HKU03x Humanity and Nature in Chinese Thought

Week 2: Introduction: God, Nature and Dao
Section 14: Summary

- Central themes: naturalism and ethics - humanity and nature in Chinese ethical thought (0.38)
- Naturalism - the physical world in which we live
    - Classical Chinese thought in more biological terms, with 氣*qì* [breath] of male (*yáng*) and female (*yīn*) types
    - Spirit, energy, mind and so on are understood to be made of 氣*qì* [breath] and as being part of this natural world—not mental phenomena
- Religion vs. Philosophy: China makes no such distinction: talks about schools, teaching, and learning
    - More sociological than psychological
    - Relies on a non-religious concept of authority: authority of a teacher not a kingt
    - Debates have a progressive trajectory à philosophy
- Progress through different versions of where natural guidance comes from
    - Humanistic & nature-based
- Chinese teachings vs. Western *thought* (philosophy and religion)
- Ethics (social-political) the central field in China
- Metaphysics: shaped in the West by idealism: largely missing in ancient China
    - Chinese were not exactly materialists, but were naturalists (biologically oriented), and monists (one realm of reality)
- Epistemology (theory of knowledge)
    - Chinese have pragmatic epistemology focused on know-how. No doctrines of reason or rationalism
    - Centered on problem-solving in this world

    - Pragmatic (process and procedure oriented, empirical) only mildly skeptical
- Logic & semantics - no logical theory, though they reasoned quite logically
    - Major focus on semantics (pragmatics) concentrating on the norms of language use and interpretation
- Ethics: norm systems, language and morality
    - Importance of morality shared in both the West and China
    - Normative theory - consequentialism vs. deontological theories
    - Chinese tend toward consequentialist arguments
- Moral psychology - key area of focus in this course
    - Chinese teachings contrast strikingly with Western tradition
- Meta-ethics
    - What kind of thing is natural guidance?
    - Is it a dao (a path or trail) or a law?
- Chinese context: history and geography
    - Overlap of Chinese and Western classical periods
    - Both early civilizations in river valleys, both with flood myths
- Pivotal difference between China and the West is language
    - Alphabet didn't spread into China - when it arrived, with Buddhism, use of characters was too entrenched
    - Character system in itself very useful and naturalistic - unifying effect throughout China of different spoken forms using same written form
    - Again, sociological with a focus on unity
- Language system started back in prehistory with the Oracle Bones

- Contrast between the human authority of the Shang and 天 *tiān*[natural] 命 *mìng*[identity/role] - the Role bestowed by nature

- Metaphor is a way to understand to meaning
- Analyzing the metaphorical structure of 天命 *tiān mìng* gives us basic framework for understanding the conception of social-political norms