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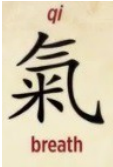
8.6 Humans in the hierarchy of nature

In this segment we're going to look at a more positive aspect of Xunzi, which is his view of how human beings fit into the hierarchy of nature.

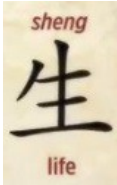
Kind of thing | **What feature distinguishes this kind of thing?**

physical things
(e.g., fire, water)

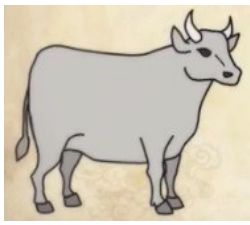


Xunzi starts with physical objects: water, fire, and so on. These things consist of 氣 **qì**. As you may recall, 氣 **qì** is the basic physical stuff which everything is made out of.

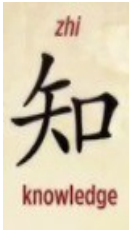
plants



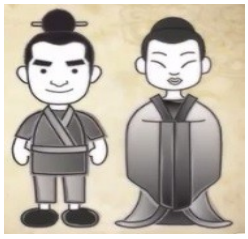
Plants are different from other physical objects, in that they have 生 **shēng** (life). They can grow, be nourished, reproduce, and die: they have a life cycle.



animals



Animals we might expect to be distinguished by their powers of locomotion. But Xunzi says that animals are next on the scale because they have knowledge (知 **zhī**). Keep in mind this is not the possession of a reflecting mind, but rather, **the ability to find a way**: to move along paths and through nature.



human beings

Finally, at the top we have human beings. And what makes human beings distinctive is that we have morality (義 **yì**). Unlike the other animals, our knowledge is specifically moral. We are able to group, to form social organizations, and dominate the other animals. It is our capacity to use morality to live in social groups that allows us to dominate the natural kingdom as we do

Xunzi places a special emphasis on the human ability to

分 **fēn** (to divide, to make distinctions).

Note that he doesn't use the standard Mohist term

辯 **biàn** (to make distinctions).

Instead, he uses 分 **fēn**, which is strongly associated with the idea of **social divisions or ranks**. And that's pretty much what he seems to have in mind: human beings are able to work as groups and dominate the other animals because we can set up ranks and organize society as a hierarchical structure.

But he still uses 分 **fēn to** refer to our ability to discriminate among ordinary and rare, more valued objects in the world. So it's **our capacity to make all of these distinctions** that makes our morality a unifying system and makes us naturally the most valuable species, naturally dominant and thus correctly the masters of all other creatures.