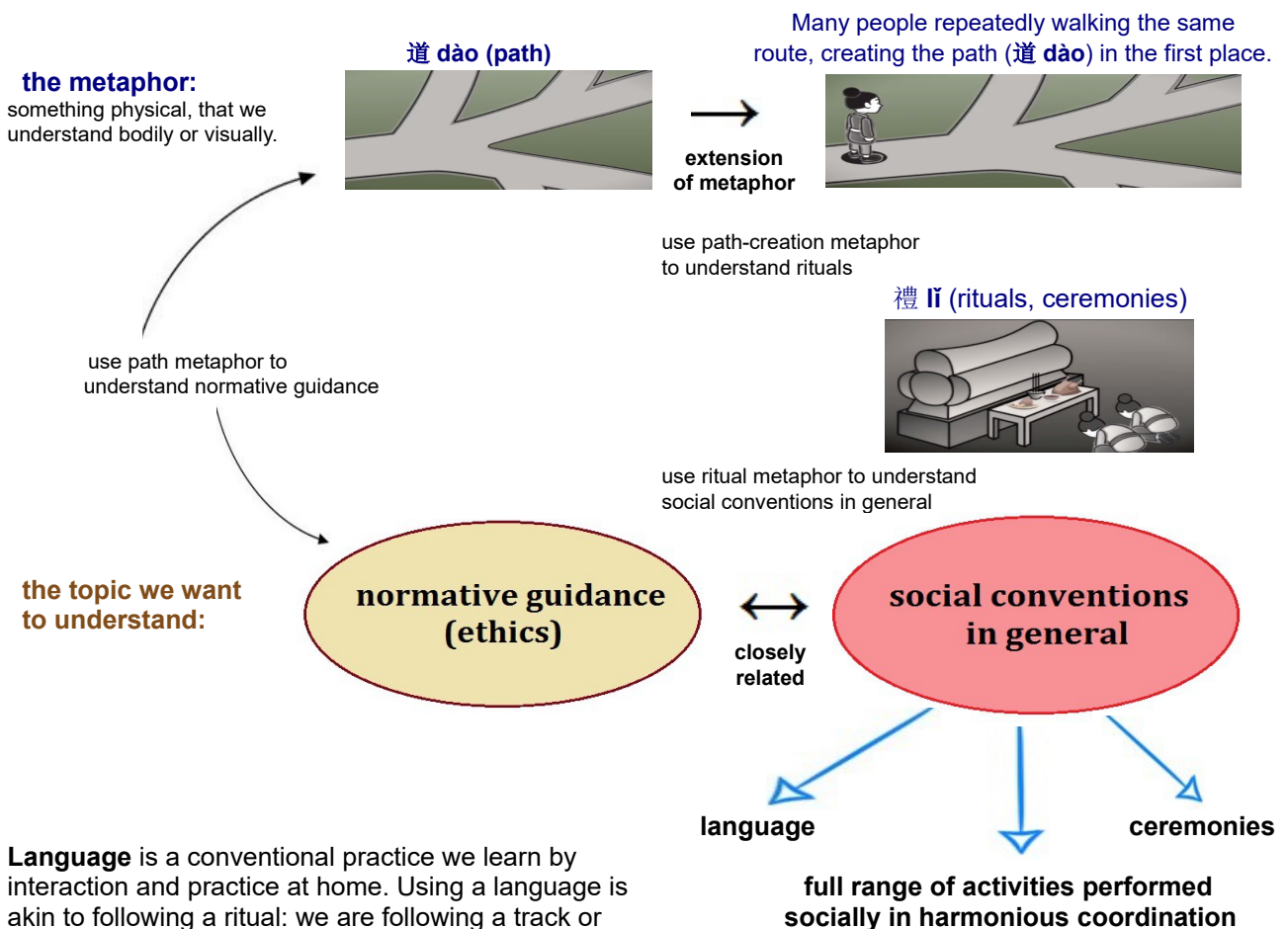


2.5 禮 lǐ (ritual) as metaphor for social conventions

Many scholars think of Confucius's talk of 禮 lǐ (ritual) as a **metaphor** for **social conventions** in general. Several of his remarks in the Analects suggest that he sees 禮 lǐ as encompassing more than the highly structured ceremonies (weddings, funerals, and so on) that he usually writes about. There is a sense in which *all* human activities that require some form of social coordination can be understood through 禮 lǐ.

At this point it might be helpful to take stock of where we are with the metaphors used in classical Chinese ethics. Recall that a metaphor is something (often something **concrete**, bodily, physical, easy to **picture** in imagination) that we use to structure something else in thought (often something **abstract**). So far our metaphorical structure looks like this.



Language is a conventional practice we learn by interaction and practice at home. Using a language is akin to following a ritual: we are following a track or 道 dào (path) that is embodied in people's past and current ways of speech behaviour (their use of questions, assertions etc). Language is not only *akin* to ritual but is also used *in* many rituals. For example, think of saying "hello" (greeting ritual), or "good-bye" (farewell ritual).

Confucian tradition traces all social conventions, including language, back to the **sages**. Note that these sages are not 上帝 shàng dì (emperor above) but are real natural people who lived and died.



禮 lǐ (ritual) often plays a part in connecting a person's 名 míng (name) to his 命 mìng (destiny), since a person's place in the social and normative order is often determined by **the ritual bestowing of a name**. For example, being knighted, getting a degree, getting married, being found guilty in court – these are all ceremonial conferrals of certain statuses upon people. Note that these conferrals are **necessary** to acquire the status: one has not graduated, gotten married, become legally guilty, etc., until that ceremony has been performed, even if every other requirement has been satisfied.