

## 4.5 Mencius's internal account of morality

性 **xìng** (human nature) is still very much a **physical** notion for Mencius, despite the addition of the heart radical. The heart-mind is a **physical** organ and has its own paths which are 天 **tiān** (nature)'s paths/ways of making choices. For Yang Zhu, following these paths was about preserving your life; for Mencius, following these paths is about doing what 天 **tiān** (nature) programs as your moral behavior.

Let's recap all the roles that 天 **tiān** (nature) has played so far...

### Confucius

In the Confucian model, we had 天命 **tiān mìng**: 天 **tiān** (nature) names the ruler, who then brings order to society.

### Mozi

天 **tiān** (nature) has a bias towards benefit for all human beings and provides us with a utilitarian standard of morality. Humans construct a social dào of moral practice to fit its standard

### Mencius

Mencius wants to reject external conceptions of 天 **tiān** (nature)'s guidance, and instead puts a natural guiding mechanism inside our **heart-minds** (心).

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So how exactly does the **psycho-physical heart-mind** work to guide us, according to Mencius? He is often teasingly unclear, leaving interpretation to come up with a number of possibilities:

- Perhaps our 氣 **qì** (breath), the matter inside our heart-minds, is in some kind of “entanglement”. When something happens outside (like your father being eaten by worms in a ditch), that causes a disturbance inside the heart, which then moves you to behave in accordance with those internal feelings (like being moved to bury your father).
- Or perhaps we should think of the heart-mind's internal paths as being like a timed map coordinating behavior perfectly with outside events. Thus we know what to do by looking into our hearts. (This view reminds us of the Western philosopher **Leibniz**, for whom each substance mirrors the entire universe.)
- Or perhaps Mencius is simply saying that whatever goes on outside you is **irrelevant**; it's how you react **inside** that really matters. Being moral is a matter of your inner state, not your external behavior—for which, strictly, there is no moral right and wrong. (This interpretation aligns with understanding Mencius what contemporary philosophers call **virtue ethics**: ethics is not about what you do but about **who you are**. It favours **religious virtue** translations...see below.)

It's not clear which, if any, of these positions Mencius takes. All we know for sure is that Mencius wants to emphasize that morality is *in some way* **internal** to the 心 **xīn** (heart-mind).



**Note:** 義 **yì** <sup>moral</sup> is one of the core terms in Chinese metaethics where in this class we are reforming Christian missionary translation rituals of using *King James* Biblical terms. You will find ‘Righteous(-ness)’ in traditional translations. The other entrenched missionary translation choices we avoid here are ‘God’ or ‘Heaven’ for 天 **tiān** <sup>nature</sup>, ‘eternal’ or ‘everlasting’ for 常 **cháng** <sup>constant</sup>, ‘The Way’ or ‘The Tao’ for 道 **dào** <sup>paths</sup>, and ‘virtue’ for 德 **dé** <sup>virtuosity</sup>. Mozi's first 法 **fǎ** <sup>standard</sup> of 言 **yán** <sup>language</sup> reminds us of the reasons for conforming to traditions. The 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> prompt our deviation. Traditional translations mislead readers about how naturalism in the Classical Chinese schools worked.