

4.2 Yang Zhu: Natural ethical egoism

Yang Zhu was a **primitivist**, that is, he believed that the source of morality comes from something **more basic than language and society**. According to Yang Zhu (for whose ideas we rely mainly on the criticism of him in the *Mencius*), the source of normative guidance is our 天(nature) endowed **physical constitution**.



Primitivists, like Yang Zhu, used a concept of 性 **xìng** (nature-course). The Aristotelian concept “human nature” is definitional. For Yang Zhu 性 **xìng** is the **physically** conditioned course of life.

If you look at the Chinese character 性 **xìng** you'll notice that it is made up of two radicals, the **heart** radical and the **life** radical. Many scholars think that the heart radical was added by Mencius. Yang Zhu may have simply used the word 生 **shēng**, a person's life. Mencius's change was motivated by his linking the concept to his theory of the heart. Yang Zhu's theory seemed less **psychological** than **physical**.

Yang Zhu's ethical egoism

Yang Zhu drew his ethics from his way of thinking of 天命 **tiān mìng**. Yang Zhu's 天命 **tiān mìng** was not a theory about political legitimacy; rather, it is the view about the nature-guided course of our lives—a status role assigned us by 天 guides us toward what would be our maximal life—our 生命 **shēng mìng**).

Your life is given to you by 天 tiān (nature), your natural guiding course preserves it.

This leads Yang Zhu to his version of ethical egoism. Note that **ethical** egoism is *not* the same as **psychological** egoism.

	Area of ethics	Content of view
Ethical egoism	Normative moral theory	Every human being ought morally to look out for his own interests.
Psychological egoism	Moral psychology	Human beings in fact always act out of motives of self-interest.

(Philosophers tend not to hold both views at once. For examples, Thomas Hobbes might be described as a psychological egoist, but not an ethical egoist; while Yang Zhu is an ethical egoist but not a psychological egoist. Yang's psychological theory is closer to Confucius' and Mozi's: we are naturally **social** creatures.)

氣 qì (breath)

Yang Zhu makes use of the physical notion of 氣 **qì**, which can be thought of as a kind of **breath**, a kind of a **vapour**, which provides the **fundamental energy of life**.



1. Your natural mandate is to preserve your life.

2. The length of your life is given to you in terms of an allotment of 氣 **qì** (breath).

It therefore follows that

Your natural duty is to preserve your allotment of 氣 qì (breath).

How?

Avoid situations in which you might die **unnaturally**, that is, avoid social or political interactions. Do not get involved in politics, don't join an army, don't get involved in society at all. The safest thing to do is go off and be a hermit. Write poetry, fish, stay around in the mountains, sing songs, but don't get involved with other people. And don't get involved, especially, in the task of trying to unify 天下, pulling all the empire together. No, no, you don't risk even one hair of your body, for this goal of unifying the empire.

