

2.1 Names and roles

How much of our 命 **mìng** (identity) comes from 天 **tiān** (nature) and how much comes from 人 **rén** (humanity)?

Recall that the word 命 **mìng** (identity) is closely related in sound and meaning to the word 名 **míng** (name). The **named roles** we have throughout our lives shape our **identities**; and these roles come from both 天 **tiān** (nature) and 人 **rén** (humanity).



天 **tiān** (nature)

Our first roles (as offspring of our parents, as male, as female, and so on) seem assigned largely by 天 **tiān** (nature). These natural roles shape us in many ways: they shape our attractions, our interests, and our behaviour.

人 **rén** (humanity)

Our roles are given to us not only by nature but also by society and our communities. For example: the jobs we have, the schools we've attended, the places we've been, our friends, our homes – all of these shape us and give us roles: as friend, as classmate, as teacher, as baseball fan...

And our identities, which mix elements of 天 **tiān** (nature) with elements of 人 **rén** (humanity), incline and motivate us to **act in certain ways**, to live up to our roles as son, as student, as wife, as a friend, and so on.

The Chinese thinkers, insofar as they took the issue of **social roles** to be central to ethics, had a rather more **sociological** approach to philosophy in contrast to the West's often **psychological** focus.