

HSÜN TZU

Man's Nature Is Evil

HSÜN TZU (310–c. 220 B.C.E.), also known as Xunzi, was born in interesting and tumultuous times to a moderately aristocratic family in the small state of Chao in the northeast of China. Hsün Tzu means “Master Hsün,” and at birth, his family name was Hsün K’uang. His education centered on the writings of the sages of ancient China and a study of Confucian doctrine. The era in China from 453 to 221 B.C.E. is known as the period of the Warring States, during which frequent conflicts arose between competing states. China was not unified until 221 B.C.E., when one of Hsün Tzu’s former students, Li Ssu, aided the first emperor of the authoritarian Ch’in Dynasty, ironically enough by using oppressive methods that Hsün Tzu would have opposed.

Hsün Tzu is first mentioned by early biographers at age 50, when he was living in the state of Ch’i where, because of the policies of its governor, many of China’s great early philosophers practiced. In terms of the era and the collection of thinkers, the state of Ch’i was comparable to ancient Athens. The doctrines of Confucius (551–479 B.C.E.) had taken root and were interpreted by major figures such as Mencius (372–289 B.C.E.), who became chief interpreter. Like Confucius, Mencius held that human nature was fundamentally good, and he credited a deity with power over the world with a positive moral drive.

Hsün Tzu, however, took a very different stance. He felt that the forces of heaven that Mencius promoted were actually the forces of nature and that there was no divine force operating within nature. He did not credit prayer with any coincidental outcome (such as the sun coming out after one prayed for sunshine). Further, Hsün Tzu became famous for declaring that human nature was evil, somewhat in line with the Christian religion’s concept of original sin. The result of his dissension was a bitter disagreement with Mencius, who held the reigning philosophical view of the period. Hsün Tzu came to be considered unorthodox, and his work was widely neglected during his life. He seems to have spent time in the three major states of the period — Ch’i, Ch’in, and Ch’u — but late in life, when



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he returned to Ch'i after having lived in its rival state Ch'in, he found himself unwelcome and ultimately retired to Ch'u, where he died.

Despite his philosophy being out of favor, Hsün Tzu's works were exceptionally well preserved. They were edited in 818 C.E. by a court scholar who collected all the individual writings and gathered them into thirty-two sections—an edition that survives today. It is not known whether every one of the sections was written by Hsün Tzu himself, but twenty-five sections are unquestionably authentic. His view that human nature was evil was based on his conviction that following one's natural instincts would almost certainly lead one to an unhappy life. Yet, he also maintained that we are born without any moral leanings or moral knowledge. As a result, Hsün Tzu insisted that we must study the writings of the classics and the sages, that we must follow the Way (the Tao), the path that leads to peace and understanding, and that we must use the rituals of the ancients as aids in self-perfection. As a result, Hsün Tzu is well known for placing great emphasis on education as a lifelong pursuit.

HSÜN TZU'S RHETORIC

Hsün Tzu is a very careful writer who understands language and the principles of rhetoric. He relies on analogy and simile to a much greater extent than the other authors in this book. For example, in paragraph 2, he points to the fact that warped wood needs to be straightened just as blunt metal must be sharpened. These are analogies for his theory that the nature of a person must be shaped and formed by a teacher or a social order. He uses this analogy again and adds, in paragraph 6, the potter and the carpenter, who both shape a material into a desirable form. People, he insists, must also be shaped into a desirable form because, as he tells us often, "man's nature is evil and . . . his goodness is the result of conscious activity" (para. 5).

The important point is that Hsün Tzu links instruction to the achievement of moral perfection. Because he feels that our natural inclinations may lead us astray, we need the rituals of discipline to help us achieve moral perfection. Otherwise, we will lose our way. We will follow our instincts and become materialistic and "petty men" marked by bad behavior and an inclination toward a sensual and selfish life. Like Aristotle, Tzu associates wisdom with virtue and living the good life with pursuing good rather than evil.

Most of the Confucian doctrines and teachers in Hsün Tzu's time were optimistic because they assumed that people are born with a moral character that will lead them to a virtuous life. But Hsün Tzu thought that the sensory life of nature would veer toward immorality and evil behavior resulting from pride, envy, lust, and fear. Following the teachings of the sages, then, is the antidote to his prediction for an undisciplined life. Hsün Tzu recommends that we follow established ritual and, in the process, accrue learning and wisdom. By his own reckoning, the man who does not attend the rituals of behavior is not much different from a beast of the fields because that man, like all animals, gives in to his natural inclinations, which Hsün Tzu sees as leading to degradation and moral destruction. For Hsün Tzu, following the instruction of the sages is the means of becoming truly human, of becoming a moral person bent on achieving wisdom and true happiness.

Because Hsün Tzu disagrees with the major Chinese philosopher, Mencius, his essay constitutes an argument in which he attempts to prove that man's nature is evil. He repeats statements such as, "From this is it obvious, then, that man's nature is evil, and that his goodness is the result of conscious activity" (paras. 5, 9, 10, 12, etc.). Repetition is a powerful rhetorical strategy when handled carefully. The reason he uses it here is that each statement concludes a brief logical analysis. For example, in paragraph 9, Hsün Tzu says that "An understanding of ritual principles is not a part of man's original nature," and therefore, he must be instructed in them. If they are good principles and lead to an ethical life, that proves he began without an ethical understanding—hence, human nature is evil.

❏ PREREADING QUESTIONS: WHAT TO READ FOR

The following prereading questions may help you anticipate key issues in the discussion of Hsün Tzu's "Man's Nature Is Evil." Keeping them in mind during your first reading of the selection should help focus your attention.

- 1. Why does Hsün Tzu say man's nature is evil?
- 2. How will proper rituals and the teachings of the sages correct man's evil nature?
- 3. How does Hsün Tzu describe "conscious activity"?

Man's Nature Is Evil

Man's nature is evil; goodness is the result of conscious activity. The nature of man is such that he is born with a fondness for profit. If he indulges this fondness, it will lead him into wrangling and strife, and all sense of courtesy and humility will disappear. He is born with feelings of envy and hate, and if he indulges these, they will lead him into violence and crime, and all sense of loyalty and good faith will disappear. Man is born with the desires of the eyes and ears, with a fondness for beautiful sights and sounds. If he indulges these, they will lead him into license and wantonness, and all ritual principles and correct forms will be lost. Hence, any man who follows his nature and indulges his emotions will inevitably become involved in wrangling and strife, will violate the forms¹ and rules of society, and will end as a criminal. Therefore, man must first be transformed by the instructions of a teacher and guided by ritual principles, and only then will he be able to observe the dictates of courtesy and humility, obey the forms and rules of society, and achieve order. It is obvious from this, then, that man's nature is evil, and that his goodness is the result of conscious activity.

¹ Reading *wen* instead of *fen*. [All notes in this selection are from the editor.]

A warped piece of wood must wait until it has been laid against the straightening board, steamed, and forced into shape before it can become straight; a piece of blunt metal must wait until it has been whetted on a grindstone before it can become sharp. Similarly, since man's nature is evil, it must wait for the instructions of a teacher before it can become upright, and for the guidance of ritual principles before it can become orderly. If men have no teachers to instruct them, they will be inclined towards evil and not upright; and if they have no ritual principles to guide them, they will be perverse and violent and lack order. In ancient times the sage kings realized that man's nature is evil, and that therefore he inclines toward evil and violence and is not upright or orderly. Accordingly they created ritual principles and laid down certain regulations in order to reform man's emotional nature and make it upright, in order to train and transform it and guide it in the proper channels. In this way they caused all men to become orderly and to conform to the Way. Hence, today any man who takes to heart the instructions of his teacher, applies himself to his studies, and abides by ritual principles may become a gentleman, but anyone who gives free rein to his emotional nature, is content to indulge his passions, and disregards ritual principles becomes a petty man. It is obvious from this, therefore, that man's nature is evil, and that his goodness is the result of conscious activity.

Mencius states that man is capable of learning because his nature is good, but I say that this is wrong. It indicates that he has not really understood man's nature nor distinguished properly between the basic nature and conscious activity. The nature is that which is given by Heaven; you cannot learn it, you cannot acquire it by effort. Ritual principles, on the other hand, are created by sages; you can learn to apply them, you can work to bring them to completion. That part of man which cannot be learned or acquired by effort is called the nature; that part of him which can be acquired by learning and brought to completion by effort is called conscious activity. This is the difference between nature and conscious activity.

It is a part of man's nature that his eyes can see and his ears can hear. But the faculty of clear sight can never exist separately from the eye, nor can the faculty of keen hearing exist separately from the ear. It is obvious, then, that you cannot acquire clear sight and keen hearing by study. Mencius states that man's nature is good, and that all evil arises because he loses his original nature. Such a view, I believe, is erroneous. It is the way with man's nature that as soon as he is born he begins to depart from his original naïveté and simplicity, and therefore he must inevitably lose what Mencius regards as his original nature.² It is obvious from this, then, that the nature of man is evil.

² Mencius, it will be recalled, stated: "The great man is he who does not lose his child's heart" (*Mencius* IVB, 12). If I understand Hsün Tzu correctly, he is arguing that this "child's-heart," i.e., the simplicity and naïveté of the baby, will inevitably be lost by all men simply in the process of growing up, and therefore it cannot be regarded as the source of goodness.

Those who maintain that the nature is good praise and approve whatever has not departed from the original simplicity and naïveté of the child. That is, they consider that beauty belongs to the original simplicity and naïveté and goodness to the original mind in the same way that clear sight is inseparable from the eye and keen hearing from the ear. Hence, they maintain that [the nature possesses goodness] in the same way that the eye possesses clear vision or the ear keenness of hearing. Now it is the nature of man that when he is hungry he will desire satisfaction, when he is cold he will desire warmth, and when he is weary he will desire rest. This is his emotional nature. And yet a man, although he is hungry, will not dare to be the first to eat if he is in the presence of his elders, because he knows that he should yield to them, and although he is weary, he will not dare to demand rest because he knows that he should relieve others of the burden of labor. For a son to yield to his father or a younger brother to yield to his elder brother, for a son to relieve his father of work or a younger brother to relieve his elder brother—acts such as these are all contrary to man's nature and run counter to his emotions. And yet they represent the way of filial piety and the proper forms enjoined by ritual principles. Hence, if men follow their emotional nature, there will be no courtesy or humility; courtesy and humility in fact run counter to man's emotional nature. From this it is obvious, then, that man's nature is evil, and that his goodness is the result of conscious activity.

Someone may ask: if man's nature is evil, then where do ritual principles come from? I would reply: all ritual principles are produced by the conscious activity of the sages; essentially they are not products of man's nature. A potter molds clay and makes a vessel, but the vessel is the product of the conscious activity of the potter, not essentially a product of his human nature. A carpenter carves a piece of wood and makes a utensil, but the utensil is the product of the conscious activity of the carpenter, not essentially a product of his human nature. The sage gathers together his thoughts and ideas, experiments with various forms of conscious activity, and so produces ritual principles and sets forth laws and regulations. Hence, these ritual principles and laws are the products of the conscious activity of the sage, not essentially products of his human nature.

Phenomena such as the eye's fondness for beautiful forms, the ear's fondness for beautiful sounds, the mouth's fondness for delicious flavors, the mind's fondness for profit, or the body's fondness for pleasure and ease—these are all products of the emotional nature of man. They are instinctive and spontaneous; man does not have to do anything to produce them. But that which does not come into being instinctively but must wait for some activity to bring it into being is called the product of conscious activity. These are the products of the nature and of conscious activity respectively, and the proof that they are not the same. Therefore, the sage transforms his nature and initiates conscious

activity; from this conscious activity he produces ritual principles, and when they have been produced he sets up rules and regulations. Hence, ritual principles and rules are produced by the sage. In respect to human nature the sage is the same as all other men and does not surpass³ them; it is only in his conscious activity that he differs from and surpasses other men.

It is man's emotional nature to love profit and desire gain. Suppose now that a man has some wealth to be divided.⁴ If he indulges his emotional nature, loving profit and desiring gain, then he will quarrel and wrangle even with his own brothers over the division. But if he has been transformed by the proper forms of ritual principle, then he will be capable of yielding even to a complete stranger. Hence, to indulge the emotional nature leads to the quarreling of brothers, but to be transformed by ritual principles makes a man capable of yielding to strangers.

Every man who desires to do good does so precisely because his nature is evil. A man whose accomplishments are meager longs for greatness; an ugly man longs for beauty; a man in cramped quarters longs for spaciousness; a poor man longs for wealth; a humble man longs for eminence. Whatever a man lacks in himself he will seek outside. But if a man is already rich, he will not long for wealth, and if he is already eminent, he will not long for greater power. What a man already possesses in himself he will not bother to look for outside. From this we can see that men desire to do good precisely because their nature is evil. Ritual principles are certainly not a part of man's original nature. Therefore, he forces himself to study and to seek to possess them. An understanding of ritual principles is not a part of man's original nature, and therefore he ponderers and plans and thereby seeks to understand them. Hence, man in the state in which he is born neither possesses nor understands ritual principles. If he does not possess ritual principles, his behavior will be chaotic, and if he does not understand them, he will be wild and irresponsible. In fact, therefore, man in the state in which he is born possesses this tendency towards chaos and irresponsibility. From this it is obvious, then, that man's nature is evil, and that his goodness is the result of conscious activity.

Mencius states that man's nature is good, but I say that this view is wrong. All men in the world, past and present, agree in defining goodness as that which is upright, reasonable, and orderly, and evil as that which is prejudiced, irresponsible, and chaotic. This is the distinction between good and evil. Now suppose that man's nature was in fact intrinsically upright, reasonable, and orderly—then what need would there be for sage kings and ritual principles? The existence of sage kings and ritual principles could certainly add nothing

to the situation. But because man's nature is in fact evil, this is not so. Therefore, in ancient times the sages, realizing that man's nature is evil, that it is prejudiced and not upright, irresponsible and lacking in order, for this reason established the authority of the ruler to control it, elucidated ritual principles to transform it, set up laws and standards to correct it, and meted out strict punishments to restrain it. As a result, all the world achieved order and conformed to goodness. Such is the orderly government of the sage kings and the transforming power of ritual principles. Now let someone try doing away with the authority of the ruler, ignoring the transforming power of ritual principles, rejecting the order that comes from laws and standards, and dispensing with the restrictive power of punishments, and then watch and see how the people of the world treat each other. He will find that the powerful impose upon the weak and rob them, the many terrorize the few and extort from them, and in no time the whole world will be given up to chaos and mutual destruction. It is obvious from this, then, that man's nature is evil, and that his goodness is the result of conscious activity.

Those who are good at discussing antiquity must demonstrate the validity of what they say in terms of modern times; those who are good at discussing Heaven must show proofs from the human world. In discussions of all kinds, men value what is in accord with the facts and what can be proved to be valid. Hence if a man sits on his mat propounding some theory, he should be able to stand right up and put it into practice, and show that it can be extended over a wide area with equal validity. Now Mencius states that man's nature is good, but this is neither in accord with the facts, nor can it be proved to be valid. One may sit down and propound such a theory, but he cannot stand up and put it into practice, nor can he extend it over a wide area with any success at all. How, then, could it be anything but erroneous?

If the nature of man were good, we could dispense with sage kings and forget about ritual principles. But if it is evil, then we must go along with the sage kings and honor ritual principles. The straightening board is made because of the warped wood; the plumb line is employed because things are crooked; rulers are set up and ritual principles elucidated because the nature of man is evil. From this it is obvious, then, that man's nature is evil, and that his goodness is the result of conscious activity. A straight piece of wood does not have to wait for the straightening board to become straight; it is straight by nature. But a warped piece of wood must wait until it has been laid against the straightening board, steamed, and forced into shape before it can become straight, because by nature it is warped. Similarly, since man's nature is evil, he must wait for the ordering power of the sage kings and the transforming power of ritual principles; only then can he achieve order and conform to goodness. From this it is obvious, then, that man's nature is evil, and that his goodness is the result of conscious activity.

³ Reading *kuo* instead of *yi*.

⁴ Omitting the words *ti-hsing*, which do not seem to belong here.

Someone may ask whether ritual principles and concerted conscious activity are not themselves a part of man's nature, so that for that reason the sage is capable of producing them. But I would answer that this is not so. A potter may mold clay and produce an earthen pot, but surely molding pots out of clay is not a part of the potter's human nature. A carpenter may carve wood and produce a utensil, but surely carving utensils out of wood is not a part of the carpenter's human nature. The sage stands in the same relation to ritual principles as the potter to the things he molds and produces. How, then, could ritual principles and concerted conscious activity be a part of man's basic human nature?

As far as human nature goes, the sages Yao and Shun possessed the same nature as the tyrant Chieh or Robber Chih, and the gentleman possesses the same nature as the petty man. Would you still maintain, then, that ritual principles and concerted conscious activity are a part of man's nature? If you do so, then what reason is there to pay any particular honor to Yao, Shun,⁵ or the gentleman? The reason people honor Yao, Shun, and the gentleman is that they are able to transform their nature, apply themselves to conscious activity, and produce ritual principles. The sage, then, must stand in the same relation to ritual principles as the potter to the things he molds and produces. Looking at it this way, how could ritual principles and concerted conscious activity be a part of man's nature? The reason people despise Chieh, Robber Chih, or the petty man is that they give free rein to their nature, follow their emotions, and are content to indulge their passions, so that their conduct is marked by greed and contentiousness. Therefore, it is clear that man's nature is evil, and that his goodness is the result of conscious activity.

Heaven did not bestow any particular favor upon Tseng Tzu, Min Tzu-ch'ien, or Hsiao-i that it withheld from other men.⁶ And yet these three men among all others proved most capable of carrying out their duties as sons and winning fame for their filial piety. Why? Because of their thorough attention to ritual principles. Heaven has not bestowed any particular favor upon the inhabitants of Ch'i and Lu which it has withheld from the people of Ch'in. And yet when it comes to observing the duties of father and son and the separation of roles between husband and wife, the inhabitants of Ch'in cannot match the filial reverence and respect for proper form which marks the people of Ch'i and Lu.⁷ Why? Because the people of Ch'in give free rein to their emotional nature, are content

⁵ Reading *Shun* instead of *Yü* here and in the following sentence to conform to the sentence above.

⁶ Min Tzu-ch'ien and Tseng Tzu were disciples of Confucius famed for their filial conduct. Hsiao-i is identified by commentators as the heir apparent of Kao-tsung—I.e., King Wu-ting—of the Yin dynasty.

⁷ Reading *kung* instead of *chü*, *wen* instead of *fu*, and adding the words *Ch'in-jen* at the beginning of the sentence. Ch'i and Lu were of course the main centers of Confucian learning.

to indulge their passions, and are careless of ritual principles. It is certainly not due to any difference in human nature between the two groups.

The man in the street can become a Yü.⁸ What does this mean? What made the sage emperor Yü a Yü, I would reply, was the fact that he practiced benevolence and righteousness and abided by the proper rules and standards. If this is so, then benevolence, righteousness, and proper standards must be based upon principles which can be known and practiced. Any man in the street has the essential faculties needed to understand benevolence, righteousness, and proper standards, and the potential ability to put them into practice. Therefore it is clear that he can become a Yü.

Would you maintain that benevolence, righteousness, and proper standards are not based upon any principles that can be known and practiced? If so, then even a Yü could not have understood or practiced them. Or would you maintain that the man in the street does not have the essential faculties needed to understand them or the potential ability to put them into practice? If so, then you are saying that the man in the street in his family life cannot understand the duties required of a father or a son and in public life cannot comprehend the correct relationship between ruler and subject. But in fact this is not true. Any man in the street *can* understand the duties required of a father or a son and *can* comprehend the correct relationship between ruler and subject. Therefore, it is obvious that the essential faculties needed to understand such ethical principles and the potential ability to put them into practice must be a part of his make-up. Now if he takes these faculties and abilities and applies them to the principles of benevolence and righteousness, which we have already shown to be knowable and practicable,⁹ then it is obvious that he can become a Yü. If the man in the street applies himself to training and study, concentrates his mind and will, and considers and examines things carefully, continuing his efforts over a long period of time and accumulating good acts without stop, then he can achieve a godlike understanding and form a triad with Heaven and earth. The sage is a man who has arrived where he has through the accumulation of good acts.

You have said, someone may object, that the sage has arrived where he has through the accumulation of good acts. Why is it, then, that everyone is not able to accumulate good acts in the same way? I would reply: everyone is capable of doing so, but not everyone can be made to do so. The petty man is capable of becoming a gentleman, yet he is not willing to do so; the gentleman is capable of becoming a petty man but he is not willing to do so. The petty man and the gentleman are perfectly capable of changing places; the fact that they do not

⁸ This was apparently an old saying. Cf. *Mencius* VIB, 2: "Chiao of Ts'ao asked, 'It is said that all men may become Yaos or Shuns. Is this so?' Mencius replied, 'It is.'"

⁹ Following the rearrangement of the text suggested by T'ao Hung-ch'ing and Kanaya.

actually do so is what I mean when I say that they are capable of doing so but they cannot be made to do so. Hence, it is correct to say that the man in the street is *capable* of becoming a Yü but it is not necessarily correct to say that he will in fact find it possible to do so. But although he does not find it possible to do so does not prove that he is incapable of doing so.

A person with two feet is theoretically capable of walking to every corner of the earth, although in fact no one has ever found it possible to do so. Similarly, the artisan, the carpenter, the farmer, and the merchant are theoretically capable of exchanging professions, although in actual practice they find it impossible to do so. From this we can see that, although someone may be theoretically capable of becoming something, he may not in practice find it possible to do so. But although he does not find it possible to do so, this does not prove that he is not capable of doing so. To find it practically possible or impossible to do something and to be capable or incapable of doing something are two entirely different things. It is perfectly clear, then, that a man is theoretically capable of becoming something else.¹⁰

Yao asked Shun, "What are man's emotions like?" Shun replied, "Man's emotions are very unlovely things indeed! What need is there to ask any further? Once a man acquires a wife and children, he no longer treats his parents as a filial son should. Once he succeeds in satisfying his cravings and desires, he neglects his duty to his friends. Once he has won a high position and a good stipend, he ceases to serve his sovereign with a loyal heart. Man's emotions, man's emotions—they are very unlovely things indeed! What need is there to ask any further? Only the worthy man is different from this."¹¹

There is the understanding of the sage, the understanding of the gentleman and man of breeding, the understanding of the petty man, and the understanding of the menial. He speaks many words but they are graceful and well ordered; all day he discourses on his reasons, employing a thousand different and varied modes of expression, and yet all that he says is united around a single principle: such is the understanding of the sage. He speaks little but what he says is brief and to the point, logical and clearly presented, as though laid out with a plumb line: such is the understanding of the gentleman and man of breeding. His words are all flattery, his actions irresponsible; whatever he does is shot through with error: such is the understanding of the petty man. His words are rapid and shrill but never to the point; his talents are varied and many but of no practical use; he is full of subtle distinctions and elegant turns of phrase that serve no practical purpose; he ignores right or wrong, disdains

to discuss crooked or straight, but seeks only to overpower the arguments of his opponent: such is the understanding of the menial.¹²

There is superior valor, there is the middle type of valor, and there is inferior valor. When proper standards prevail in the world, to dare to bring your own conduct into accord with them; when the Way of the former kings prevails, to dare to follow its dictates; to refuse to bow before the ruler of a disordered age, to refuse to follow the customs of the people of a disordered age; to accept poverty and hardship if they are in the cause of benevolent action; to reject wealth and eminence if they are not consonant with benevolent action; if the world recognizes you, to share¹³ in the world's joys; if the world does not recognize you, to stand alone and without fear: this is superior valor. To be reverent in bearing and modest in intention; to value honor and make light of material goods; to dare to promote and honor the worthy, and reject and cast off the unworthy: such is the middle type of valor. To ignore your own safety in the quest for wealth; to make light of danger and try to talk your way out of every difficulty; to rely on lucky escapes; to ignore right and wrong, just and unjust, and seek only to overpower the arguments of your opponents: such is inferior valor.

Fan-jo and Chü-shu were famous bows of ancient times, but if they had not first been subjected to presses and straighteners, they would never have become true of themselves. Ts'ung of Duke Huan of Ch'i, Ch'üeh of T'ai-kung of Ch'i, Lu of King Wen of the Chou, Hu of Lord Chuang of Ch'u, and Kan-chiang, Mo-yeh, Chü-ch'üeh, and Pi-liü of King Ho-liü of Wu were all famous swords of antiquity, but if they had not been subjected to the grindstone, they would never have become sharp, and if men of strength had not wielded them, they would never have been able to cut anything. Hua-liu, Ch'i-chi, Hsien-li, and Lu-erh were famous horses of antiquity, but if they had not been subjected to the restraint of bit and bridle and the threat of the whip, and driven by a master driver like Tsao-fu, they would never have succeeded in traveling a thousand *li* in one day.

In the same way a man, no matter how fine his nature or how keen his mind, must seek a worthy teacher to study under and good companions to associate with. If he studies under a worthy teacher, he will be able to hear about the ways of Yao, Shun, Yü, and T'ang, and if he associates with good companions, he will be able to observe conduct that is loyal and respectful. Then, although he is not aware of it, he will day by day progress in the practice of benevolence and righteousness, for the environment he is subjected to will cause him to progress. But if a man associates with men who are not good, then he will hear only deceit and lies and will see only conduct that is marked by wantonness,

¹⁰ Adding *wei-ch'ang* before the negative in accordance with the suggestion of Kubo Ai. But the sentence is far from clear.

¹¹ A similar passage is found in *Kuan Tzu*, sec. 12, though without the anecdotal setting of a conversation between Yao and Shun.

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¹² This last is of course aimed at the logicians.

¹³ Reading *kung* instead of *k'u*.

evil, and greed. Then, although he is not aware of it, he himself will soon be in danger of severe punishment, for the environment he is subjected to will cause him to be in danger. An old text says, "If you do not know a man, look at his friends; if you do not know a ruler, look at his attendants." Environment is the important thing! Environment is the important thing!

❏ QUESTIONS FOR CRITICAL READING

1. What are the sages?
2. What does a son owe to his father?
3. What role do the emotions play in the life of a gentleman?
4. What is a petty man?
5. What does Mencius believe about human nature?
6. Why does Hsün Tzu introduce the analogy of the potter and the carpenter?
7. What is Hsün Tzu's antidote to human nature?
8. What is the difference between nature and conscious activity?

❏ SUGGESTIONS FOR CRITICAL WRITING

1. Hsün Tzu is creating an argument here to defend his view of human nature. How effective is his argument? In an essay that either defends or attacks his ideas, clarify the strengths and the weaknesses of his argument. What for you are the strongest positions that may convince a reader of his views? Which positions seem the weakest and least convincing? Are you in general agreement with him about how to shape an ethical life?
2. In a brief essay, explain why you feel Hsün Tzu is either a pessimist or an optimist. To what extent is it clear that in our current society his views are held widely? To what extent are his views deemed irrelevant in today's world? Do you find yourself optimistic about the way people live today? Use examples from your own environment when writing about optimism or pessimism.
3. If you followed Hsün Tzu's teaching, how close would you be to living an ethical life? What are the ethical issues that Hsün Tzu establishes in his essay? What does he want you to do, and why? What would be the result of your paying close attention to his teachings and following his advice? In what ways would your "nature" be altered if you were to do as he says and pay attention to the rituals of your elders?
4. In paragraph 7, Hsün Tzu discusses "Phenomena such as the eye's fondness for beautiful forms," and he sees in them a problem for anyone who wishes to overcome instincts and the nature that he claims is evil. However, some modern philosophers see the quest for beauty as a means of discovering a spiritual

understanding of the world. Examine what Hsün Tzu says about this and take a stand. How important is Hsün Tzu's warning? Are you particularly susceptible to the fondness he describes?

5. Hsün Tzu often tells us "the sage transforms his nature and initiates conscious activity; from this conscious activity he produces ritual principles, and when they have been produced he sets up rules and regulations" (para. 7). He does not tell us what the ritual principles or rules and regulations of his time are. What are they for you today? What ritual principles have you been instructed in and practice to make yourself a better person? What rules and regulations help improve your nature?
6. The essay ends with a powerful statement: "Environment is the important thing! Environment is the important thing!" (para. 24). Sociologists today talk a great deal about environment and its shaping of the individual. What is your view about how the environment affects an individual's ethical views? If human nature is evil, why would Hsün Tzu think environment is so important? He talks about associating with "men who are not good" (para. 24) resulting in one's own bad behavior. If this is a reasonable assumption, what is the best thing a person can do to try to live an ethical life?

7. **CONNECTIONS** Hsün Tzu is presenting an argument to convince you to shape your own basic nature by living an ethical life. Aristotle (p. 688) is doing much the same, but these two sages have different starting points and different attitudes. Examine their arguments and identify how they agree with each other and how they are different. Is one pessimistic and one optimistic, or are they both pessimistic or optimistic? Which of them gives you the most useful advice? Which of them seems to be speaking most productively to you?