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1.2 The Chinese classics: philosophy or religion?

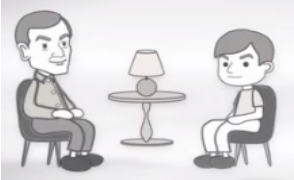
Before we address that question, we should note that ancient China and the West conceived of what they were doing in different ways.

The Chinese classics used the terms...

家 **jiā** ("school"), 教 **jiào** ("teaching")

These words suggest a **sociological** conception of the subject matter.

In classical China, philosophy was about contending, discussing, debating (**public** and **social** activities).



In fact, in China **no distinction** was made between religion and philosophy until the modern period.

… while the West tends to use the term...

"thought"

This word suggests a **psychological** conception of the subject matter.

In the West, philosophy tends to be conceived of as an activity of **private**, **individual** reflection.

So then what criterion should we use in this course to distinguish philosophy and religion?

Take #1: **Philosophy** = Subject matter that presupposes naturalism.
Religion = Subject matter that presupposes supernaturalism.

Using this criterion, the Chinese classics count as **philosophy**, as they presupposed naturalism.

Problem with the criterion: Surely there can be **naturalistic religions**. For example, Buddhism is surely a religion and yet it is also naturalistic. So this distinction isn't quite right.

Take #2: Philosophy and religion differ in **method**. Philosophy has a uniquely **logical** character.

Criterion needs refining: How should we understand the logical nature of philosophy? Must philosophical discussion contain an **explicit logical theory**, in order to count as philosophy? If so, then the Chinese classics are not philosophy, as they did not have an explicit logical theory.

Refinement: We should understand philosophy's uniquely logical character in terms of whether there is **logical reasoning** going on – the giving of arguments, the offering of reasons – without requiring there to be an explicit logical theory.

Using this criterion, the Chinese classics count as **philosophy**, as they were clearly engaging in **argument and reasoning**.

So our criterion for the course will be:

Philosophy = Subject explored without reliance on an authority; instead **its content is the result of discussion and exchange**, and progress is made through **argument**.

Religion = Subject in which there is a **reliance on some authority,** such as God, or a text, or a tradition, or a mystical experience.

Thus in this course, we will treat the Chinese classics as **philosophy** – naturalistic ethical philosophy.