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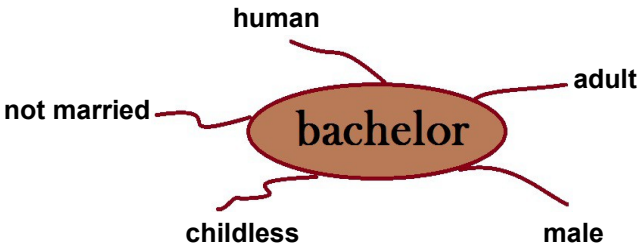
1.12 Meaning and mind maps

In this course, we want to think of **meaning** using the metaphor of **path** rather than using the Western metaphor of **law**. We want to think of meaning as being about **ways of going from one concept to another**.

For example, consider philosophy's favourite example of a definition: **A bachelor is an unmarried man.**

Instead of thinking of this definition as something like a law (as it tends to be in Western philosophy), we want to think of the concept of bachelor in terms of **paths** to other concepts; knowing how to use the word bachelor is part of **knowing your way** around the concepts in this area.

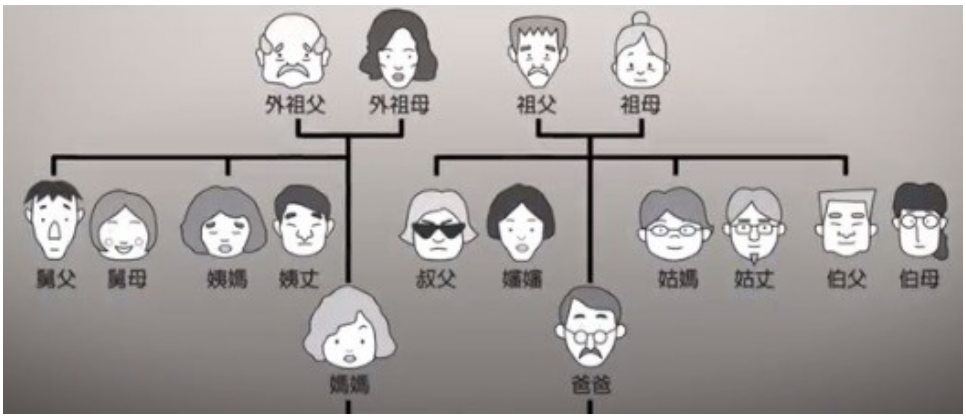


Each of these concepts in turn are linked to other concepts. For example, the concept "adult" is linked to the concept of "growth", and so on. We could add these links to the diagram until we have what we call a **mind map**: a diagram representing links among concepts. (For some examples of mind maps, do a Google image search for "mind maps" or "concept maps".)

Mind maps in different cultures

In different cultures, people develop **different ways of finding their way around**, and draw links among concepts in different ways. For example, in Chinese society, the age relation (who is younger and who is older) is particularly important, which means that familial relationships are categorized using finer distinctions than in the West.

The **brothers of one's parents**, for example, are not just lumped under the category of "uncle", as in much of the West. Instead, people think of "my mother's younger brother" or "my father's older brother". (See the partial kinship diagram to the right.)



Thinking of meaning in terms of **paths among concepts** will help us steer clear of certain misconceptions about the Chinese language. For example, one **misconception** is: *Chinese words have lots of meanings*. You look up a Chinese word in a dictionary and you see a long list of English entries under it.

德 **dé**: virtue; power; charisma; excellence.

But in this course we want to think of the above list of English words as indicating: each English word has an inferential **link** to other English words, and **that schematic set of links** is rather like the inferential links that the Chinese word 德 **dé** has to other Chinese words. In other words:

The English words "virtue", "power", "charisma", and "excellence" each have one of the conceptual roles that make up the conceptual role played by the Chinese word 德 **dé**.

Our focus, then, is on **inference**: how we move from one concept to another in **reasoning**. This will help us understand **why certain philosophical theories were convincing**, by understanding the reasoning behind them. Many classical Chinese concepts can be understood as **natural metaphors**, so once we fill in our understanding of a given metaphor, we can begin to grasp how that concept worked in classical Chinese reasoning.