These handouts are for personal educational use only: do not copy, cite, or distribute.

1.11 Using metaphor to approach meaning

A central issue for the course is **interpretation**, which we will approach here in terms of **metaphor**.

To **use a metaphor** is to use a word or phrase to characterize something in a way that is imaginatively applicable in another context, where the familiar structure helps us appreciate a structure in the new abstract realm where we use the familiar word or phrase.

We can divide metaphors into **two** kinds.

For example, a teacher might say sternly to a pupil: "That's **strike two**!" Here the teacher is using a **baseball metaphor** to tell the student that he is **one step away** from being in big trouble, just as in baseball, **three strikes** means you are "out".

natural metaphors

These are metaphors that can be understood by **all** human beings in virtue of their natural, biological **humanity**.

*For example, **walking** is a natural human movement that we make because human beings have physical bodies that are capable of walking. So a walking metaphor of moral behavior would be a **natural** metaphor.*

conventional metaphors

These are metaphors that depend on knowledge of a **convention** to understand the metaphor.

*For example, **shaking hands** is a conventional gesture of greeting that is common in some societies but not all. Human beings greet each other in other ways too (e.g., rubbing noses). So a shaking hands metaphor would be a **conventional** metaphor.*

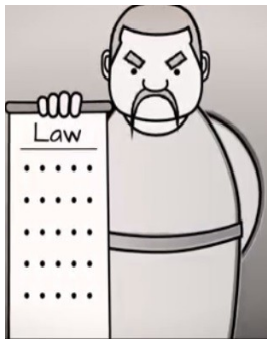
So far in the course, we have discussed **two** metaphors in connection with normative (ethical) theorizing:

A **natural** metaphor: **道 dào (path)**
(Chinese model of ethics)

… and...

a **conventional** metaphor: **law**
(Western model of ethics)

A **path** metaphor is a **natural** metaphor of moral guidance because probably as soon as hominids left the trees and began walking about, they would have learned to follow the paths, e.g., of other animals to find water. Following a path is arguably something all human beings can do just **in virtue of being human**.
I



The metaphor of **law** (and kingship), however, is a more **conventional** one, since it depends on particular social institutions. The concept of law is is linked to a **social practice** of having an authority to command and punish. The social practice of published commands was disputed as a political model of rule in Classical China. It was not the main metaphor in ethics.