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SYNTHESIZING IDEAS



WHILE AN ISOLATED IDEA CAN OCCUR TO SOMEONE, more-interesting ideas—and, usually, changes in society, science, and scholastic thought—come from connecting several ideas. One name for this kind of connection is “synthesis.” As the word *thesis* means a proposition, an argument, or a point of view, **synthesis** means **a combination of different arguments, propositions, or points of view**. One hallmark of an educated person is the ability to synthesize ideas from multiple sources to form his or her own opinions.


Synthesizing ideas requires you to use all of the skills discussed in other chapters of this guide. You must read and understand multiple sources and be able to summarize them quickly and efficiently; you must discover how to discuss different texts in ways that are meaningful without being clichéd; you must construct a claim—and in many cases a thesis statement—that asserts an interesting, arguable relationship between different ideas; and you must locate the evidence necessary to support that claim. This chapter will discuss some of the most common ways to synthesize ideas: **summarizing multiple sources, comparing and contrasting, finding themes and patterns, and synthesizing ideas to form your own argument** 

SUMMARIZING MULTIPLE SOURCES

Writers often need to summarize, as quickly as possible, what others have said before they can present their own thoughts on an issue. Most often, this kind of writing forms part of a response essay or a research essay.

Writing a literature review, or any other summary of multiple texts, is somewhat different from writing a summary of a single text. It simultaneously requires you to tighten your focus and to make connections between different texts. As you summarize multiple texts in your own writing, keep these suggestions in mind:

Be succinct and selective

The more you have to summarize, the less space you can devote to any one source. While a three-page summary of a single text will include quite a bit of detail about the main and supporting arguments, a three-page summary of ten texts can devote only a few sentences to each text. **Choose the points that you want to include carefully, and make sure your wording is as concise as possible.** Include only those elements of the text that relate to your overall purpose .

Construct a framework that leads to your ideas

Rather than simply stating the main idea of each text, construct a framework in which you can relate the ideas from multiple texts to each other, so that they all lead directly into your main idea. For example, imagine that you have been given an assignment to write your own definition of “human nature” based on the selections in this book by Thomas Hobbes, Ruth Benedict, and Edward O. Wilson. While simply summarizing each of these texts would adequately convey their major points, framing them so that they relate to each other makes the summary much more focused and concise, and allows you to synthesize them to form your own argument.

Those who study human nature frequently focus on the interaction between human nature and culture, questioning how much our inherent nature forms our culture—and how much our culture can affect our basic nature. For Thomas Hobbes, human beings are inherently selfish and aggressive, but our own self-interest can compel us to form cooperative societies and develop cultures. Edward Wilson, working from a modern Darwinian framework unavailable to Hobbes, makes a very similar argument. According to Wilson, evolution-shaped attributes very similar to those that Hobbes perceived in human nature—such as the desire to mate and the urge to defend territory—determine the way that we interact with others in society, which forms the basis of culture.

Ruth Benedict places a much stronger emphasis on the way that culture shapes human nature, but she also starts out with inherent (and presumably inherited) human characteristics. Like Hobbes and Wilson, Benedict believes that human beings across cultures have the same set of inherent traits. Unlike

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the other two, however, Benedict focuses on the differences among human beings. According to Benedict, human beings in all cultures are born with the same spectrum of characteristics, but those characteristics are encouraged or discouraged to different extents by the cultures in which people live. This view is perfectly compatible with the views of both Hobbes and Wilson; it simply emphasizes the other half of the nature/culture equation.

The framework for this discussion revolves around a single question: how does each author view the interaction between human nature and culture? **Once this question has been answered by the three authors whose works are summarized, the writer is free to propose his or her own answer to the question, thus synthesizing the ideas in the summary portion.**

COMPARING AND CONTRASTING

One of the most common assignments in college courses is to compare or contrast different texts, concepts, or phenomena. (The format of this assignment is discussed in chapter 8, p. 558.) Technically, to *compare* things means to **discuss how they are similar**, while to *contrast* things means to **show how they are different**. However, in general usage, the term “compare” can be used for either operation. Though comparison/contrast assignments can cover almost any two things that have only the most general characteristics in common (Los Angeles and New York; Tom Cruise and Russell Crowe; ice cream and zucchini, etc.), most such assignments in college writing classes will be to compare or contrast different texts.

A comparison/contrast assignment involving texts (including visual texts such as paintings or photographs) requires you to make connections between two or more opinions, arguments, theories, or sets of facts. A good comparison/contrast essay, however, does more than just list similarities and differences—when done well, it can become a vehicle for generating a unique and creative synthesis of different ideas.

As with any writing assignment, the key to good comparison and contrast essays is to **generate an interesting, subtle topic to write about**. Look beyond surface similarities or differences and try to invent, rather than simply discover, a compelling basis for viewing two (or more) texts in relation to each other. Here are a few suggestions to keep in mind: 

Choose a single point for comparison

Consider the following thesis statement:

Plato and Machiavelli are very different in their nationalities and their cultures; however, they are similar in the way that they present their ideas, in the emphasis that both place on knowledge, and in their belief that certain people are superior to others.

This kind of listing is appropriate for prewriting, but it lacks the focus and organization necessary for a good essay. Instead of simply listing similarities and differences, you need to create a framework in which the comparison makes sense. Doing so will often mean choosing a single area of similarity or difference and focusing entirely on that area, as in the following revision of the above statement:

The crucial difference between Plato and Machiavelli is that Plato sees ultimate truth as existing beyond the material world while Machiavelli believes that material reality is the only truth that matters.

This framework, of course, cannot account for all the differences between Plato and Machiavelli, but it does not have to. A comparison/contrast paper does not need to be exhaustive nearly as much as it needs to be **focused**. By looking only at Plato's and Machiavelli's views of material reality, you will be able to develop a significant, interesting approach to reading the two texts together.

Do not try to compare everything

Any two things can be compared or contrasted in hundreds of different ways, most of which will not be relevant to your main point. Stick closely to the focus of that essay and be ruthless in **cutting out details that do not support your primary claim.**



Avoid stating the obvious

Many comparison/contrast assignments deal with pairs of things whose surface similarities or differences are easy to see. When this is the case, consider working against the obvious. Look for ways that clearly similar things are different or that clearly different things are the same. An apple is different from a monster truck, for example, in many ways—so many, in fact, that there is little value in pointing them out. If you can come up with a compelling argument, though, about how an apple is *like* a monster truck (perhaps that they have both become much bigger than they need to be to fulfill their natural functions), you will have a very interesting essay indeed.

The same principle applies when you are comparing ideas. Imagine that you have been asked to compare or contrast a pair of essays whose main points obviously contradict—such as Mencius's chapter on the inherent goodness of human nature and Hsün Tzu's rebuttal essay, "Man's Nature Is Evil." The essays clearly oppose each other, but they also share a number of assumptions about what kinds of behavior constitute "good" and "evil." Finding those assumptions and making them the basis of a comparison paper will be much more interesting than simply repeating the obvious fact that Mencius thought that people were good, while Hsün Tzu thought that they were bad.

Compare underlying assumptions

Beneath every claim is an assumption, a presumption that makes it possible for a claim to be true. The claim that "higher education is a good thing because it

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helps people get good jobs and earn more money throughout their lives" can be true only if earning more money is a good thing; it is the unstated assumption beneath the claim. (See chapter 8, p. 564, for more on this.) The most obvious—and therefore the least subtle—connections between two works will usually be found in what the authors explicitly state. **More-sophisticated connections can be found in the underlying principles and premises that are necessary for an argument to make sense.**

For example, consider this comparison, based on an underlying assumption shared by Plato's "Speech of Aristophanes" and David Suzuki's "The Sacred Balance":

On the surface, David Suzuki's environmentalist essay "The Sacred Balance" seems to have little to do with Plato's tongue-in-cheek discourse on love, "The Speech of Aristophanes." While Suzuki argues for a renewed commitment to the earth and its ecological systems, Plato creates a metaphor for romantic attraction. Underneath these arguments, however, lies a shared view of human nature as limited, fractured, and in need of completion. Plato believes that we feel that something is missing because the other half of our true self has been missing since birth, and we must find it in another person in order to be complete. Suzuki, on the other hand, believes that the sense of emptiness we feel comes from our alienation from nature. Though Suzuki and Plato find different reasons for it, they both believe that humanity is incomplete, missing something crucial to its happiness.

Neither Plato nor Suzuki attempts to prove that people are incomplete; this assumption lies behind the arguments that both make. Keep in mind that an underlying assumption may not be referred to in a text. It is not a major point of an argument, but it is the underlying value or idea that makes the argument possible.

FINDING THEMES AND PATTERNS

Some ideas—particularly those featured in this book, such as the role of law and government and the essence of human nature—have been explored throughout history in societies that otherwise have little in common. Showing how these ideas influence one another and how they appear in different societies and different contexts throughout history can help you synthesize multiple arguments.

Show how ideas interact

One very important way to synthesize arguments is to **demonstrate how ideas interact with each other.** Ideas can influence other ideas in a number of different ways:

- One idea can be **based directly** on another idea. For example, Gertrude Buck's critique of sophistic rhetoric in "The Present Status of Rhetorical Theory" is drawn directly from Plato's critique of the Sophists in the *Gorgias*.
- An idea can be **based indirectly** on another idea. Garrett Hardin's "Lifeboat Ethics," for instance, draws much of its inspiration from Thomas Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population*.
- An idea can be **influenced** by a combination of other ideas. For example, Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* was influenced by Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology*, which established that the earth was much older than people had previously thought, and Thomas Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population*, which showed how the competition for resources changed certain aspects of human society.
- An idea can be **based on a general perception** created by another influential text. For example, Edward Wilson's argument in "The Fitness of Human Nature" draws largely on the framework for understanding nature created by Charles Darwin.
- An idea can **synthesize** a number of other ideas. For example, Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" cites the work of, among others, Jesus, Gandhi, Henry David Thoreau, and Thomas Aquinas.
- One idea can **apply another idea to a new situation**. For example, Matthieu Ricard's arguments in "The Universe in a Grain of Sand" apply the principles of Buddhism to the theory of quantum mechanics.
- An idea can be formulated as a **rebuttal** to another idea. For example, Hsün Tzu's "Man's Nature Is Evil" was written in direct rebuttal to Mencius's views in "Man's Nature Is Good."
- An idea can be formulated in **general opposition to another system of thought**. For example, George Orwell's "Pacifism and the War" opposes the entire ethical position of pacifism.

To demonstrate a pattern of influence among two or more texts, you must first establish that such influence is theoretically possible. You do not have to prove that one author knew another author's work directly. People can be very influenced by ideas whose sources they do not know. However, no idea has been universally influential at every moment in history. It would be difficult to assert, for example, that Plato was influenced by the Buddha's teachings, which were written down thousands of miles away in a culture that had no known contact with Plato's Athens. And it would be impossible to argue persuasively that Plato was influenced by the ideas of Paulo Friere, who lived and wrote more than two thousand years after Plato died.

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Once the possibility of influence has been established, the case for influence must be made through very close readings of the relevant texts. Consider an assignment to explore the possible influences of Taoism on Sun Tzu's military theories in *The Art of War*. For the most part, Sun Tzu's ideas could not be further removed from Lao Tzu's. Lao Tzu was a pacifist who abhorred war and believed that it is wrong to try to force people to do anything. Sun Tzu was a military commander who believed that, with the right tools, it is always possible to impose one's will on another. However, both texts came out of China's Period of Warring States, and Lao Tzu's *Tao te Ching* is unquestionably the older of the two works. Under these circumstances, it is entirely possible that Sun Tzu's work was influenced by the *Tao te Ching*.

However, though this influence is possible, the fact that Sun Tzu does not directly quote or refer to Lao Tzu means that the case for influence must be made through close reading. To create a persuasive case for influence, begin by listing each text's main points:



TAO TE CHING

- Exertion is unnecessary.
- Leaders should allow things to happen naturally.
- Distinctions between people are counterproductive.
- Genuine power is achieved by allowing others to come to you.
- The best way to govern people is not to govern them.
- It is impossible to influence the course of events.
- War is senseless.
- Leaders should always follow "the Way."

THE ART OF WAR

- The best way to win a battle is not to fight it.
- An enemy should be taken intact, without destroying cities.
- Understanding military strategy is important.
- Politicians should not interfere with generals.
- Harmonious human relations are important to victory.
- Commanders should know themselves.
- Commanders should know their enemies.

Lurking amid all of the different assertions in these two texts is one undeniable similarity: Sun Tzu, like Lao Tzu, believes that winning through inaction (that is, never having to fight) is superior to winning through action (that is, superior numbers or strategies). Given the prevalence of Taoist ideas during the time in which Sun Tzu wrote, this similarity is not likely coincidental; it is, rather, strong evidence of a pattern of influence.


Locate a larger theme

Another way to synthesize ideas is to **show how a text fits into a larger theme, or "big idea."** Many of the selections in this book attest to the fact that human beings struggling with similar questions often come up with similar—or at least partially similar—answers. Cultures and individuals with no connections to each other have arrived at strikingly similar responses to questions such as “Is human nature good or evil?”, “Is war ever justified?”, and “Do we have a responsibility to those less fortunate than ourselves?”

To see how individual ideas fit into larger themes or patterns, consider the following six images, all of which appear in this book:

- Dorothea Lange: *Migrant Mother* (p. 341)
- Igbo Mother and Child (p. 129)
- Pablo Picasso: *Guernica* (p. 271)
- William Hogarth: *Gin Lane* (p. 320)
- Joseph Wright of Derby: *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump* (p. 402)
- Ad for Chinese Population Policy (p. 516)

The relationship between the first two works is easy to see: both consist almost entirely of a mother holding a child. Interestingly, though, each of the other four paintings also features a mother holding a child—though in extremely different circumstances. The following chart attempts to describe the mother-and-child theme of each work as it relates to the work's larger theme.

WORK	DESCRIPTION OF MOTHER-AND-CHILD SCENE	OVERALL THEME
Dorothea Lange: <i>Migrant Mother</i>	The mother holds a baby to her breast, shelters it from the camera and the squalor of the lean-to.	The determination of a mother to protect her children
Igbo Mother and Child	A contented mother nurses an infant; the mother's crown symbolizes strength and vitality.	The power of motherhood
Pablo Picasso: <i>Guernica</i>	An anguished mother holds the twisted body of a dead child.	The anguish of war
William Hogarth: <i>Gin Lane</i> 	A drunken mother reaches for a dip of snuff while her infant child falls to its death.	The negative consequences of alcoholism

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Joseph Wright of Derby: <i>An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump</i>	A terrified mother turns away from the experiment while holding her daughter, who looks on with a mix of terror and curiosity.	The mixed reaction to scientific progress during the Enlightenment
Ad for Chinese Population Policy	A happy, prosperous mother holds up an equally happy, prosperous child.	The happiness and prosperity produced by having only one child

As this chart shows, the connection between the works goes beyond simply the existence of a mother-and-child pair: in each case the relationship between the mother and the child reflects the argument of the overall work. In the painting about anguish, the mother is in anguish over the child; in the painting about alcoholism, the mother's alcoholism causes the child's death. A connection of this kind could lead to a very strong synthesis essay that could go beyond the six works here and draw conclusions about the overall theme of mothers and children in art. The introduction to such an essay might look like this:

MOTHERS AND CHILDREN IN ART

The bond between a mother and her children goes deeper than the patterns of any particular culture; the mother-child bond has a sound basis in evolution and forms one of the few truly universal elements of the human experience. For this reason, strong connections between mothers and children can be found in almost every human society, and depictions of mothers and children can be found in almost every kind of art. This does not mean, however, that the depictions are all the same. Different cultures value different things at different times, and artistic production usually follows along. However, because the connection between mothers and children is universally strong in human societies, artists from a variety of cultures have been able to use this connection as the basis for a variety of different arguments about the human condition.

SYNTHESIZING IDEAS TO FORM YOUR OWN ARGUMENT

One mark of an educated person is the ability to form ideas that draw upon other sources but that are neither slavish imitations of, nor uncritical reactions to, other people's opinions. This synthesis process lies at the very heart of critical analysis. Simply put, "synthesizing ideas to form your own argument" is the same thing as "thinking."

SYNTHESIZING IDEAS: A MODEL FROM CLASSICAL RHETORIC

When you encounter a new idea, you need not accept it as absolute truth or reject it out of hand. More-subtle, more-creative approaches exist between these two extremes. In their discussions of invention, ancient rhetoricians identified five different ways that an idea can affect a reader or a listener. One reaction from a reader or a listener is absolute and uncritical agreement, while another is complete disagreement. But, ancient rhetoricians recognized, most reactions fall somewhere in between. The other three cases, explored below, illustrate how your reaction to an idea can lead you to synthesize ideas to form your own.

You can simply become informed about an issue

Often, the process of coming up with your own idea requires nothing more than the knowledge that an issue exists and an understanding of the arguments that comprise it. Once you understand how an issue has been defined, you can apply your own experience to make informed judgments about it. It is often valuable to read other people's ideas simply to become informed about the issues that they discuss.

If, for example, you are one of the billions of people who do not understand much about quantum mechanics, you might not even be aware of the century-long debate about whether or not subatomic particles follow the normal laws of physics. A dialogue such as the one between Matthieu Ricard and Trinh Xuan Thuan in "The Universe in a Grain of Sand" is probably not going to convince anyone one way or another about this issue. However, it is enough to alert people without a scientific background to the existence of the issue and thereby pave the way for future discussions and arguments.

You can become convinced that an issue is important

Very often, people recognize an issue without really understanding its importance or its consequences. This was the case in 1798 when Thomas Malthus wrote *An Essay on the Principle of Population*. People at the time understood that populations were increasing, but they saw this as a good thing because it increased available labor and kept the price of goods down. Malthus, however, demonstrated with compelling arguments that increases in population would eventually outstrip increases in food supply and cause serious catastrophes for societies that did not control their growth rates.

Malthus's arguments awakened people to the dangers of unchecked population growth and opened a door for people to generate their own ideas about how best to deal with the problem. As it turns out, most modern thinkers who label themselves "Malthusian" advocate solutions to the problem of overpopulation that Malthus rejected—they have taken his ideas and synthesized them with other facts, policies, and values to create their own ideas. Malthus was a devout Anglican min-

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ister who believed that contraception was a sin and abortion an unspeakable evil. These beliefs, however, have not stopped Malthus's ideas from becoming the cornerstone of modern arguments favoring wide distribution of birth control and universal access to abortion. Those who hold such views are not being inconsistent; they are simply synthesizing Malthus's ideas about the importance of a problem with their own opinions of how best to solve it.

You can agree with only some points of an argument

Though writers often present their ideas as all-or-nothing propositions, you do not have to accept them as such. Most arguments are composed of different elements that often can be separated from each other and accepted on their own. It is perfectly valid, and occasionally quite sophisticated, to reject some elements of an argument and accept others as you work toward your own idea synthesis.

Look, for example, at the twelve qualities of the ideal ruler presented in al-Farabi's "Perfect Associations and Perfect Rulers":

1. freedom from physical defect
2. a good understanding of what people say
3. a good memory
4. intelligence
5. speaking ability
6. a fondness for learning
7. a fondness for truth
8. sexual restraint
9. a proud spirit and a fondness for honor
10. a lack of interest in worldly goods
11. a fondness for justice
12. strength of mind

Some of these, such as a fondness for truth and a fondness for justice, most people today would agree are requirements for a good ruler. Others, such as freedom from physical defect, would probably strike most people as unfair and irrelevant. Most of the rest of the items could be (and have been) subject to a great deal of debate by contemporary societies trying to identify the best potential leaders. Though al-Farabi saw these principles as part of the same ideology, most people today have embraced some of them and rejected others. You can do the same with any argument or idea, resulting in a synthesis that is both based on the ideas of others and yet uniquely your own.

SYNTHESIZING IDEAS: A MODEL FROM PHILOSOPHY

In the early part of the nineteenth century, the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) developed a system for synthesizing ideas that has become known as “Hegelian dialectic.” Hegelian dialectic involves three steps, known to Hegel’s students as the **thesis**, the **antithesis**, and the **synthesis**. In Hegel’s sense of the word, a **thesis is a proposition**, an **antithesis is an opposite proposition**, and a **synthesis is a third proposition that resolves the apparent contradiction between the two**. Here is an example using the works of Mencius and Hsün Tzu that were discussed earlier in this chapter:

THESIS: Human nature is inherently good (Mencius).

ANTITHESIS: Human nature is inherently evil (Hsün Tzu).

SYNTHESIS: *Neither inherently good nor inherently evil, human nature is inherently self-interested, which can be “good” in some circumstances and “evil” in others.*

In the Hegelian model, the interplay between opposites, which is referred to as a “dialectic,” occurs constantly, with each synthesis becoming a new thesis that provokes an antithesis and requires a new synthesis. For example, the “synthesis” statement above can become a new thesis:

THESIS: Human nature is self-interested.

ANTITHESIS: Human nature is altruistic.

SYNTHESIS: *There is no real opposition between selfishness and altruism, since human beings often perceive their own self-interest in helping others in their family and their society.*

And, of course, this synthesis can produce yet another trio of arguments:

THESIS: People help others because they perceive it to be in their own best interest.

ANTITHESIS: People often act altruistically when there is no hope of self-interest, as when soldiers sacrifice their lives to save others.

SYNTHESIS: *Even acts of suicidal altruism can be based on a form of self-interest, as when people who sacrifice their lives to help others derive pleasure from the knowledge that they are doing so.*

At this point, the exercise of resolving antitheses has led us to formulate an idea that is solidly based on the ideas of Mencius and Hsün Tzu without duplicating either of their opinions exactly. Any of the three “synthesis” propositions in this exercise could be refined to make an original and creative thesis. Taken

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together, they form the basis for the following sample paper, which also draws on ideas from Ruth Benedict and Thomas Hobbes to achieve a synthesis that does not completely accept or reject any of its source materials.

HUMAN NATURE, MORALITY, AND ALTRUISM: ARE PEOPLE GOOD, OR WHAT?

As Confucianism became more and more influential in ancient China, even the major Confucians could not agree on one key issue: is human nature essentially good or essentially evil? Mencius, the most influential Confucian besides Confucius himself, weighed in strongly on the side of inherent human virtue. His fellow Confucian, Hsün Tzu, believed the opposite—he felt that people are inherently evil. Though this same debate has been replicated in most of the great religions and philosophies of the world, the terms that it incorporates are problematic. *Human nature can be neither inherently good nor inherently evil, since "good" and "evil" are constructed differently by different cultures.*

In "The Individual and the Pattern of Culture," Ruth Benedict explains how different behaviors can be seen in different moral lights by different cultures. Eating a relative's dead body would be seen as a horribly evil act by someone in New York. Not eating a relative's dead body, on the other hand, would be seen as an unforgivable moral lapse in some parts of New Guinea. With these variations in what constitutes good and evil, it is impossible to ascribe either character trait to humanity in the abstract. The most that can be said is that human beings are inherently disposed or inherently not disposed to act according to the dictates of their home cultures.

One could argue with much more conviction, however, that human beings are inherently self-interested. In certain states, such as the Hobbesian "state of nature," this self-interest leads to a state of "war of all against all." However, Hobbes also states that human beings, recognizing their self-interest, come together and form societies and act—often altruistically—to preserve those societies. When this is the case, self-interest is at the heart of behavior that both Mencius and Hsün Tzu would undoubtedly have seen as "good." *There is, therefore, no real opposition between selfishness and altruism, since human beings often perceive their own self-interest in helping others in their family and their society.*

Yet there are some occasions—especially in times of war, plague, famine, or great oppression—in which people act altruistically when there is no possibility of this act working in their own favor. A young marine throwing himself on a hand grenade to save his companions, a mother giving the last bit of food to her family and starving to death, a political dissident taking on a totalitarian regime knowing that it will mean death—actions of these sorts can be documented in cultures throughout the world, and yet they do not seem to be accounted for by a theory of human nature as inherently selfish.

However, *even acts of suicidal altruism can be based on a form of self-interest, as when people who sacrifice their lives to help others derive pleasure from the knowledge that they are doing so.* Nothing is wrong with such a feeling. It would be foolish to suggest that people who derived pleasure in helping others were acting "selfishly" in the normal, pejorative sense of the word. It is reasonable, however, to assume that they would not act in this way unless they derived satisfaction from doing so—and satisfaction, even when earned through acts of great self-sacrifice, is "selfish" in the broadest sense of the word.

To return to the debate between Mencius and Hsün Tzu, it is fair to say that the two great Chinese thinkers used the terms "good" and "evil" when they really meant "selfish" and "unselfish." A close examination of human societies, however, supports the argument that no ironclad distinction exists between selfish and unselfish action, since both are, in some way or another, in the perceived self-interest of the people who act. The most that can be said about the "inherent" properties of human nature is that human nature is inherently self-interested—and that this is not necessarily a bad thing.

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