrong and good and bad, on Aristotle’s account, are derived from facts about the biology of things. Thus our knowledge of human good is a function of our biological knowledge of the species *homo sapiens*.

Aristotle was one of the greatest thinkers of all time, and by the standards of the ancient world, his biological understanding was highly advanced. He thought that each natural kind, including human kind, has a distinctive and discoverable function (i.e., a *telos* peculiar to that kind, and from that *telos* we can derive the good for that thing). Under the

inspiration of this conception, Aristotle himself produced work that made him both the founding father of biology and a major influence upon its development for centuries to come. But more recent biology, especially since Darwin, has made such great advances that, however impressive in its own day, Aristotelian biology has now been completely superseded. Does this mean that the ethical and evaluative implications of Aristotelianism are outmoded also?

For a good many years it was thought so, partly because modern biology no longer believes in the existence of radically separated species that have been distinct from the beginning of creation. Furthermore, biologists came to abandon the idea of studying the physiological character of plants and animals in terms of overall function. In modern biology we can describe the function of some part of the anatomy—the function of the heart in the anatomy of a lion, for instance—but we cannot sensibly talk about the function of the *lion*. The heart serves an end in the body of the lion, but the lion does not serve any end. Even if careful observation of lions reveals characteristic patterns of both physiology and behavior, modern biology holds that the explanation of these will be found, not in some *telos* towards which all lions naturally strive, but in their genetic structure, of which these characteristics are a manifestation or expression. Thus modern biology, rather than pointing us towards the study of individual species with a view to discovering their distinctive *function*, points us to the study of a microbiological structure that will reveal a distinctive *genome*.

It seems then that modern biology is not the sort of study that could allow us to derive facts about right and wrong and good and bad in the way that Aristotelian biology could. And yet Aristotelianism has undergone something of a revival in recent years. This is because, alongside biology, there has grown up a study much closer to Aristotle's. This study is one which may allow us to speak in some of the ways that he did. It is the study of ethology. The very name "ethology" indicates the connections of this relatively new science with the concerns of the ancient Greeks, because it is derived via Latin from Greek words meaning "the study and depiction of character." In its modern sense, ethology can be described as the study of animal behavior in its natural environment. Among its first well-known exponents was Konrad Lorenz, whose famous book *On Aggression* was based on an ethological study of wolves.

If we set ourselves to study not the physiology but the behavior of animals in their natural environment, we come to see, ethologists tell us, that there are conditions under which animals cannot thrive and in which their natural behavior may undergo destructive and even self-destructive alteration. For instance, the male of one species of fish is armed with a sting, whose purpose is to protect the egg-carrying female from predators. But if a male and female are removed to the safety and confinement of a small tank in which there are no predators, the male will eventually turn its sting upon the female herself. This behavior is clearly abnormal since it works to the destruction of the fish and its progeny, and it comes about because of the unnatural conditions in which they have been placed. These conditions are simply not good for the fish.

Examples of this sort can be multiplied very easily, and our understanding of natural function is further enriched by evolutionary biology. It is possible to show, in many cases, that functions like the protective sting just described emerged in the course of evolutionary adaptation. Plants and animals have developed the traits they possess because this equips them better for survival. Darwin's expression "survival of the fittest" is well known for the important part it has played in the advancement of the biological sciences. But "fittest" is a normative term that aims to describe what is naturally good and advantageous.

Can the sciences of ethology and evolutionary biology be extended to human beings? The combination of the two, together with explorations from the social sciences, has resulted in “sociobiology,” the name of an inquiry specially associated with the Harvard entomologist E. O. Wilson, who wrote a famous book entitled *Sociobiology: the new synthesis*. Wilson’s idea is that we should

consider man in the free spirit of natural history, as though we were zoologists from another planet completing a catalog of the social species on Earth. In this macroscopic view the humanities and social sciences shrink to specialized branches of biology; history, biography and fiction are the research protocols of human ethology; and anthropology and sociology constitute the sociobiology of a single primate species.

(Wilson, 1975, 2000: 547)

This sort of study aims to combine insights from evolutionary theory, genetics, ethology, and sociology in a way that will generate an account of what is the most natural, and hence most successful, mode of existence for human beings. Wilson’s later, much shorter book *On Human Nature* is perhaps the most straightforward account of this approach, but something of the same sort can be found in Desmond Morris’s *The Naked Ape*, and later editions of Richard Dawkins highly successful book *The Selfish Gene*. More recently, the noted Dutch primatologist Frans de Waal has advocated the study of human beings as socially interacting animals with an evolved biology modeled on his studies of apes (and other animals). In *Good Natured: the origin of right and wrong in humans and other animals* (1996), de Waal aims to show that recognizably moral behavior is not confined to human beings, and that sympathy, co-operation, and even guilt and self-sacrifice can all be observed in other animals. He thereby suggests contra Dawkins and conventional interpretations of the survival of the fittest that selfishness is not our natural condition, and that an ethical concern for others has a deep biological root. The ambiguous title of his book neatly captures this; we are good by nature, and what is natural is what good for us.

5.4 Virtue Theory

Sociobiology might be said to be a modern equivalent of Aristotelian biology. It holds out the promise of answering the question “What is the good life for human beings?” Its philosophical importance is further underlined by the fact that Aristotelian ideas have made a significant comeback in moral philosophy also, as is evidenced by the titles of recent books by Alasdair MacIntyre (*Dependent Rational Animals*) and Philippa Foot (*Natural Goodness*). These philosophers (among others) think that there is much to be gained by focusing on the predicative rather than the attributive use of “good. They further believe that too much attention has been given to what are called “thin” moral concepts, such as good and bad and right and wrong, and not enough attention has been given to contrasting “thick” moral concepts, such as generosity, cowardice, foolhardiness, and prudence.

This approach to moral philosophy, often called “virtue theory,” has three important attractions. First, it provides a plausible alternative to both ethical subjectivism and the kind of moral realism discussed in Chapter 1. As Alasdair MacIntyre writes:

Whatever it means to say of some particular member of some particular species that it is flourishing, that it is achieving its good, or that this or that is good for it, in that it conduces to its flourishing – assertions that we can make about thistles and cab-

bage, donkeys and dolphins, in the same sense of ‘flourishing’ and the same sense of ‘good’ – it is difficult to suppose either that in making such assertions we are ascribing some non-natural property or that we are expressing an attitude, an emotion, or an endorsement.

(MacIntyre, 1999: 79)

The point applies equally to human beings as to other creatures. Words like “healthy,” “intelligent,” “outgoing,” and “lazy” have real descriptive content. To call someone “good” or declare their actions “right” tells us almost nothing about what they are like or have done. But to describe them as lazy or intelligent is to convey a good deal of information about them.

Second, such descriptions are determined not by our liking or disliking, but by the facts of their actions. When people run away from danger, it is simply false for me to describe their behavior as “brave,” however sympathetic I may be to their predicament and their fear. Conversely, if they hold their ground and confront the danger, this fact compels me to describe their action as brave, even if I have always disliked them and wish them ill; so too with all the other virtue words. I cannot properly be called “kind” if I laugh other people’s distress, even if I care nothing about them. I cannot avoid the charge of laziness if I neglect my work and stand around doing nothing, even if I (and others) think the work is not specially interesting or important.

Third, the descriptive content of virtue words is such that it has a normative element built in, so to speak. While “good” and “bad” seem to say no more than “nice” and “nasty,” words such as “generous” and “cowardly” are more like “nutritious” and “poisonous.” To call something nutritious is both to describe it *and* to recommend it; to say that something is poisonous is to describe it *and* to warn against it on the basis of that description. In both cases fact and value come together, and they do so because nutrition is a function of the properties of the food and the nature of the creature for which it is nourishing. Oats are not nutritious to a lion, but they are to a horse, and this is because of the natural properties of oats, lions, and horses. In a similar way, virtue theory holds that generosity, bravery, kindness, and the like are character traits that count as virtues, not because people happen to applaud them, but because of the facts of human nature—our vulnerability and dependence on others.

What then is human flourishing? The answer to this question will provide the naturalist’s account of the good life, but it is an answer that will only be arrived at with systematic and extensive investigation. That investigation may not follow exactly the sort of path de Waal lays out. Human beings are complex creatures around whose lives impressive social, political, and cultural structures have arisen over several millennia. Accordingly, any plausible account of their flourishing will have to take the social and cultural influences into account, as well as the biological and ethological influences. It will have to be as much anthropological as biological. The ambition, however, is that the central questions of moral philosophy will finally be answered by the sciences of anthropology and evolutionary biology in a way that is different from, but nonetheless much in, the spirit of Aristotle.

5.5 The Natural as a Norm

This is a highly attractive prospect to many contemporary thinkers, especially given the prestige of the life sciences. Yet significant philosophical difficulties lie in the way of completing that program. Ethology is defined as the study of the behavior of animals in their

natural environment, and this definition raises the first question: What is the natural environment of man? Wilson remarks: “*Homo sapiens* is ecologically a very peculiar species. It occupies the widest geographical range and maintains the highest local densities of any of the primates” (Wilson, 1975, 2000: 547). That is to say, unlike almost all other species (e.g., bears or tigers) human beings live in strikingly *different* environments—just compare the environment of the Inuit of the Arctic Circle with that of the Kalahari desert dwellers. And Wilson’s point about population density also directs our attention to the fact that human modes of existence differ enormously. Think of the environment and lifestyle of someone resident in New York or London in contrast to that of an East African tribesman or the life of a Tibetan monk in comparison with the life of a Parisian socialite. These are differences far greater than any that obtain between other primates. Gorillas and chimpanzees live in only a few parts of Earth, and the size of the groups they live in are pretty much the same wherever they live. So, which of the vastly different environments in which human beings live is their *natural* environment, and which of the many modes of existence that history records is the *natural* one for them?

One response to these questions is to look beyond all the variety and search for some underlying unity. According to Wilson, “Human nature . . . is a hodgepodge of special genetic adaptations to an environment largely vanished, the world of the Ice-Age hunter-gatherer” (Wilson, 1978, 1995: 187). The underlying unity on this account is a distant evolutionary history in which human nature was formed, a nature that human beings share and can still be detected in the many environments in which they have made their home.

This idea—that the natural behavior of human beings is more easily discerned in relatively “primitive” societies such as those of contemporary hunter-gatherers—is one that many people find attractive and plausible. They have a sense that life in the modern city is a kind of cultural accretion on top of a more basic human mode of existence. Moreover, it is on the strength of this idea that judgments of relative superiority are often made. It is commonplace to hear the “naturalness” of the life of the North American Indians, say, commended and contrasted with the “artificiality” of the life of the commuter in a modern city. And there is a quite widely held belief that, for instance, the European nuclear family is not as natural as the extended family which still persists in less developed parts of the world.

This use of “natural” as a term of commendation is widespread—think of the expressions “natural childbirth” or “natural remedy”—and for that reason extensively used by advertisers: “100% natural,” whether applied to food or fibers, is a selling point. Its negative counterpart, “unnatural,” is not so commonly used nowadays (though at one time certain sexual desires and practices were described as unnatural), though the term “artificial” often serves much the same purpose. But whichever terms we use, any naturalistic account of value requires us to be able to do two things—to draw a distinction between the natural and the unnatural and to explain why the former is preferable. Neither task, as we shall see, is easily accomplished.

How are we to know what is and what is not natural? The sociobiologist’s answer is straightforward enough in outline. What is natural is what suits human beings as they have evolved, their “special genetic adaptations to an environment largely vanished, the world of the Ice-Age hunter-gatherer,” to quote Wilson again. The problem with this criterion is that our knowledge of that distant history is very limited indeed. If, in order to determine what is and what is not natural for human beings, we need to know about Ice-Age hunter-gatherers, the truth is that we are largely limited to speculation. It will not do to appeal, as sociobiologists and evolutionary psychologists sometimes do, to contemporary hunter-gatherers, because, as far as fitness to survive is concerned, the New York stockbroker is

as well *fitted* to survive as the Kalahari bushman, for the obvious reason that both *have* survived. Judged by the standard of ways in which it is possible for human beings to live given their evolved genetic inheritance, the two ways of life are at least equally good, and that of the New York stockbroker is probably better.

The implication is this. Presented with a choice between radically different styles of life, the question immediately arises “In which way should I live my own life?” The appeal to naturalness (i.e., suitability for creatures with our genetic inheritance) will not provide an answer. This is true, not just for the relatively abstract choice between lifestyles, but for almost all the other, more specific choices we might try to make on these grounds. There may indeed be many reasons to favor what is called “natural childbirth” over induction or Caesarian section, but these cannot be explained by or rooted in a sociobiological explanation of their naturalness. Similarly, a natural diet cannot be shown to enjoy any special relationship to our biological nature or our environment. When people speak of a “natural diet,” they often have it in mind to draw a sharp contrast with what are called “junk” foods. Even if there are good reasons for recommending foods high in fiber and low in fat (though this is now contentious), one of them cannot be that these are natural foods. In the first place, many people naturally (i.e., left to their own devices) choose junk food. In the second place, a low-fiber and high-fat diet does not inevitably lead to death or ill health. Conversely, even healthy eaters sometimes die young.

But there is an even more important objection to the attempt to make natural a norm. The relationship between those who choose a healthy diet and the food they eat is not like the relationship between a tiger and the animals it hunts. Still, less is it like the relationship between a plant and the nutrients it extracts from the earth and the atmosphere. One crucial difference is this. Human beings can and do *think* about what they should eat and drink. They are neither driven by natural instinct alone, nor, in adult life, does it drive them very much. So, while a cow will simply turn away from meat, we can decide whether or not to eat it. In making this decision we can certainly take into account the fact that this food serves some useful biological function, but we can take other factors into account too, such as its taste, scarcity, or cost. All human beings do this in fact. It may be fashionable to suggest that less industrialized societies have more natural, additive-free diets, but the truth is that since time immemorial the poorest peasants in remote parts of India and China have added a wide variety of spices to their food, and they have reserved scarcer and/or more expensive foods for festive occasions.

The philosophical point is this. We naturally incline to certain foods more easily than others, and some of these foods serve certain biological ends especially well. Both facts are relevant in considering what to eat, and there may be some reason to call a diet that gives them pride of place natural. However, these are not the only facets of food that we can reasonably consider in constructing our diet. We are not obliged by nature or by anything else to lend them an importance above all others. We can *deliberate* about the merits of natural foods. The point can be generalized. There may be patterns of behavior and ways of life that we have good reason to call “natural.” But from this fact, if and when it is one, nothing automatically follows about the good life. We can ask ourselves critically just how much weight we ought to give to it.

5.6 Is the “Good for Man” Good?

In these last examples “natural” has been taken to mean things to which we are instinctively disposed and which are well suited to our genetic makeup. The possibility of raising

critical questions about what comes naturally, in this sense, is in fact a very important one. So far we have been concerned to ask whether (when we replace his outdated biology with modern ethnology and evolutionary biology) we should endorse Aristotle's conception of the good as the good for (the species) man. What we have found is that it cannot provide a basis for deciding between a wide range of competing lifestyles. This is because it cannot single out just one form of life as naturally good for human beings, and even if it could, its naturalness would only be one consideration amongst others.

This last point leads on to a more profound criticism. Perhaps the way of life to which we are drawn by nature is something we have reason to resist. Perhaps some of the things that are *good for* human beings are not in fact *good* when viewed from a wider perspective. For example, it may well be natural for human beings to hunt and natural for them to take a real pleasure in the suffering and destruction of other animals. There is enough support for cruel sports in almost all times and cultures to suggest that the appetite for them, if not universal, is certainly deep seated and widespread. Moreover, it is not difficult to imagine a story which explains how bloodlust of this sort has evolutionary advantages, and hence is part of our evolved nature. But it is just as easy to see that from the point of view of the other animals involved, or from the detached point of view which concerns itself with pain and suffering wherever these are to be found, this impulse in human beings, however natural or good for them, is not to be applauded or encouraged.

Similarly, I do not find it hard to imagine that ethology and/or evolutionary psychology might show racism or xenophobia to be deeply entrenched in the unself-conscious behavior of human beings. (There seems plenty of evidence for it.) I do not think, if such were found to be the case, that we would for long lack a plausible explanation of its place in our evolutionary development. If so, however, we would not necessarily have found reason to commend this natural human impulse or to cease to strive against its manifestation. Racial hatred may be as natural as maternal instinct, but that does not mean it is equally commendable.

In short, though earlier arguments have raised serious doubts about the possibility, even if the sciences of ethology, anthropology, and evolutionary psychology enabled us to outline with reasonable certainty and clarity a manner of life which we had reason to call the good for human beings, we would still be left with this question: Is the good for man good? To put the issue like this is to separate two questions which have so far been run together, namely "What is a good life?" and "What is good?" But the two questions are connected. One answer to the first is that the good life consists in *realizing* the good.

5.7 Natural Good and Freedom

At first it may sound implausible to think that what is natural to human beings (i.e., the conditions under which they thrive and the activities they instinctively delight in) might nevertheless be an unworthy way for them to live. Yet it is an idea with which the history of moral thought is quite familiar. The Christian doctrine of original sin, for instance, holds that there is a powerful inclination on the part of human beings to do what they should *not* do. For the moment, though, we should notice another objection. Human nature and the natural are *given*. That is, our nature and what is natural to us is something we discover, with the help of biology or some other science. It is a matter of fact. From the point of view of Aristotle and many of the ancient Greeks, this is one of the things that makes it a fitting basis for a conception of the good life.

But from another point of view, this is just what makes human nature and the natural an *unsuitable* basis for human action. To appeal to facts about our nature, and to try to

make them unalterable determinants of the way we live, is to disguise from ourselves a fundamental feature of the human condition, namely its radical freedom. Presented with a scientifically grounded account of the natural way of life for the species *homo sapiens*, we are still free to choose it or reject it.

To see the full force of this point, it is useful to think about zookeepers responsible for the health and welfare of the animals in their charge. It is easy to imagine that they might find the studies of ethologists and primatologists very valuable, since such studies could be expected to determine accurately the conditions under which their animals would flourish. They might even establish that certain animals simply *cannot* flourish in even the best conditions that zoos can provide (as seems to be the case with polar bears). In the light of this knowledge, the zookeepers are able to establish the best pattern of life for the different animals—what they should be fed, when they should be fed it, where they ought to sleep, how much exercise space they need, and so on. Once all these practices are put in place, the animals in the zoo will simply follow this way of life. They will do so quite unreflectively and because, though they enjoy the benefits, they have no consciousness of its merits, and they may to some extent have to be compelled to follow it. Provided the ethologists and so on have got it right, the way of life imposed upon them will prove best for them. Yet the animals themselves, obviously, are neither involved in the discovery nor the implementation of the regime under which they flourish, nor could they be involved since they lack the rational faculties that would allow them to be involved.

It is this fundamental difference that leads the philosopher Christine Korsgaard to reject any naturalistic philosophy of this kind on the grounds that it presents us with a “rebarbative picture of the virtuous human being as a sort of Good Dog . . . [who] . . . always does what he ought to do spontaneously and with tail-wagging cheerfulness and enthusiasm” (Korsgaard, 2009: 3). Korsgaard (whose own views we will return to in Chapter 7) does not think that ethical naturalism of this kind is faithful to Aristotle’s most important insights, but she chiefly wants to emphasize the point that choice is an inescapable part of human life. Unlike other animals, “human beings” as she puts it “are *condemned* to choice and action” (Korsgaard, 2009: 1, emphasis original). Even if it were possible to outline just one style of life that could be called “natural” to human beings, we would still have to decide whether or not to follow it. Either that, or some political “zookeepers,” who thought that their knowledge of human nature and the natural was superior, and for that reason authoritative, would have to deny us the freedom to choose. More importantly still, if we ourselves were to suppose that what is natural for us is authoritative, we would be denying our own freedom to choose.

One way of making this point is to say that we would be making our essence determine our existence, whereas “existence comes before essence.” This is an expression coined by the French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre, and it leads us to examine the next philosophy of value—existentialism. But before that, a summary of the preceding chapters may be useful.

5.8 Summary

We have been asking the question “What sort of life would it be best to have and to pursue?” Chapter 1 addressed the sceptical challenge presented by subjectivists who hold that this question is a matter of subjective preference and not one that we can meaningfully reason about. That challenge can be met by distinguishing between *moral realism*, which falsely tries to base morality on a special moral sense, and *moral rationalism*, which appeals

instead to making practical judgments about the application of moral concepts in particular circumstances.

Chapter 2 then considered the possibility of human beings arriving at an agreed set of rules that would govern their relationships. The idea of such a social contract has a long history in philosophy, but it encounters some important problems. Given the absence of any actual agreement on the rules that will govern our lives together, it has to appeal to hypothetical consent—to what people under certain idealized conditions would agree. Unfortunately, hypothetical consent does not bring with it the kind of obligation that real consent does, and Scanlon's sophisticated attempts to replace consent with reasonableness are in the end no more successful. Besides, as Bernard Mandeville aimed to show with his *Fable of the Bees*, a vibrant social order is possible, and generally beneficial, when people strive to satisfy their own desires and pursue their own interests without any special regard for self-denying social rules.

We might go further, as Friedrich Nietzsche does, and press the case for egoism or the affirmation of self as a far more admirable and edifying ideal than the equal moral worth of all human beings that Christianity has bequeathed to us on the grounds that this egalitarian vision is driven principally by the resentment of the weak against the strong and is the enemy of both excellence and individuality. The problem with Nietzsche's anti-Christian alternative, however, is that it inevitably brings with it a radical relativism which leaves us free to endorse the very things that Nietzsche despises. In other words, Nietzsche's philosophy needs, but lacks, an independent criterion of what is truly valuable.

The ancient philosophy of hedonism aims to supply just such a lack. It makes pleasure its criterion on the grounds that only pleasure is a properly natural good. This gives it universal appeal, in the same way that pain is universally repellent—a correspondingly natural evil. Hedonism's invocation of the pleasure/pain criterion is an idea many people find attractively simple, but the problem lies in working out just what this means in detail. Upon reflection it seems that, contrary to expectations, hedonism must favor the restrained life of the Epicurean rather than the more alluring Cyrenaic ideal of constant gratification. In any case, there lies behind both versions a mistaken conception of pleasure as a sensuous experience produced by activity. Rather, as Aristotle points out, activities prove pleasurable because they are worth engaging in. With a few exceptions, such as food and sex, perhaps, the pleasure is a function of their worth, and not, as hedonists suppose, the other way about. This implies that the value of the various activities in which human beings engage is intrinsic to them. To understand this is to see that there is no compelling reason to give pleasure an especially important place in our lives. Indeed, many possible aspects of a human life *other* than the pleasure it contains contribute to its value.

Just what are these other aspects and how might we hope to knit them into a single coherent ideal? This is the question Aristotle expressly addresses in *Nicomachean Ethics*. He tries to answer it by giving an account of what is distinctive about human nature, and then defining "the good" as "the good for man" (i.e., for a creature with this distinctive nature). The arguments considered in this chapter, however, showed that this appeal to human nature is not entirely successful, even with the help of the modern sciences of ethology and sociobiology. First, it is impossible to specify a natural good for human beings that will enable us to decide between competing styles of life. Second, even if we could do so, this would not show that the attributes, attitudes, and activities that add up to human flourishing are good in a wider sense. The conditions under which human beings do best as a species of animal might be (and probably are) conditions under which a wide range of other creatures, both plant and animal, might be put at risk—a theme that will be

considered further in Chapter 9. What is properly called “natural” in human beings, and what may well lead to a vigorous flowering of the species in the sense in which Aristotle meant it, has its dark side (as the Christian doctrine of original sin holds), and in the absence of further argument we have no reason to regard this dark side as an aspect of life it would be good to promote.

In any case, Aristotelian naturalism overlooks one crucial respect in which human beings differ from other animals—their radical freedom. This is the concept from which existentialism takes its cue.

The Confucians who preserved and taught the ancient writings held the fundamental belief that these texts represented the sage rulers of antiquity. Tremendous authority was vested in these works as a record of the thoughts and deeds of the sages. The sages themselves were seen as individuals who had ruled through an understanding of the ultimate authority of the universe, *T'ien*, and thus could properly be called *T'ien-tzu*, or "Son of Heaven." They were said to rule under the authority of *T'ien ming*, the "Mandate of Heaven."

Confucius, on the basis of the teachings of the ancients, focused on the moral transformation of the individual and society as the remedy for the chaos of the time in which he lived. He looked to the rulers of his day to become true "Noble People" and as a result to become true rulers bearing the Mandate of Heaven and capable of uniting the empire by following Heaven's authority. Failing to find such a ruler, Confucius redirected his attention to teaching his disciples in the hope of transforming society through the creation of a widening circle of people who were educated according to the moral ways of the ancient rulers.

Confucius used the term *chün tzu*, noble person, as the central figure in his concept of moral transformation. Throughout the classical period of Confucianism and up to the beginnings of Neo-Confucianism, the *chün tzu* remained at the center of Confucian teachings. Following the advent of Neo-Confucianism, that center shifted from the *chün tzu* to the sage, or *sheng*, with the understanding that anyone could become a sage through learning and self-cultivation. Despite this shift, the understanding of humankind remained largely the same in terms of basic Confucian teachings. Even after Neo-Confucian thought added sophistication and new dimensions to the tradition, there remained a core of basic Confucian teachings.

CLASSICAL CONFUCIAN TEACHINGS

Classical Confucian ideas are the products of a group of early Confucians principally represented by Confucius, Mencius, and Hsün Tzu. Rather than considering their teachings separately,

it is possible to talk in general terms about early Confucian thought, focusing on specific ideas largely shared by all Confucians. The most important of these teachings include *jen*, or “humaneness,” *i*, or “righteousness,” *li*, or “propriety/ritual,” and *hsing*, or “human nature.” *Hsiao*, or “filial piety,” is also a vital concept, one that is central for young people growing up in the Confucian tradition.

For the Confucian, these teachings may be said to characterize the ways of the sages of antiquity, who served as models for how to live. The teachings also came to characterize the idea of becoming a *chün tzu*, the ultimate goal of the moral cultivation of the individual. To understand the character of this noble person is to understand the nature of the traits that compose that moral character.

Humaneness

Jen, or humaneness, is probably the most commonly mentioned of Confucian virtues and the single most important teaching of Confucianism. The term, often depicted as a very general virtue in Confucian writings, has been translated in a wide variety of ways, in part reflecting the broad nature of the term, but also the complexity of trying to render the concept into another language. We can find *jen* translated as “benevolence,” “compassion,” “altruism,” “goodness,” “human-heartedness,” “humanity,” “love,” “kindness,” and “humaneness”—the last being the term that will be used here.

What does the Chinese character *jen* actually mean? It is composed of two parts, each a meaningful element. One part means “person,” and the other part signifies the number “2.” So, the word itself literally means something like “person ‘two-ed’” or “person doubled.” This definition suggests the relation of one person to another—and not just any relation, but the *proper* relation between two individuals. In this way, *jen* begins to refer to the moral relation of one to another, and thus, a sense of humaneness.

For all Confucians, *jen* is the most central teaching of the

THE CLASSIC OF FILIAL PIETY

The *Hsiao-ching*, or Classic of Filial Piety, became one of the most fundamental statements about the cardinal Confucian virtue of *hsiao*, or filial piety. Though not one of the original Five Classics, in later centuries it was added to an expanded canon of works called the Thirteen Classics. It is itself a product of the Han Dynasty, though tradition claims it was authored by a disciple of Confucius. There are a number of basic statements about the nature of filial piety that recur within this text, and because of this, it has been held in high respect through the centuries.

The passage that follows is representative of the way in which filial piety is described. There is little doubt about the nature of the relation between children and parents in this passage. With modernization came a strong rejection of this type of statement, though it is also apparent that the sentiment expressed is a deeply ingrained part of the Confucian heritage. At the heart of the notion of filial piety is the idea that one's body is a gift from one's parents and, for this reason, should be harmed as little as possible. In turn, the *Hsiao-ching* makes the virtue of filial piety the foundation for all other virtues:

Our body, skin and hair are all received from our parents; we dare not injure them. This is the first priority in filial piety. To establish oneself in the world and practice the Way; to uphold one's good name for posterity and give glory to one's father and mother—this is the completion of filial piety. Thus filiality begins with service to parents, continues in service to the ruler, and ends with establishing oneself in the world (and becoming an exemplary person). . . . Filiality is the ordering principle of Heaven, the rightness of the Earth, and the norm of human conduct. This ordering of Heaven and Earth is what people should follow: illumined by the brightness of Heaven and benefited by the resources of Earth, all-under-Heaven are thus harmonized.*

* William Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, comp., *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, 2nd ed., vol. 1, New York: Columbia University Press, 1999, pp. 326–327.

tradition. It defines the basic relationship between people in a way that respects the moral integrity of the individual and his or her relation to others. Confucius described *jen* as the “single thread” that runs throughout his teachings. It is generally assumed to be the main characteristic of the noble person. For all later Confucians, it continues to play an essential role in defining the character of Confucian teachings and the ideal of either the noble person or the sage.

Can we describe *jen* in any more specific way? When asked about the “single thread” that runs through Confucius’s teachings, a disciple commented that it may be described in several ways. In fact, two specific virtues are mentioned as ways to describe *jen*. These are the virtues of *chung*, or “conscientiousness,” and *shu*, which means “sympathy” or “empathy.” These words suggest a richer, deeper meaning for *jen*. On the one hand, *jen* means that a person demonstrates conscientiousness toward others, a sense of being concerned about people’s well-being, and acts toward others with nurturing care and consideration. On the other hand, *jen* also has a level of sympathy, or empathy—the capacity to share in the feelings of others and to express one’s own concern for any plight or misfortune that might befall them. This richer meaning is captured in part by the translations of *jen* as “humaneness” or “compassion,” as opposed to simpler definitions like “goodness” or “love.”

There is a famous passage in the Analects of Confucius that is taken as a description of the teaching of *jen*. It reads simply: “Do not do to others what you would not have them do to you.” As has often been commented, it is essentially the Golden Rule of the Christian Bible. It says that an individual must consider the other person in all actions and not do something that he or she would not want done in return. This passage is a description of humaneness or goodness, and is a way of describing what should be the ideal moral relation between one person and another.

In describing this same virtue, Mencius says that it is

characteristic of human beings, whose basic nature is goodness, not to be able to bear to see the suffering of another person. This does not mean that some people are not capable of hurting others. Rather, it suggests that human nature has the ability to express goodness and, though it can be turned to evil, goodness is the true state of human nature, a goodness defined in terms of the virtue of *jen*.

It is difficult to overestimate the significance of this virtue or teaching to the Confucian tradition as a whole. In fact, one can say that across the centuries of the history of Confucianism, the teaching of *jen* would be the one consistently defining characteristic of the tradition. Whatever century, whatever school of thought, whatever individual Confucian, *jen* has always played a central part.

Righteousness

I is usually translated as “righteousness” (though it can also be translated as something like “conscience”). It means being able to distinguish between right and wrong; it is almost an inner judge within an individual. In this sense, the word *conscience* applies very well to the idea of *I*. To say that someone has a conscience is to say that he or she will act on the basis of an inner sense of right and wrong. This distinction between right and wrong does not necessarily follow popular opinion alone. In fact, in most cases when someone is described as acting based on conscience, it means that he or she has made decisions based on a higher sense of right and wrong. In other words, he or she has not gone along with the majority point of view, because that point of view did not correspond with a higher sense of what was right, according to that individual’s beliefs in a particular situation.

When Confucians discuss righteousness or conscience, they often describe it by explaining what it is *not*. In this case, righteousness or conscience is said to be the opposite of *li*, or “profit,” and *yung*, “utility.” Profit and utility describe two reasons that a person might consider doing something.

Someone might say, for example, if I take a certain action, I will profit; or, he might say that the action will be useful to him, or to family or friends. From the Confucian point of view, these are the wrong motivations to use when judging whether an action should be carried out. The sole concern from the Confucian point of view is whether the action is ultimately right or wrong—that is, whether it is morally right or wrong in and of itself, regardless of possible consequences, good or bad. This question of moral right or wrong takes precedence over any potential thought of how useful or profitable something might be to the individual, or to society, for that matter.

This teaching proved difficult for Confucius and his followers. They were, after all, attempting to convince the rulers of their day to adopt their beliefs. As Confucius and his followers often discovered, the only real point of interest for any ruler of the day was the degree to which Confucian teachings would prove useful to his particular state in this period of terrible civil strife and great contention between states for power. Teachings that stressed doing only what was morally right with no thought of utility or profit were of little interest to political leaders. For this reason, the Confucians met with little success in their attempts to turn the rulers of their day toward their line of thought.

The concept of *I*, even after Confucianism had begun to change over the years, at times produced very grave difficulties for Confucians. Problems arose especially when Confucians served in high governmental positions, giving advice to emperors. Such situations sometimes produced the classic example of a battle of wills: The emperor may want to launch a military campaign to seize more territory. He sees that these actions will bring him great profit and will be highly useful, considering the additional resources that will be added to the realm. The Confucian minister is asked for his advice. Under some circumstances, the Confucian minister might be in complete agreement with the emperor's plan, if

he believes there is some specific justification for military action. However, in this particular case, he realizes that the emperor's decision rests solely on a desire for profit, and finds that there are no moral grounds to support the cause. His decision is that the proposed action is morally unjustifiable and he requests that the emperor desist in his plans.

From the Confucian point of view, no other decision is possible. It is a decision based on what is morally right. In some cases, the emperor might have accepted such advice; in other cases, though, the Confucian minister might be punished—a punishment that resulted from taking a moral stand in the face of a potentially immoral act. To stick by a decision based on a moral determination, no matter what the consequences, is part of the nature of this teaching of *I*. A Confucian minister of state did not relinquish a moral conviction, regardless of the fact that his action might lead to demotion, banishment, imprisonment, torture, or even execution. Moral right from the Confucian perspective was more important than even one's own life. The history of Confucianism is filled with individuals who became martyrs to the cause of *I*.

Rites or Propriety

Li, translated as “rites” or “propriety,” is a teaching found throughout the writings of the ancient sages, particularly the several writings that make up the Classic or Book of Rites. Much of the world of the sage rulers represented in the Chinese Classics is dominated by ritual performance. There are rituals for virtually every occasion and each is seen as significant in terms of the role of the sage ruler and his relation to the authority of *T'ien*. Such ritual reflected the order and structure that dominated not only the individual life of the sage ruler, but the larger society over which he ruled. In turn, it was believed that this order and structure was a mirror image of the order and structure that existed in Heaven itself, as the ruling authority over the entire universe.

Ritual, then, was not simply a casual performance of ceremonies. Instead, it was seen as directly connected to the moral order of the cosmos. At one level, ritual was a way for the individual to show respect to Heaven itself for the organization of all things. At another level, the ritual was itself the way in which moral order was maintained.

The Confucians, as the transmitters of the ancient writings, found a particular importance in preserving the ritual culture that represented China at the time of the sage rulers. As a result, there is much attention paid in Confucian writings to the importance of the ancient rituals. Beginning with the thoughts of Confucius himself, there are a number of passages that discuss the preservation of ritual and the importance of the proper performance of such rites. There are passages, for example, where Confucius is asked to spare the expenditures of ritual by limiting the number of items sacrificed or to lessen the suffering of sacrificed animals by reducing the number of animals included. In each case, Confucius responds by reinforcing the importance of performing the ritual fully and accurately, because he sees such acts not only as something mandated by the sage rulers of antiquity, but also as a symbol of the broader moral order of the universe. The accuracy of the ritual was important, and the Confucians took responsibility for the preservation of the exact form of ancient rituals.

In terms of ritual, Confucius served as both a transmitter and a creator. He emphasized not just the details of ancient rites, but also a critically important element of Confucian understanding of ritual. One can imagine that the ancient culture the Confucians sought to preserve might very well have seen the most important element in ritual as its accuracy and, in fact, might have concluded that any mistake in a ritual performance rendered the act ineffective. From the Confucian perspective, accurate performance was important, but not the most critical element. In a passage in the *Analects*, Confucius laments that ritual has become nothing more than

a mere performance, and he protests this. If the ceremony is performed with accuracy in all its details, what is missing, in Confucius's opinion? The answer is inner feeling. In fact, it is inner feeling that is the key to ritual.

A person performs ritual not for its own sake, but in order to enter into a special relationship with the object of the ritual. For the ruler, or Son of Heaven, the object is Heaven; for the individual, it may be the family, ancestors, or a variety of other possibilities. The point, of course, is that ritual is a symbol of the moral relations that tie all people and the entire world together. To experience the feelings of the ritual is to understand the larger moral implications of ritual performance. Without this broader understanding, there is nothing to the ritual but a physical performance. Although for some, this kind of performance might be quite adequate and efficacious, for a Confucian, it is the inner feelings—not the act of the ritual itself—that represent the real meaning.

This extended sense of inner feelings provides a broadened sense of the meaning of ritual for the Confucian. The term *li* originally meant “ritual,” “rite,” or even “sacrifice.” The Chinese character for the word was a pictogram of a sacrificial vessel being presented to a spirit. The term can be used, however, in a very broad context, one that falls outside of the strict use of the term *ritual* itself. For example, it can be said that one acts in a fashion of *li*, ritual, toward his or her elders. That does not mean he or she performs constant rituals for the benefit of elders. Rather, it means that the person behaves with a ritual attitude. But what does it mean to act with a ritual attitude? It means that one acts with propriety or an attitude of deference toward others.

Again, one does not normally think of a connection between the terms *ritual* and *propriety*. In a very real sense, however, propriety is, by definition, acting ritually. This connection is, for the Confucian, a demonstration of the degree to which all behavior may be considered ritual behavior because it is done out of deference to the moral authority

of sage rulers and the ultimate authority of Heaven. It is showing deference to the moral structure of the world in which we live.

Human Nature and Learning

With the ideal of the noble person, Confucians placed major significance on the ability of each individual to learn to become moral. Self-cultivation was aimed at the development of the kind of teachings described: humaneness, righteousness, and ritual and propriety. The question that arose early in the Confucian tradition was whether such qualities were inherent in the individual or were to be acquired from outside. The Confucians believed that the models for these teachings were the sages of antiquity; no one doubted the sages' ability to embody these virtues in their highest form. The question, of course, was whether all people shared the same nature as the sages.

Confucius himself did not address the question of human nature. He left that issue to be debated by the major teachers who followed him. Essentially, two positions developed on the question, one from Mencius and one from Hsün Tzu. It is important to remember that in the early days of Confucianism, Hsün Tzu was the most prominent interpreter of Confucius. Mencius was virtually unknown to his own generation, even though later, after the advent of Neo-Confucianism, he was recognized as the orthodox interpreter of Confucius.

On the question of human nature, Mencius and Hsün Tzu appear to have had very different interpretations. For Mencius, human nature was originally good. This does not mean that there are not evil people, but Mencius saw evil as a violation of the original good. In this respect, everyone has the same nature as the sages of antiquity, although the natures of the sages were fully realized, whereas ordinary people had to make great efforts to realize their own capacity to be a sage. Mencius defines this human nature in terms of *jen*, *i*, *li*, and *chih*, or "wisdom." Mencius said that human responsibility lies with

developing the inner moral nature with which each person is born. Learning, though arduous, was essentially focused on manifesting more fully what was already inherent within human nature.

For Hsün Tzu, by contrast, human nature was deficient without thorough learning and education. He even suggested that human nature in the raw was evil. (Hsün Tzu was the only Confucian philosopher to take this position.) Although this suggestion was never taken very seriously in the tradition, Hsün Tzu does represent a major trend within Confucian thought. This trend believed that human nature was in need of diligent effort in education under the very strict models of the sages of antiquity. Though Mencius came to dominate Confucian thought, Hsün Tzu played a critical role in emphasizing the Confucian tradition's belief in the importance of education in the process of the transformation of a person into a moral individual. It is a matter of degree as to how much moral quality the individual begins with, but there is a steady tradition of emphasis on the absolute necessity of learning to create the moral person, the noble person, envisioned by Confucius with the full embodiment of the virtues of humaneness, righteousness, and ritual or propriety and wisdom, as a reflection of the moral character of the sages of antiquity and ultimately heaven itself. It rested with the Neo-Confucians to bring philosophical sophistication to these teachings as well as the proximity of the sage as a model to emulate.

NEO-CONFUCIAN TEACHINGS

What makes Neo-Confucianism different from traditional Confucianism is its more philosophical orientation and the degree to which it is a response to both Buddhism and Taoism. Neo-Confucianism entertains questions about what human nature is like and what its relation is to the rest of the universe at a far more sophisticated level than earlier Confucian teachings did. The various schools of Neo-Confucianism have very different understandings of human nature and the universe,

a universe now understood in terms of a philosophical system rather than the simple ethical teachings of the Confucian predecessors. It is not that the ethical teachings are put aside, but rather that they are brought into a more elaborate system of ideas, including theories about the origins of the cosmos.

Neo-Confucianism is also different from earlier Confucianism because it represents a very conscious response to Buddhism and Taoism, one that is both negative and positive. On the one hand, Neo-Confucianism originally grew as an attempt to counter what were seen as the otherworldly characteristics of Buddhism and Taoism. To the Confucians, humankind's concern should be with real problems in the world, not the seeking of a spiritual release from the world itself. On the other hand, the Confucians recognized that both Buddhism and Taoism provided a model for religious life and could play a valuable role in establishing guidelines for a more spiritual life within Confucianism. As a result, the spiritual or religious life in Neo-Confucianism became much more significant than it had been in earlier Confucianism.

A basic core of teachings characterizes the Neo-Confucian movement, which stretches across a wide range of time and cultural settings and represents a broad variety of individuals. Basic Confucian values and teachings were reaffirmed, including the cultivation of sagehood as a religious goal and the need to take moral action in the world. Neo-Confucians felt the need to reemphasize the old teachings because many of these ideas seemed to have fallen into eclipse, particularly during the years after the end of the Han Dynasty and into the T'ang Dynasty, when the expansion of Buddhism and Taoism reached its height. It was the Neo-Confucians who established Mencius as the interpreter of Confucius, and, with this move, they were able to draw attention to the theory of the goodness of human nature as well as the foundation of teaching in terms of the basic virtues of Confucianism—humaneness, righteousness, ritual, and propriety.

The traditional Confucian ideal of the *chün tzu*, or noble

person, was also transformed for the Neo-Confucians to the *sheng*, or sage. With the acceptance of Mencius as the orthodox interpreter of Confucius, the ideal of the sage moved out of antiquity and became a goal for every individual. Mencius had said that anyone could become a sage, and the Neo-Confucians took him seriously. Mencius did not mean that the goal of sagehood was easily accessible for most people. In fact, for most people, it remained largely unapproachable. Now, however, it was believed to be possible and came to be considered the direct object of learning and self-cultivation.

We have described the *Li hsüeh*, or School of Principle, and the *Hsin hsüeh*, or School of Mind, the two major schools of Neo-Confucianism. These divisions differed in their understanding of the self-cultivation process required to achieve sagehood because of subtle differences in their philosophical understanding of human nature. They were united, however, in their conviction that the individual needed to seek moral transformation, to work toward the goal of sagehood. Even the *shih hsüeh*, School of Practical Learning, which sought to turn away from the more philosophical teachings of the School of Principle and the School of Mind, did not reject the goal of sagehood. It defined sagehood in terms of the basic moral teachings of early Confucianism, but it retained that ideal state as the aim Confucians hoped to reach.

For all Neo-Confucians, then, sagehood was the goal of religious life. This religious life, in turn, was measured in terms of the Confucian's ability not to renounce the world as some believed the Buddhists and Taoists advocated, but to commit to the moral transformation of the world.

The end result of these concepts was that the Neo-Confucians were committed to taking moral action in the world. They saw in early Confucianism a tradition that focused on moral action and they sought to recapture this tone of the early teachings. Even as they became more interested in philosophical discussion and the cultivation of sagehood, they did not abandon the emphasis on the need to establish an agenda

of moral prerogatives for acting in the world. They saw their own reestablishment of Confucianism as a way of embracing this fundamental idea—to act and to transform the world through the power of the moral teachings of the sages of antiquity and through their own learning and self-cultivation.