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1.13 Using metaphor to understand 天命 (tiān mìng)

Recall the first historical Chinese philosophical doctrine, attributed to the Duke of Zhou:

天命 tiān mìng

To understand this doctrine, we will look at the **natural metaphors** for each of these characters and the links these metaphors have to other concepts.

tiān
天

the heavens (concieved of as a dome)

above

dì
地

the earth (conceived of as flat)

天地 (tiān dì)
is generally translated as 'the cosmos', everything there is, **the world**

天 **tiān** is often translated as 'sky'. The sky is full of **stars** and **planets**, moving in **constant paths**, giving us the sense that there exists something **stable**, **predictable**, and **reliable** in this world, that can be used as **guidance**.

天

天 **tiān** is also translated as 'God' and 天 **tiān** does plays an inferential role similar to the one of the roles played by **the concept of God.** Namely, 天 **tiān** is the **ultimate source of legitimacy, authority, and guidance**, just as God is supposed to be. (However, unlike with God, 天 **tiān** is not associated with punishment or command.)

天下 tiān xià
天下 **tiān xià** is everything beneath the heavens, i.e., **the world of living things.** So 天 **tiān** rules the whole world of living things, holding everything together in harmonious guidance.

The Chinese word 命 **mìng** is closely related in sound and meaning to the word 名 **míng**, which has to do with **names** and **roles**. Prof Hansen might say, "My 名 **míng** is Chad Hansen", but some call him *Dad*, others *Son*, still others *Professor*. Our names pick out roles or statuses we have in life: our identity. We can think of our lives as being a natural progression through these roles. In a similar way, the status 王 **wáng** (king) falls naturally on one who leads the social world into a productive harmony with heaven and earth—the cosmos.

The word 命 **mìng** is also closely tied to the idea of **destiny**, or **fate**. Fate is 命運 **mìngyùn**. And when we talk about our lives, we talk about our 生命 **shēng mìng**, which draws together the idea of the roles that form our lives being fated or destined.

命

So analyzing the metaphorical structure in 天命 **tiān mìng** gives us way to start constructing a basic conceptual framework for understanding how these thinkers conceived of political legitimacy, political structure, the role of the ruler, the role of society, and so on.