HKU03x Humanity and Nature in Chinese Thought

Week 1: Introduction: God, Nature and Dao
Section 1: Naturalism vs Super-naturalism

- Focusing on naturalism also means ruling out supernaturalism (or Godism)
- It also means contrasting different models of ethics/ethical guidance
- Chinese model focuses on 道 *dao*[path], a path metaphor
- A path doesn't tell us to take it or walk a certain way; it's there and we choose to follow it or not.
- In the West, a law metaphor dominates - a command, an order
- A law presupposes the legitimate authority/normative status of whoever makes it
- Laws typically entail punishment for those who violate them
- Where does the authority to make binding laws and impose punishment come from?
    - In the Middle East and Indo-European world, it came from a supernatural sovereign
    - Naturalism *denies* that
- There are naturalistic Western normative theories, and they face a host of challenges
    - It must find a natural source of norms to replace the supernatural one
    - In the Chinese Classical tradition, ethical naturalism is the default position
    - The issue becomes which form of naturalism: human, social or the course of nature
- Naturalism is a kind of one-level theory of reality
    - There is no distinct other world from this, the world science describes
    - Ideas, minds and so on - these all boil down to physical structures
    - If you believe there is something outside of what can be studied by science, you hold a non-naturalist view

- Idealism is a familiar Western example of non-naturalism
    - Gods, souls/minds are beyond natural physical reality
- Are Chinese creation stories *supernatural* creation stories?
    - In supernatural creation stories, a mind outside the space-time world creates it from nothing
    - A few hundred years after the era we are interested in, we do find Chinese creation stories, but with organic metaphors, e.g., the world hatched from an egg
    - Yin and yang theory offers another fanciful but naturalistic Chinese account of creation
- Science addresses mainly naturalistic explanations and scientific method checks whether they are true or false