HKU03x Humanity and Nature in Chinese Thought

Week 2: Confucius
Section 8: Presuppositions about Moral Psychology

- Two lines of argument against use of punishment (and against the codification of punishment referred to in the previous lecture)
    - Moral psychology (implicit in the Confucian argument)
    - Interpretive argument (which comes from the magistrates and officials)
- Psychological assumptions
    - Human beings have a natural tendency towards sociability - to get along with others, to engage in social activities with others
    - Humans also have a self-regarding tendency to avoid pain or punishment, a selfish inclination
    - Confucius' argument works on the assumption that exercising either of these tendencies strengthens it
    - Thus, using punishment/reward will strengthen selfish tendencies rather than the social ones. Educating in social norms, 禮 *li*[ritual] and by modeling excellence (德 *dé*[virtuosity]), by contrast instills patterns of socially cooperative behavior so they naturally fit into a harmonious society
- Interpretive argument from Confucian bureaucracy
    - If you publicize or promulgate punishments this way, it will encourage people to become argumentative
    - People will no longer treat the Confucian authorities as virtuoso models of behavior. They will instead guide their behavior by "the written word," and resist the authority of officials & aristocrats
    - Putting things into a public language gives them a way to dispute about interpretation

- Confucius does not formulate anything like Mencius' claim that people are 'naturally good' but his argument implies that we naturally acquire, learn and seek 德 *dé*[virtuosity] in performance of social conventions. We are candidates for training and moral inculcation and strive for mastery
- Confucian ethics look more *conventional* than *rational*
- 禮 *lǐ*[rituals] are training in spatially and temporally located behavior patterns that we instill as our second nature
- Our *names* give us normative identities in a structure of interlocking normative statuses with ritual roles – this is a natural way of using language in acquiring and transmitting cultural practices—social 道 *dào*s
- Remember: Confucius as a transmitter, not a creator