Kao Tzu said: “The nature of man may be likened to the willow tree, whereas righteousness may be likened to wooden cups and wicker baskets. To turn man’s nature into humanity and righteousness is like turning a willow tree into cups and baskets.” Mencius replied: “Sir, can you follow the nature of the willow tree, and make the cups and baskets? Or must you violate its nature to make the cups and baskets? If you must violate the nature of the willow tree to turn it into cups and baskets, then don’t you mean you must also violate the nature of man to turn it into humanity and righteousness? Your words, alas, would incite everyone in the world to regard humanity and righteousness as a curse!”

Kao Tzu said: “The nature of man may be likened to a swift current of water: you lead it eastward and it will flow to the east; you lead it westward and it will flow to the west. Human nature is neither disposed to good nor to evil, just as water is neither disposed to east nor west.” Mencius replied: “It is true that water is neither disposed to east nor west, but is it neither disposed to flowing upward nor downward? The tendency of human nature to do good is like that of water to flow downward. There is no man who does not tend to do good; there is no water that does not flow downward. Now you may strike water and make it splash over your forehead, or you may even force it up the hills. But is this in the nature of water? It is of course due to the force of circumstances. Similarly, man may be brought to do evil, and that is because the same is done to his nature.”

Kao Tzu said: “Nature is what is born in us.” Mencius asked: “’Nature is what is born in us’—is it not the same as saying white is white?” “Yes,” said Kao Tzu. Mencius asked: “Then the whiteness of a white feather is the same as the whiteness of white snow, and the whiteness of white snow the same as the whiteness of white jade?” “Yes,” Kao Tzu replied. Mencius asked: “Well, then, the nature of a dog is the same as the nature of a cow, and the nature of a cow the same as the nature of a man, is it not?”

Kao Tzu said: “The appetite for food and sex is part of our nature. Humanity comes from within and not from without, whereas righteousness comes from without and not from within.” Mencius asked: “What do you mean when you say that humanity comes from within while righteousness comes from without?” Kao Tzu replied: “When I see anyone who is old I regard him as old. This regard for age is not a part of me. Just as when I see anyone who is white I regard him
as white, because I can observe the whiteness externally. For this reason I say
righteousness comes from without.” Mencius said: “Granted there is no difference
between regarding the white horse as white and the white man as white. But is
there no difference between one’s regard for age in an old horse and one’s regard
for age in an old man, I wonder? Moreover, is it old age itself or our respectful
regard for old age that constitutes a point of righteousness?” Kao Tzu persisted:
“My own brother I love; the brother of a man of Ch’in I do not love. Here the
sanction for the feeling rests in me, and therefore I call it [i.e., humanity] internal.
An old man of Ch’u I regard as old, just as an old man among my own people
I regard as old. Here the sanction for the feeling lies in old age, and therefore I
call it [i.e., righteousness] external.” Mencius answered him: “We love the Ch’in
people’s roast as much as we love our own roast. Here we have a similar situa-
tion with respect to things. Would you say, then, that this love of roast is also
something external?”

The disciple Kung-tu Tzu said: “Kao Tzu says that human nature is neither
good nor bad. Some say that human nature can be turned to be good or bad. Thus
when [sage-kings] Wen and Wu were in power the people loved virtue; when
[wicked kings] Yu and Li were in power the people indulged in violence. Some
say that some natures are good and some are bad. Thus even while [the sage] Yao
was sovereign there was the bad man Hsiang, even a bad father like Ku-sou had a
good son like [the sage-king] Shun, and even with [the wicked] Chou for nephew
and king there were the men of virtue Ch’i, the Viscount of Wei, and the Prince
Pi-kan. Now, you say that human nature is good. Are the others then all wrong?”
Mencius replied: “When left to follow its natural feelings human nature will do
good. This is why I say it is good. If it becomes evil, it is not the fault of man’s
original capability. The sense of mercy is found in all men; the sense of shame is
found in all men; the sense of respect is found in all men; the sense of right and
wrong is found in all men. The sense of mercy constitutes humanity; the sense
of shame constitutes righteousness; the sense of respect constitutes decorum
(li); the sense of right and wrong constitutes wisdom. Humanity, righteousness,
decorum, and wisdom are not something instilled into us from without; they
are inherent in our nature. Only we give them no thought. Therefore it is said:
‘Seek and you will find them, neglect and you will lose them.’ Some have these
virtues to a much greater degree than others—twice, five times, and inacculably
more—and that is because those others have not developed to the fullest extent
their original capability. It is said in the Book of Odes:

    Heaven so produced the teeming multitudes that
    For everything there is its principle.
    The people will keep to the constant principles,
    And all will love a beautiful character.
Confucius said, regarding this poem: ‘The writer of this poem understands indeed the nature of the Way! For wherever there are things and affairs there must be their principles. As the people keep to the constant principles, they will come to love a beautiful character.’”

Mencius said: “All men have a sense of commiseration. The ancient kings had this commiserating heart and hence a commiserating government. When a commiserating government is conducted from a commiserating heart, one can rule the whole empire as if one were turning it on one’s palm. Why I say all men have a sense of commiseration is this: Here is a man who suddenly notices a child about to fall into a well. Invariably he will feel a sense of alarm and compassion. And this is not for the purpose of gaining the favor of the child’s parents, or seeking the approbation of his neighbors and friends, or for fear of blame should he fail to rescue it. Thus we see that no man is without a sense of compassion, or a sense of shame, or a sense of courtesy, or a sense of right and wrong. The sense of compassion is the beginning of humanity; the sense of shame is the beginning of righteousness; the sense of courtesy is the beginning of decorum; the sense of right and wrong is the beginning of wisdom. Every man has within himself these four beginnings, just as he has four limbs. Since everyone has these four beginnings within him, the man who considers himself incapable of exercising them is destroying himself. If he considers his sovereign incapable of exercising them, he is likewise destroying his sovereign. Let every man but attend to expanding and developing these four beginnings that are in our very being, and they will issue forth like a conflagration being kindled and a spring being opened up. If they can be fully developed, these virtues are capable of safeguarding all within the four seas; if allowed to remain undeveloped, they will not suffice even for serving one’s parents.”

Mencius said: “Man’s innate ability is the ability possessed by him that is not acquired through learning. Man’s innate knowledge is the knowledge possessed by him that is not the result of reflective thinking. Every child knows enough to love his parents, and when he is grown up he knows enough to respect his elder brothers. The love for one’s parents is really humanity and the respect for one’s elders is really righteousness—all that is necessary is to have these natural feelings applied to all men.”