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Adapting: A Chinese Philosophy of Action

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Adapting: A Chinese Philosophy of Action

Description

If you are from the West, it is likely that you normally assume that you are a subject who relates to objects and other subjects through actions that spring purely from your own intentions and will. Chinese philosophers, however, show how mistaken this conception of action is. Philosophy of action in Classical China is radically different from its counterpart in the Western philosophical narrative. While the latter usually assumes we are discrete individual subjects with the ability to act or to effect change, Classical Chinese philosophers theorize that human life is embedded in endless networks of relationships with other entities, phenomena, and socio-material contexts. These relations are primary to the constitution of the person, and hence acting within an early Chinese context is *interacting* and co-acting along with others, human or nonhuman.

This book is the first monograph dedicated to the exploration and rigorous reconstruction of an extraordinary strategy for efficacious relational action devised by Classical Chinese philosophers, one which attempts to account for the interdependent and embedded character of human agency-what Mercedes Valmisa calls "adapting" or "adaptive agency" (*yin*). As opposed to more unilateral approaches to action conceptualized in the Classical Chinese corpus, such as forceful and prescriptive agency, adapting requires heightened self- and other-awareness, equanimity, flexibility, creativity, and response. These capacities allow the agent to "co-raise" courses of action ad hoc: unique and temporary solutions to specific, non-permanent, and non-generalizable life problems.

Adapting is one of the world's oldest philosophies of action, and yet it is shockingly new for contemporary audiences, who will find in it an unlikely source of inspiration to cope with our current global problems. This book explores the core conception of adapting both on autochthonous terms and by cross-cultural comparison, drawing on the European and Analytic philosophical traditions as well as on scholarship from other disciplines. Valmisa exemplifies how to build meaningful philosophical theories without treating individual books or putative authors as locations of stable intellectual positions, opening brand-new topics in Chinese and comparative philosophy.

Keywords

adapting, adaptive agency, philosophy of action, Chinese philosophy, relational action, co-action, early China, agency

Disciplines

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Introduction

我何為乎？何不為乎？吾辭受趣舍，吾終奈何？

How should I act? And how should I not act? I must accept and reject, prefer and discard. How should I ultimately manage to do all this?

—Zhuangzi “Autumn Floods”

若有為不為於其間則敗其自化矣

As long as we stay in the dichotomy between acting thus or not acting thus, we defeat our capacity for self-transformation.

—Guo Xiang

Philosophy of Action

This is a book on philosophy of action. Chinese philosophy is action-oriented to the extent that, not only most metaphysical, epistemological, and other theoretical speculations are put to the service of praxes and are meant to be enacted, practiced, embodied, or realized, but also that the process of acting itself becomes one of the most fundamental topics of inquiry. Yet Chinese philosophy of action greatly differs from the action theory one may find in contemporary academic analytical circles insofar as it does not attempt to identify the mental states that cause actions, such as intentions, desires, or beliefs, nor the conditions of possibility of agency, such as free will. The issues that interested early Chinese philosophers had more to do with discerning the guidelines and evaluating the efficacy of different models of action. They asked normative questions regarding *how to act* and *how not to act*, somewhat betraying an ethical orientation but mostly illuminating their leading concern with world-embedded agency and self-efficacy. Early Chinese philosophy of action aims at developing strategies that enable us to manage our own lives in relation with others and our shifting contexts, which include

both human and nonhuman actors; efficaciously achieving our goals; shaping our own lives and controlling the outcomes of our actions; coping with openness, uncertainty, and change in ordinary life; and creating order and harmony with/in nature and society.

Interconnected Entities

From these lines of inquiry, we can already see that the preoccupation with human action and its efficacy translates a larger preoccupation with the relationship between the person and her worlds, the agent and her contexts. Philosophy of action in the context of early China is profoundly different from its counterpart in the contemporary Western philosophical narrative because it begins from an irreducibly relational notion of agency instead of some discrete subject. *Agency*, the capacity to act and its manifestation, was understood relationally in early China. Everything that we do as agents, including the construction of our identities as agents, is the product of our relations with others. All discourses regarding action start from the realization that nothing can be defined independently from other things for all creatures are embedded in nets of constituting relationships that facilitate, condition, and potentially constrain their self, thinking, emotions, preferences, capacities, and options. This is what we call a *relational ontology*, in which relations are constitutive and primary, not subordinated to the presumption of individual entities prior to second-order relations as we would find in a substance ontology.

Among these nets of constituting relationships, a primordial axis is that of one's own body. Our bodies do not exist in isolation; they can only be found and recognized in their relation with the bodies of other "entities" or *wu* 物. A fundamental concept in Classical Chinese philosophy, *wu* may be translated as a discrete entity with distinct physical boundaries. It may refer to an object, an animal, a plant, a person, or any hybrid combination as long as it has a perceivably distinct bodily shape that distinguishes it from other entities. That is, for something to be an entity it must display certain perceivable features that make it discernible from all other types of entity (the tree as tree and the monkey as monkey) and recognized in its individuality as such (*this* tree and *me*). As the *Xing zi ming chu* 性自命出 defines it, *wu* is that which makes itself apparent (*xianzhe zhi wei* 現者之為物). In making itself apparent in its distinctiveness, an entity

embraces particularity and excludes ambiguity. Interconnectedness is not at odd with determinacy, and it certainly does not imply chaos, confusion, or undifferentiatedness.

In early China, the world is a collection of distinct yet interconnected *wu*. We often encounter the term “ten thousand *wu*” (*wanwu* 萬物), which literally means many different entities and metaphorically points to a catalogue of all the possible types of entities that may appear in the world. The world is then a collection of perceivable material bodies in interconnection: bodies that depend on, determine, define, affect, constitute, and empower one another, and which are in turn embedded in the larger bodies of Heaven and Earth. There cannot be a world without relations.

Relationality

In its minimal account, relationality merely means that agents cannot be considered in isolation from their environments, that agency cannot be sourced to an individual actor. Instead, actors must be located within the net of relationships that affect, prevent, or enhance their possibilities to act as well as the outcomes of their actions. In principle, relationality does not imply interdependence. A basic or weak account of relationality conceives of different entities in the world as they interplay with one another and understands courses of action as responses to particular situations, contexts, and other actors. In this regard, we will see that some early Chinese philosophers, while thinking relationally, hypostasize conceptual entities such as fate (*ming* 命) and the times (*shi* 世) that are perceived to act separately from and in opposition to humans. Fate—short for everything that happens without human intervention and remains out of human control—becomes *disconnected* from humans. While affecting human life and playing an important role in human emotions, thoughts, and actions, at ontological and epistemological levels fate remains its own separate entity beyond human grasp and comprehension, unaffected by human influence.

Beyond the basic notion that everything exists in interrelation, a more radical or strong account of relationality implies interdependency and oneness. The bird cannot become and act as a bird without the air that sustain its wings, the tree wherein its niche is nested, or the worms that nourish its body. Humans, too, as one more type of *wu*, find themselves in

a relation of co-dependence with other entities. The radical account also posits a maxim of oneness by arguing that there is no such thing as the “external” world. It ruptures the dichotomies of inner–outer, self–world, and agent–context by including every single aspect of the world within the agent’s field of activity. In this way, fate, or those events and states believed to happen without the person’s intervention, are integrated as an enabling part of the person that facilitates her being and becoming, similar to her own body and the ground she steps on. In an interdependent account of relationality as oneness, the world becomes the agent’s playground, and action is always co-action—the rising together of an event via multiple human and nonhuman agencies.

Efficacious Agency

Whether it is in the weak or strong accounts, the preoccupation with efficacious agency becomes particularly pressing due to the acknowledgment of these nets of interrelations between entities. If our actions do not purely spring from ourselves; if our beliefs, preferences, and decisions are a product of our relations to others; moreover, if we depend on other entities to act, how can we ever exercise any control over our actions, and how can we achieve self-efficacy? The conundrum underlying these questions is illustrated in the anecdote of Zhuang Zhou wandering around Diaoling Park 莊周遊乎雕陵之樊. In the story, Zhuangzi intends to hunt a huge bird, which intends to hunt a mantis, which intends to hunt a cicada. By the end, Zhuangzi is “hunted” by the forester, who scolds him and asks him to leave. Each hunter is also about to be hunted, but none of them has any awareness of it. The anecdote points at the difficulty in understanding the extent to which all entities are co-dependent and entangled with one another. The animals of the anecdote, fully absorbed in hunting their prey, are unaware of everything around them, including the fact that they themselves are being hunted. Even Zhuangzi, who takes the role of external and reflexive observer, remains oblivious to his own multiple dependencies with others. This unavoidably raises the question: If, for any given entity, there are plural levels of interrelatedness and co-dependence affecting his actions, how is it possible to act with efficacy?

Adapting

As an answer to this question and the larger concern with world-embedded agency, early Chinese philosophers devised and practiced a form of relational action that we do not find in other philosophical traditions and which I have termed *adaptive agency* or *adapting* (*yin* 因). A preliminary definition of the concept of adapting states that “adapting is abandoning oneself and taking entities as standard” 因也者，舍己而以物為法者也 (*Guanzi* 管子 “Xinshu shang” 心術上). The agent decides a course of action (what to do) in accordance with the temporary situation in which he is embedded—that is, all the entities and potential actors with which he interacts in a particular situation. If the world is a collection of all the interrelated entities that may appear, we may say that a situation is a coming together of interconnected and interdependent entities in an intentionally discriminated and temporarily shared space-time. For an adaptive agent, the situation becomes the main parameters by which to evaluate the suitability of a course of action. Only this full adequacy agent-situation will guarantee a maximum degree of efficacy with the best possible use of resources, competencies, and affordances.

As a descriptor of successful action, *efficacy* depends on what is intended to be achieved, and hence it will be defined differently depending on the agent’s goals. Adapting is an open-ended strategy of action which allows the agent to achieve any potential goal, and hence remains independent from and susceptible to be put to the service of any concrete practices and ideologies. Texts that advocate for adapting argue that it produces the best possible response for an agent of particular features and conditions, in a specific situation, given certain goals (although these may in turn be adjusted to the situation). Chinese discourses on adapting shaped an exceptional philosophy of action that asked the person to constantly adjust to varying circumstances in order to better respond to the manifold situations humans confront in a lifetime, including during the transformations due to bodily change, sickness, and death. Overall, the adaptive person is a situational, contextual, reflexive, flexible, and creative agent capable of designing strategies ad hoc: unique and transient courses of action for specific, nonpermanent, and nongeneralizable life problems.

Contrast with Other Models

Adapting contrasts with more unilateral models of action that early Chinese philosophers proposed for achieving control under shifting, uncertain, or constraining circumstances: the *prescriptive model*, based on conformity to pre-established, non-negotiable, fixed guidelines for action; and the *forceful model*, based on imposing the agent's arbitrary preferences and desires. Much like adaptive agency, the prescriptive and forceful models are relational, the differences lying in how each respond to situations and contexts, their manner of interacting with other actors, and their treatment of sources of authority and potential constraints.

The analogy of reading an article may be used to illustrate the contrast between prescriptive, forceful, and adaptive agency. We may read an article with the intention of learning everything it tells, for example when the author is authoritative or we have no significant expertise. Or we may read an article with the intention to refute it, when we are, for instance, competing experts in a field. We may instead do a critical reading, considering each piece of evidence and arguments in all fairness, using the convincing ones to build on and elaborate and introducing limiting conditions when suitable. The first reader, whom we may call prescriptive, looks at the text as a dogmatic teaching which must be abided by. The second, the forceful reader, takes a biased look at the text in order to impose his own preferred interpretation. The critical reader decides on which ideas stand according to the evidence provided by the author and her own expertise, taking into account as much available information before evaluating how to approach each thesis and offer her final observations. Now consider that these readers had different goals: a student who must repeat verbatim a theory in an exam, a graduate student asked to argue against a theory in class, a scholar looking for different approaches to solve an issue. Different goals entail that different reading strategies be applied. The adaptive agent can do prescriptive, forceful, or critical readings depending on what the situation requires. Adaptive agents adhere to no model of action; they decide on what to do according to contextual and situational demands.

The Co-Action Paradigm

The concept and praxis of adapting is a testimony to the assumption of co-dependence inherent to strong forms of relationality. These imply

that not only humans or intentional actors act, but that they are in turn acted upon by everything around them, including nonsubjective and nonintentional entities.

Affordances are the possibilities that entities furnish to us, as in the *Daodejing* 道德經 the emptiness of the house allows room for lodging and in the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 the tree affords a shade in which to lie down. Entities' affordances act on human and other subjective agents by modifying their behavior: they affect, inspire, enable, encourage, or forbid. The entities with which an agent is interrelated in a given situation become co-actors in the course of action that is raised. Moreover, the situation itself becomes a participant in the action, for when the agent is aware of a situation, this awareness modifies his manner of response. In this way, adaptive agents acknowledge that all actions are enabled by the world and all strategies of action must be devised in accordance to the features of the entities with which they are interacting.

The Classical Chinese conception of agency can be summarized in the co-action paradigm. The co-action paradigm dictates that there is neither a purely individual agent whose actions would entirely originate from the inside—beliefs, preferences, desires (conventional autonomy)—nor a fully external world separate from the agent's inner realm that would determine his actions (conventional heteronomy). All actions are collective events: they necessitate multiple agencies in joint collaboration. Some of these agencies possess awareness and intentionality (like humans) and others do not (like objects, concepts, and laws).

Once we have acknowledged the extent to which intentional agents are affected by their complex connections to other entities, environment, contexts, and situations, we cannot keep acting as if we were independent subjects with fully autonomous control. Adapting becomes the smartest form of intentional and purposive action for a relational understanding of the world. Adapting is always inter-acting (acting in response to others) and co-acting (acting along with others, including nonhuman others). In this way, adaptive actions—those which start from an understanding of the interdependency of all entities in a rising situation and put it to use—prove to be more efficacious than other types, such as the forceful or the prescriptive.

Adaptive agency is not fully controlled by the human side of the co-action paradigm. But in the same way that we cannot understand an action as springing from an individual and independent agent alone (inner), neither should we favor the other side of the co-action paradigm, namely

the nonsubjective and nonintentional world (outer). Adapting does not imply determination or incapacity to do otherwise (*budeyi* 不得已). An efficacious use of the world's affordances consists in creatively shaping and reappropriating them. Accordingly, adapting is a contextually creative way of acting and a timely confluence between actors that raises a new and suitable event.

A Note on Methodology

Adapting was not the prerogative of any school of thought or group of experts in early China. It appears across texts of the most diverse intellectual affiliations and epistemic backgrounds, associated with different goals and purposes, and inserted into different contexts of validity, such as the socio-political, the military, the metaphysical, the epistemological, the ethical, and the environmental. In tracing, locating, and interpreting the Chinese philosophy of adapting, I have worked with the master texts, today considered the classical philosophical corpus, but also with the political, military, historical, and mantic literature. Early China, much as many other early civilizations, was a predisciplinary culture. Our endeavor to do a philosophical study does not warrant that we only work with the texts that we today happen to classify as philosophical. I treat all materials that deal with the notion and practice of adapting as equally legitimate sources for my inquiry. In the same vein, I use received as well as found materials.

Precisely thanks to the study of found and excavated manuscripts, we have learned that most of the classical texts were composed by different hands over long periods of time, that many of them were composites of preexisting materials, that they did not have a stable or closed form until much later in history, and that the book-author format in which we see them today misleads us in presupposing for them a certain linearity, unity, identity, and coherence. Therefore, I do not treat texts compiled under a single title as inherently sharing an intellectual identity and coherence by virtue of their purported authorship, nor as opposed to other texts that were handed down to us in a different compilation.

In other words, I reject the notions of author, book, and school of thought as a priori legitimate hermeneutical principles for the early period. Instead of philosophizing at the level of the book (always associated with an author and/or a school of thought), I philosophize at the level of the unit of argument.

The units of coherent meaning and argument do not need to extend to an entire book compilation. They do not even need to extend to a complete chapter of the transmitted book. The unit of argument may go as long as a chapter or as short as a passage or extend through several passages. We may also find these units compiled in different books that have not been historically attributed to the same author.

In this study, I find context and source of meaningful exegesis not in the pre-established and fixed categories of book and author, but in more fluid textual, literary, conceptual, philosophical, and historical connections. I look for coherence among textual ideas within one or several texts, no matter whether these ideas appear in a single chapter or across chapters; in a single book or across books attributed to different authors and schools of thought. In sum, I let the philosophical proposals and problems, concepts, images, and ways of literary argumentation themselves sustain coherence and a context for comparing similarities and differences between formulations and to thereby create philosophical systems beyond the connections that the traditional mode of downward classification inclines us to make.