Adapting

A Chinese Philosophy of Action

MERCEDES VALMISA

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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*, some-
what betraying an ethical orientation but mostly illuminating their leading
concern with world-embedded agency and self-efficacy. Early Chinese phi-
losophy 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 wu* 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 *dis*connected 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.

1

What Is Adaptive Agency?

Overview

This chapter provides an illustrated guide to the Chinese philosophy of adapting, covering the following seven core aspects: the design of strategies ad hoc, the lack of constant standards to select the right course of action, the difference between constitutive standards and structural goals, the radical question: how to act in a world without standards, adapting as a procedural meta-model of action, how to train in adaptability, and how masters educated others in adaptive agency.

Although for the sake of conciseness one base text will be used to illustrate each point, the seven core aspects of adapting appear across early texts traditionally ascribed to different schools of thought, and should not be identified with purely Legalist, Confucian, or Daoist concerns.

Strategies Ad Hoc

Adaptive agents employ strategies ad hoc: transient courses of action designed to respond to the specific demands of a moment. Adapting implies not adhering to fixed guidelines for action even when a plan of action has previously proven successful to achieve a goal. The success of a plan of action lies in its being produced as an intimate response to the particular circumstances in which the agent is immersed. These circumstances, bound by time and space, can hardly repeat in the future. Therefore, action strategies must be as transient as the circumstances in which they are embedded.

The *Han Feizi*'s 韓非子 parable of the hare serves to illustrate this point. After exposing how the kings of the past responded to the history-bound and culturally determined needs of their people in their different epochs (i.e., the need for cooking to protect from raw meat

infections or the need for channeling water in flooding times), the passage closes,

今有搆木鑽燧於夏后氏之世者，必為鯀、禹笑矣。有決瀆於殷、周之世者，必為湯、武笑矣。然則今有美堯、舜、湯、武、禹之道於當今之世者，必為新聖笑矣。是以聖人不期脩古，不法常可，論世之事，因為之備。

　宋人有耕田者，田中有株，兔走，觸株折頸而死，因釋其耒而守株，冀復得兔，兔不可復得，而身為宋國笑。今欲以先王之政，治當世之民，皆守株之類也。[1]

Now suppose there had been someone who joined the pieces of wood or drilled wood to make fire in the age of the Xiahou clan. He would certainly have been ridiculed by Gun and Yu. Suppose that there had been someone who opened drainage channels in the times of the Yin and Zhou. He would certainly have been ridiculed by Tang and Yu. That being so, suppose now that there are those who, in the present age, praise the ways of Yao, Shun, Tang, and Yu. They would certainly be ridiculed by new sages. Therefore, sages neither seek to emulate the ancients nor attempt to establish a fixed standard of what should be constantly considered acceptable. They examine the affairs of their age, and adapt to them by creating appropriate measures.

　　Among the people of Song there was a farmer, and in the middle of his field there stood a tree trunk. One day a hare ran into the trunk, broke its neck, and died. Based on this happening, the farmer cast aside his plough and kept guard at the trunk, hoping he would obtain another hare. But he never obtained another hare, and he became the laughing stock of the state of Song. Now suppose someone wished to use the political measures of the Former Kings to govern the people of the present age; it would be the equivalent of keeping guard at a tree trunk.

Simply put, there are no fixed standards to follow that can guarantee success in all times and contexts. Measures, or modes of action, must respond to the specificities of the situation and be constantly adapted to ever-changing circumstances. There is no room for inflexible guidelines for behavior: the world changes, and human action must change along with the world. For this reason, the sage ruler does not decide his actions according to what was

customary in past socio-material conditions, but rather "adapts his public affairs to the epoch in which he lives" 事因於世.[2] "Five Vermins" ("Wudu" 五蠹) continues to prove this point with more anecdotes, crystallizing in the expressions "different epochs require different actions" 世異則事異, and "different actions require a change in measures" 事異則備變.[3]

"Five Vermins" is among the early Chinese texts that show greater awareness of the key role of material conditions in people's socio-ethical life. Reflecting on differences in demography, resources, and the relative social importance of political positions, it argues that the ancients belittling material goods was not due to their superior virtue but to the superabundance of material goods. Similarly, the struggle for resources does not make the author's contemporaries vulgar: it reflects their current state of scarcity.[4] People's socio-ethical behavior reflects, like a mirror, the material conditions of their times. This argument sets the basis to consider the material contingency of values and standards of action which are often taken as necessary and absolute. For accurately reading the past, especially when attempting to use it as a model against which to judge the present, it is necessary to contextually interpret past events through the lens of the socio-material conditions that facilitated certain attitudes and hindered others. The *Han Feizi* discloses a hermeneutic principle of timeless relevance: do not interpret the past within the confines of present values.

Although "Five Vermins" is a political text, the parable of the hare invites us to think that adapting was not solely a strategy for rulers. The topos of abandoning the past as an idealized standard by which to judge and guide present action reappears throughout the *Han Feizi*. The image of Wang Shou 王壽, a burdened man who walks with difficulty as he carries the heavy weight of the past on his back, represented by a box of bamboo writings, is as emblematic as the image of the hare. Wang Shou burns his books and dances in uncumbered joy after being told that "public affairs are actions, and actions emerge from specific moments; those who understand this know that there are no constant affairs" 事者 ，為也。為生於時 ，知者無常事.[5] Models of action that carry the prescriptive authority of the past, such as those fossilized in writings, hinder agents' ability to walk the paths they encounter in life. Conceived in and for different times, old models have become obsolete for the world is in constant change.

The parable of the hare gives us the false impression that waiting for the hare cannot be used as an efficacious strategy in later instantiations because of its fortuitous character; after all, the hare's death was the result of an arbitrary

event which may never be replicated in the future. This is, however, not the point of the parable in the way it is framed in the *Han Feizi* passage.[6] As we see in the anecdote's early king narrations, the kings' actions were all well-planned strategies that responded to the contextual needs of their people. The measures these kings proposed were far from random, rooted in specific socio-material problems. The reason why the kings' measures should not be taken as reproducible strategies for efficacious action is the same reason why they were efficacious at their own time: they were ad hoc responses to specific, impermanent, and nongeneralizable sets of circumstances. The passage equates current rulers who wish to use former rulers' measures to solve today's problems with the obviously naïve and laughable farmer from Song in a rhetorical move to expose the inadequacy and foolishness of such thinking through *reductio ad absurdum*.

Lack of Constant Standards

The parable of the hare is hilarious because it plays with absurdity. Through humor, the anecdote gains adherence to its philosophical tenets. While all readers will joyfully agree that only a fool would "keep guard at a tree trunk" (*shou zhu* 守株), the behavior that the anecdote denounces is, however, not uncommon. The search for reliable standards to guide human action is a common human tendency. In early China, these standards were often based on virtues such as humanity (*ren* 仁) and propriety (*yi* 義). As a compound, although differently defined, *renyi* 仁義 appears in most of the masters' texts. Following the anecdote of the hare, "Five Vermins" offers an illustration of how acritical adherence to fixed values leads to loss: "King Wen acted according to humanity and propriety, by virtue of which he ruled All under Heaven, whereas King Yan acted according to humanity and propriety, by virtue of which he lost his state. This demonstrates that humanity and propriety were useful in antiquity but not in current days. That is why I say that different epochs require different actions."[7] The author's rationale is that, in antiquity, competition was ruled by morality, whereas in his current day it is ruled by sheer use of force. Therefore, King Yan would have needed a strong army to protect his state.[8] The rules of the game having changed, agents should not use old strategies; not even strategies based on ethical values that are often, but mistakenly, considered to be absolute; that is, not contingent on changes in time, space, and socio-material conditions.

Another typical early Chinese standard for acting is the value of usefulness or employability (*ke yong* 可用). Employability, the promise to perform well in particular tasks, was an important feature to display in early Chinese sociopolitical relations for candidates considering office. Acting in ways that visually display one's usefulness enhances the possibilities of being employed in relevant positions, although it does not guarantee success: "There are things that gentlemen can do and others that they cannot do. . . . They can act so as to show that they are employable, but they cannot cause others to necessarily put them to use. . . . Hence they would be ashamed of showing inability, but they are not ashamed to remain unused."[9] Another problem is that rulers decide on the officers' employability through appearances and rhetorical games rather than on empirical grounds.[10] In any case, the general consensus is that the agent is benefitted by projecting an image of usefulness.

Nevertheless, the *Zhuangzi* famously debated, displaying usefulness is not invariably applicable in all sorts of circumstances. There are contexts that require precisely the opposite: opacity, invisibility, unfathomability, and even an open statement of one's lack of skills and resources.[11] The latter is the case of the trees of harsh wood and twisted branches which can avoid the ax and live out their years (*zhong qi tian nian* 終其天年) precisely because humans cannot utilize their timber to build things. These trees find personal utility (self-preservation) in their lack of utility from a human instrumental perspective (employability).[12] Further examples of this clash of perspectives are "oxen with white foreheads, pigs with turned-up snouts, and humans with piles disease," all of them inauspicious beings to sacrifice to the River who find their luck in social rejection.[13] Similar is the case of the infamous character Crooked Shu 支離疏, who made a living by washing clothes and sifting rice and thus saved himself from war because of his radical lack of physical normalcy. Social conventions equate normalcy with usefulness and employability, which make normalcy desirable. And yet, like the crooked trees, Crooked Shu got to live and let others live thanks to being perceived as a useless outcast on the margins of productive society.[14]

One standard favors displaying usefulness in order to be employed and socially valued (a conception of self-benefit as social capital); the other favors uselessness precisely to avoid being utilized (a conception of self-benefit as self-preservation). With these apparently irreconcilable standards, the chosen model of action would seem to follow as a natural consequence of the agent's prior worldview and values. The *Zhuangzi* complicates this picture. While "Among Humans" 人間世 calls into question the established value of

usefulness through the stories of outcasts, "Mountain Trees" 山木 introduces a new twist by challenging the counter-value of uselessness. In its opening anecdote, the character of Zhuangzi takes advantage of his disciples' puzzlement toward two seemingly contradictory experiences to explain that no single course of action can always be efficacious, not even when it conforms to values considered invariably cherishable. Agents must decide whether to display their worthiness or lack of ability according to circumstance, which entails that no value must be taken in the abstract as an absolute guide to plan one's behavior.

莊子行於山中，見大木，枝葉盛茂，伐木者止其旁而不取也。問其故。曰：「無所可用。」莊子曰：「此木以不材得終其天年。」夫子出於山，舍於故人之家。故人喜，命豎子殺鴈而烹之。豎子請曰：「其一能鳴，其一不能鳴，請奚殺？」主人曰：「殺不能鳴者。」

Zhuangzi was walking in the mountains when he saw a big tree with strong branches and luxurious foliage. A woodcutter was standing right next to the tree and yet did nothing to take it. (Zhuangzi) asked why, and (the woodcutter) replied: "There is no way to use it." Zhuangzi said: "This tree gets to live out its years precisely for its lack of value."

The teacher (and his disciples) left the mountains and stayed in the house of an old friend. The old friend was delighted (with the company), so he ordered his servant to kill a goose and boil it. The boy asked: "There is one that can honk and another that cannot. Which one should I kill?" The host replied: "Kill the one that cannot honk."

明日，弟子問於莊子曰：「昨日山中之木，以不材得終其天年；今主人之鴈，以不材死。先生將何處？」莊子笑曰：「周將處夫材與不材之間。材與不材之間，似之而非也，故未免乎累。若夫乘道德而浮游則不然。無譽無訾，一龍一蛇，與時俱化，而無肯專為。」[15]

The next day, the disciples asked Zhuangzi: "The mountain tree that we saw yesterday got to live out its years because of its lack of value; and yet the host's goose died also because of its lack of value. Which position would you take, sir?"

Zhuangzi replied laughing: "I could place myself in a position between value and lack of value. This position between value and lack of value could seem the most (appropriate), but it is not, because it would not prevent me

from encountering difficulties. It would be different, however, if I could ride the potency of the *dao* and thereby float and roam; without pain or glory, now a dragon and now a snake, transforming along with the moment, never willing to maintain a single course of action."

Zhuangzi's disciples do not react against the first teaching involving the useless tree that gets to enjoy its lifespan to the fullest. It falls within the parameters of their master's counterintuitive thinking and their shared philosophy of life. They show a reaction, however, after witnessing an event that escapes the Zhuangzian notion of the utility of the useless: the killing of a voiceless goose.

Geese are a topical image in early Chinese literature and poetry that represents strict migratory patterns and, by extension, changing seasonal practices and the cyclical passage of time. Given that one of their most symbolic features is their loud vocalizations during flight in flocks, poetry qualifies their calls as harmonious, in pair with human sounds of melancholy and sadness. More importantly, households used geese as intruder alarms. In the instrumental eyes of humans, a goose that cannot honk has lost half its character and all of its immediate utility, rendering it worthless as a tree whose timber cannot be transformed into furniture. If the goose that cannot honk is the useless one—namely the one that apparently adheres to the Zhuangzian value of uselessness that prevents harm—then how come it was the one that got killed? The disciples are right to be puzzled and to inquire from their master which position would be better to take (*chu* 處) when aiming at self-preservation: showing worth or worthlessness?

Zhuangzi's laugh illuminates that the question is framed in the wrong way. His disciples take each event as a patterned norm, destroying their unique and unrepeatable character. They establish a dichotomy (*x* vs. non-*x*) in which displaying a particular value must always have either a positive or negative consequence. They want a fixed rule to act under all possible circumstances. Zhuangzi, in turn, aims to escape the dualism by avoiding both extremes much as the middle point, for the latter still approves of the legitimacy of the dichotomy. He expresses the movement beyond ordinary right–wrong dualist judgments (*shi fei* 是非) through the image of riding the *dao*, which is all potency and remains unbound by particular forms. Equally unbound, Zhuangzi aims at transforming along with the moment and to "never be willing to maintain a single course of action" (*wu ken zhuan wei*

無肯專為). There is no standardized model to decide on the actions that will bring success to our endeavors. One must learn to live in the all-embracing uncertainty and openness represented by the *dao*.[16]

The big tree and the honking goose did not choose their state of being. Their given features happened to be useful in a particular context. When applied to humans, the message becomes purposive and proactive. Being adaptive means that one might sometimes show instrumental qualities while other times display an absolute lack of them. Adapting precisely consists in not adhering to any particular standard of action and learning from context and situation which course would temporarily work best. Looking back at the tree anecdotes of "Among Humans" from this perspective, we realize that the value of usefulness they vindicate is not an absolute value. Agents must not be constrained by conventional thinking that represents certain things as good and others as bad. But they must not fall into the opposite extreme of unconventionality either. The risk of polarizing is that agents get trapped in yet another fallacy. The key lies in the capacity to acknowledge that all patterns of action can be useful at certain times and contexts. The efficacy of human actions lies with knowing how to situationally decide the best course possible given certain structural goals. In order to do so, agents must sometimes bracket values and standards.

Constitutive Standards versus Structural Goals

The *Zhuangzi*'s proposal of adaptive agency is more radical than the *Han Feizi*'s. "Five Vermins" argues for the heterogeneity of standards between different epochs (*shi* 世), a term that encapsulates a large span of time with semi-stable socio-material and cultural conditions. Within a single epoch, it also recognizes another kind of heterogeneity—conflicts between coexisting sources of motivation—but only to denounce that they pose a threat to an ordered society and a stable government.[17] The ruler must disambiguate motivations and equalize all perspectives in accordance to the epoch's semi-stable socio-material conditions.

Beyond the heterogeneity of standards between epochs, the *Zhuangzi* observes constant micro-changes in a single space-time and even within oneself.[18] The *Zhuangzi* places the heterogeneity of perspectives and values at the basis of the legitimacy of establishing multiple coexisting standards. Simultaneously, the heterogeneity of values lies at the basis for rejecting any

single particular standard as absolutely legitimate under all conditions. The *Zhuangzi* presents a more radical case of adaptability where the strategies for action cannot depend solely on the general tenets of an epoch; they must also adapt to rapidly changing circumstances. While in the *Han Feizi* we still find reliably stable patterns for establishing time-specific guidelines for action, the *Zhuangzi* opens our eyes to the fact that, even within a certain relatively stable cultural and political space-time, such as a reign, there is an endless variety of micro-changes to consider on a daily basis. In choosing their actions, agents must therefore allow their standards to get dissolved into particular situations: not either pole of the dichotomy and neither the prudent middle path, but the openness and flexibility to choose among different possible paths depending on the circumstances.

To qualify this statement, we need to differentiate between constitutive standards and structural goals. Constitutive standards are content-dependent, defined by particular contents considered conducive for a good life. Structural goals, in turn, are content-neutral: ideals that can recognizably be achieved through different means. From the approach of adaptive agency, constitutive standards get dissolved in the situation as agents decide the most suitable course of action to fulfill a structural goal. Taking the previous passage as illustration, showing utility or lack thereof are constitutive standards to achieve the structural goal of self-preservation. Sticking to one of these content-based acting standards can only betray the agent's expectations of efficacy. While agents often attain self-preservation through actions that hide one's abilities or openly demonstrate one's instrumental uselessness, there are occasions where the opposite might be the case, as in the situation of the goose. In these cases, the constitutive standard of an adaptive agent gets dissolved into a particular situation and must be transformed, even radically, to its opposite. Nevertheless, the larger structural goal of self-preservation remains. Its attainment implies dissolving the previously established standardized way of acting. There is no single constitutive course of action that can guarantee fulfilling a structural goal under all possible conditions.[19]

Much like the Zhuangzi in the goose anecdote, who was unwilling to be confined within a conventional spectrum of action, the Confucius of the *Analects* discusses the sage as someone who changes standards according to situations. In a passage resembling the *Mencius*'s depiction of Confucius as the "timely sage" (*shi zhi sheng* 時之聖), Confucius describes Bo Yi, Shu Qi, Liuxia Hui, and a number of other influential ethical and political figures by highlighting the constitutive moral standards by which each guided

their actions. In striking contrast to all of these figures, Confucius claims to transcend content-oriented principles. He does not govern himself by preconceived standards of rightness, for these are impermanent. In Confucius's words: "As for me, I differ from them all. I have no preconception about what can and cannot be" 我則異於是，無可無不可.[20]

Goldin has called this theme of situational change, which I am further conceptualizing as a feature of adaptive agency, "the primacy of the situation."[21] Goldin points at the following lines from *Analects*, which I offer you in his translation: "In his associations with the world, there is nothing that the noble man invariably affirms or denies. He is a participant of what is right" 君子之於天下也，無適也，無莫也，義之與比.[22] The gentleman's structural goal is to do what is right. However, what is right cannot be decided beforehand; there are no fixed standards that can guarantee doing the right thing under all circumstances.

Reading the *Analects*, we witness Confucius changing his advice (i.e., guiding standards) depending on the disciple with whom he talks. When inquired about why he changes the response, Confucius points out each disciple's character and how his advice would lead each to what is right according to their personalities.[23] The abstract question is always reconfigured by means of its context (including who asks and for which reasons), which relativizes it and particularizes it. Confucius would not answer an abstract question with an equally abstract rule. He would only respond to the particular circumstantial implications of the question based on the inquirer. We could call Confucius's adaptive agency a sort of moral indexicality, where the right thing to do is only discernable from the perspective of the particular person seen as a point of reference relative to all the intersections around it.[24] Constitutive standards transform as the gentleman adaptively responds to the situations' particularities, while the higher structural goal of doing what is right remains.

The Radical Question: How to Act?

An important question remains. If there are no fixed standards to decide how to achieve our goals, how can we act? The Lord of the River reflects on this question during his journey of self-realization in the "Autumn Floods" 秋水 chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, an important text that encapsulates the popular Zhuangzian theme of the relativity and interdependence of the concepts of big and small to discuss perspectivism in epistemology, ethics, and action.[25]

In the role of the master, Ruo, the god of the North Sea, explains that knowledge is always partial and incomplete, hence insufficient to establish constant standards (*ni* 倪).[26] Every value, perspective, or standard is bound by its own set of circumstances.

井蛙不可以語於海者，拘於虛也；夏蟲不可以語於冰者，篤於時也；曲士不可以語於道者，束於教也。[27]

A well frog cannot be expected to discuss the sea, for it is confined to its own space. A summer insect cannot be expected to discuss ice and cold, for it concentrates in its own season. A biased scholar cannot be expected to discuss the *dao*, for he is bound to his own teaching.

The problem is not with being bound, an inevitable feature of finite and determined entities (*wu*). It lies with not acknowledging one's own finitude and binds, for this lack of epistemological self-awareness leads to clouded ignorance, which triggers absolutist views. Applying a perspectivist corrective to one's way of knowing and perceiving the world should not lead to replacing a previously accepted epistemic framework with a new one. The result of the corrective is understanding that every single standard, old and new, conventional or countercultural, is contingent and provisional. Never constant, and never final, standards only make sense for particular situations through a partial perspective.[28]

Extrapolating from epistemology and ethics to the question of agency, the Lord of the River asks the crucial question:

然則我何為乎？何不為乎？吾辭受趣舍，吾終奈何？[29]

If we establish this as a fact, then 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?

Up to this point, the conversation had remained at the level of making distinctions, evaluating things, and learning a new epistemological approach: *how* and *what* we know about the world. This had ethical implications on the relativity and impermanence of values, which quickly found their way into the more practical question of how to act on an ordinary basis, pressed by the immediacy of a present that requires making choices. As Meyer

summarizes, "for the first time, there is an attempt to translate the epistemological angst of the interlocutor into a philosophy of praxis: what is it that we should do in a world with no absolute standards and categories?"[30]

Ruo directs our attention to the *dao*. Source and nurturer of all entities, the *dao* cannot itself be an entity. While entities are bound by their own physical and psychological boundaries, the *dao* is formless, all-embracing, and equanimous, without preference. Interpreting the formlessness of the *dao* as a philosophy of action, Ruo recommends acting "without a method" (*wufang* 無方) in a world without standards.

無一而行，與道參差。嚴乎若國之有君，其無私德；縣縣乎若祭之有社，其無私福；泛泛乎若四方之無窮，其無所畛域。兼懷萬物，其孰承翼？是謂無方 ... 物之生也若驟若馳，無動而不變，無時而不移。何為乎？何不為乎？夫固將自化。[31]

Do not limit your actions to one way only; participate in the *dao*'s irregularity and unevenness. Be severe like the ruler to his state, granting no biased favors. Be bountiful like the deity's altar in its ceremony, granting no biased blessings. Be overflowing like the endlessness of the four directions, making no boundaries nor distinctions. Impartially embrace the ten thousand kinds of entities—which would deserve special shelter? This is what I call being without a method. . . . The life of an entity is like the gallop and speeding of a horse; there is no movement that doesn't come along with a change; there is no time that doesn't come along with an alteration. [As for the questions you were asking] How to act? How not to act? It is clear that one must transform oneself.

We see again in these passages an emphasis on not acting in the conventional way while also avoiding turning the unconventional into a new fixed standard. Becoming a countercultural agent will not save one from trouble. The adaptive agent is not the one who abandons the comfort of the conventionally established for its risky and unorthodox negation in an assumed dichotomy. Nor is he the one who rests in a moderate middle path. The adaptive agent embraces all possible courses of action and uses them as needed, relieving the temporarily selected modes of action of their moral superiority and ontological necessity, and the temporarily discarded ones of their moral inferiority and ontological shame. Notice that *fang* 方 or "method" also means "place" or "location" (as in the "four directions": *si fang* 四方).

Not having a method involves not being tied to any particular location, not getting stuck in a fixed position, rooted to a place and unable to move, hence unable to act and wander (*xing* 行 and *you* 遊).

Returning to the River's crucial question, Ruo concludes that "it is clear that one must transform oneself."[32] *Zhuangzi* editor and philosopher Guo Xiang 郭象 (252–312) comments this line: "As long as we stay in (the dichotomy) between acting thus or not acting thus, we defeat our capacity for self-transformation" 若有為不為於其間則敗其自化矣.[33] The unwillingness to be trapped in dualistic thinking along with the advocacy for the transformation of one's approach to standards of action reminds us of another passage where the narrator suggests that "rather than praising Yao and blaming Jie, it would be better to forget both (options/models) and transform our way (of thinking and living)" 與其譽堯而非桀，不如兩忘而化其道.[34] Namely, transform our inherent belief that choosing one option at one particular time excludes the viability of taking the opposite path. Agents must stop thinking in dualistic terms that endow choices with unwarranted substance. Transforming one's understanding of the nature of agency itself, which will have radical consequences for how to answer the question of how to act, is what the text calls "not having a method."

And yet there is a method. The method of not acting according to any particular method: an open structure that allows one to be temporarily guided and filled with a plurality of mutually replacing constitutive standards and courses of action.

Adapting: A Meta-Model of Action

Adapting is not descriptive of the content of an action but indicative of a procedural method for performing actions that respond to the specificities of a situation. What shapes an adaptive action is not its content (what is done) nor its goal (why it is done), but the means by which an action responds to the demands of a situation (how it is planned: the procedure). This implies that all sorts of actions can be adaptive as long as the means–ends relations are planned as adjusted, ad hoc responses to situational factors. Consequently, there is no single model for acting adaptively. Adaptive agency precisely requires that the agent adheres to no particular model and changes her parameters for deciding how to act in accordance with each given situation. In this way, adapting is not *a* course or model of action. It operates on a different plane: a method for

producing an endless number of adaptive actions; a meta-model of action in which many different courses of action can be incorporated.

The latter point is best illustrated in a piece from the *Huainanzi* 淮南子, which features Confucius as the adaptive agent par excellence.

> 人或問孔子曰：「顏回何如人也？」曰：「仁人也。丘弗如也。」「子貢何如人也？」曰：「辯人也。丘弗如也。」「子路何如人也？」曰：「勇人也。丘弗如也。」賓曰：「三人皆賢夫子，而為夫子役。何也？」孔子曰：「丘能仁且忍，辯且訥，勇且怯。以三子之能，易丘一道，丘弗為也。」孔子知所施之也。[35]

> Someone asked Confucius: "What kind of person is Yan Hui?" Confucius replied: "A humane person. Qiu [Confucius] does not equal him." "What kind of person is Zigong?" Confucius replied: "An argumentative person. Qiu does not equal him." "What kind of person is Zilu?" Confucius replied: "A courageous person. Qiu does not equal him." The guest said: "The three are worthier than you, Master, yet they act as your disciples, why?" Confucius said: "Qiu can be humane and severe, argumentative and stammering, courageous and cowardly. If Qiu could trade the capacities of these three students for Qiu's single *dao*, Qiu wouldn't do it." Confucius knew how to apply [these capacities].

In each case, Confucius declares to be less advanced than his disciples in the cultivation and performance of a characteristic virtue. Yet what Confucius lacks turns into his advantage. The narrator of this exemplary dialogue establishes a difference between having certain valuable abilities and knowing how to apply them properly. While Yan Hui is more humane than Confucius, he is always humane, even in circumstances that would require from him to be severe. Zigong is more courageous than Confucius, but Confucius knows how to behave cowardly when that would be a more fitting attitude. Confucius describes his *dao* as an adaptive one: he can act differently according to different circumstances. Confucius' *dao* is unitary (*yi* 一), despite involving a number of different behaviors. His method of agency is not defined by the numerous discrete abilities he can display (*neng* 能) but by his capacity to display them adaptively (*dao* 道). While each ability allows for high performance of corresponding courses of action, Confucius's unitary method of agency can accommodate an endless number of constitutive courses of action. This is what I call a meta-model of action: an open model

that serves to establish constitutive models of action but that is not restricted nor defined by any single one of them.

The text follows with a fable meant to reinforce the meaning of Confucius's adaptive *dao*. Niu Que of Qin 秦牛缺 is attacked and robbed by bandits while crossing the mountains, yet he does not seem bothered. Disturbed by the victim's lack of emotional reaction, the bandits inquire into his unusual attitude. Niu Que explains that what the bandits have removed from him are external and irrelevant things, leaving intact his physical and moral integrity. The bandits decide to kill the wise Niu Que, fearing that he would prosecute them as criminals. The anecdote concludes,

此能以知知矣，而未能以知不知也。能勇於敢，而未能勇於不敢也。凡有道者，應卒而不乏，遭難而能免，故天下貴之。今知所以自行也，而未知所以為人行也。其所論未之究者也。人能由昭昭於冥冥，則幾於道矣。時曰：「人亦有言，無哲不愚。」此之謂也。 [36]

This shows that one may act wisely with the wise, but should not act wisely with the unwise. One can be brave with the courageous, but should not be brave with the cowardly. Those who have the *dao* respond ceaselessly to all situations yet are never lacking. When encountering difficulty, they are able to avoid it; therefore, All under Heaven esteems them. In this case, [Niu Que] understood how to act out of his own accord, but he did not yet understand how to act in accord with other people. The means of his considerations were not penetrating enough. When people can start from clarity and reach obscurity, they are close to the *dao*. An ode says: "People have a saying: no wise man is not also a fool." This is its meaning.

The wise becomes a fool when his untimely display of wisdom turns against himself. Sages like Confucius know how to adapt to their audience and how to situationally employ their virtues and abilities. As we saw in the *Analects*, Confucius does not hold a constant response to each abstract question: questions must become embodied, localized, concretized into particulars if they are to create adapted contextual solutions.

A third depiction of Confucius as an adaptive agent appears in the *Mengzi* 孟子.

孟子曰：「伯夷，聖之清者也；伊尹，聖之任者也；柳下惠，聖之和者也；孔子，聖之時者也。 [37]

Mencius said: "Bo Yi was the pure sage. Yi Yin was the devoted sage. Liu Xia Hui was the accommodating sage. Confucius was the timely sage."

The purest among sages, Bo Yi would never do anything that he considered incorrect. The most devoted sage, Yi Yin would never refuse to serve, even under a corrupt ruler. Liu Xia Hui is the accommodating one, who could do as well among poverty as in richness. As opposed to these three, characterized for a constant trait, Confucius knows what is appropriate to do at each time, "the one who hurried when it was proper to do so, delayed the actions when it was proper to do so, stayed behind when it was proper to do so, and took office when it was proper to do so."[38] Confucius stands out among the other sages for his inconstancy. Yet his inconstancy is not random; switches in plans are decided by fitness to time and context (*keyi* 可以 x *er* 而x).

Confucius is described as an adaptive agent with no constant standards to follow. In all three unorthodox depictions of Confucius, the sage adheres to a meta-model of action: a structure defined by its adaptive procedure to produce endless constitutive courses of action which are modeled as intimate responses to specific situations but which can never become constant standards nor fully replace the structure itself.

How to Train in Adaptability: Theory and Praxis

To explain how to act "without a method" and yet produce endless constitutive strategies of action ad hoc without letting any of them define the agent, I will use the *Zhuangzi*'s "Treatise on Equalizing Entities" ("Qiwulun" 齊物論). This treatise is one of the most philosophically complex pieces in the early Chinese corpus and the most explicit in terms of exposing the procedure of adaptive action. While other early sources point at similar ideas of epistemic neutrality, perspectivism, emptiness, and responsivity, the Treatise remains the best exposition of a doctrine that finds several variations during the classical period of philosophy in China.

The Treatise explains the grounds of methodical perspectivism and the epistemological stance that enables acting adaptively as one of epistemic neutrality. The passage here discusses perspectivism and the theory of co-dependent origination of the opposites (*fangsheng zhi shuo* 方生之說),

both at the basis of the sage's epistemic awareness and subsequent capacity to adapt.

物無非彼，物無非是。自彼則不見，自知則知之。故曰：彼
出於是，是亦因彼。彼是，方生之說也。雖然，方生方死，
方死方生；方可方不可，方不可方可；因是因非，因非因是。
　是以聖人不由，而照之于天，亦因是也。是亦彼也，彼亦是也。
彼亦一是非，此亦一是非。果且有彼是乎哉？果且無彼是乎哉？彼
是莫得其偶，謂之道樞。樞始得其環中，以應無窮。是亦一無窮，
非亦一無窮也。故曰「莫若以明」。[39]

Among entities, there is none that cannot be seen from "that" position, and none that cannot also be seen from "this" position. From "that" position, ["this" position] cannot be seen. Depending on which position you approach something from, you will know an aspect or another of it. Therefore, it is said: "that" position comes from "this" position, and "this" position also exists because of "that" position. [The existence of] "this" and "that" is what we call co-dependent origination. Although that is the case, as entities live they die, and as they die, they come to life again; entities that are possible are also impossible, and being impossible, possible they become; having reasons to affirm is having reasons to deny, and those reasons to deny mean that there are reasons to affirm.

Therefore, the sage does not proceed from this (vicious circle of co-dependence), but is illuminated from Heaven so that his "this" is adaptive. His "this" is now a "that," and his "that" is then a "this." His "that" includes something to affirm and something to deny, and his "this" also includes something to affirm and to deny. So, in fact, does he still have a "that" and "this"? Or does he not have a "that" and "this" anymore? When "this" and "that" do not find themselves as opposite positions, this is called the axis of the *dao*. The axis obtains its position at the center of the circle, from where it responds without limits. His affirming also responds without limits, and his denying also responds without limits. Therefore, it is said: "There is nothing like using clarity."

Perspectivism is the theory that knowing is a partial exercise limited by the perspective from which we approach an entity. When faced with the same phenomenon, different perspectives will lead to different perceptions, whether these are of a physical, an ethical, or a theoretical nature. Positions and value judgments belong to human perspective, not to entities. They all have grounds on which

they are formulated, therefore they can be said to coexist. Simultaneously, different positions only gain meaning when understood in opposition to one another, which this passage terms "co-dependent origination."[40]

If different positions justify different judgments, and they are all potentially possible, it follows that there is nothing absolute or ultimate about our perception of the world, but just perspectives and contextual, contingent, relative, and impermanent coexisting truths. Nevertheless, the passage continues, when socialized into a particular cultural environment and worldview, humans become blind to all the others, which sets the roots for the nonsensical vicious circle of disputation (*bian* 辯). Taking their own partial and limited perspective as the only and absolute truth, they enter a game of rhetoric that leads to a vicious circle: as one denies, the other affirms, an affirmation that gives way to a new negation, which creates the grounds for a new affirmation, and so on. The problem with the ideas advocated by other thinkers is not that they are wrong or implausible, but rather that they are partial and yet taken to be the only correct option.

The realization that all our perceptions, beliefs, and judgments are a matter of perspective challenges absolutism and leads to perceiving phenomena with neutrality. As the Treatise reads, "All entities necessarily have what makes them so. All entities necessarily have what makes them possible. There is no entity that is not so. There is nothing that cannot be" 物固有所然，物固有所可。無物不然，無物不可。[41] From the *dao*'s phenomenological approach, all that appears has equal right to do so, even opposing views, beliefs, and perceptions. The plurality of human and non-human paths (*dao* 道) is original and irreducible. By virtue of existing, all options are legitimate options, yet none of them tells us the whole story of the world of phenomena. Although all paths have the right to appear, none of them has the right to claim itself as absolute and ultimate.

The second part of the passage argues that the sage prevents perspectivism from degenerating into a self-defeating relativism that would keep him from making choices. The Treatise fights both absolutism and relativism. The fact that plural paths coexist and that they all have grounds on which to be established (i.e., that they are natural and legitimate) does not entail that they are all morally right nor always valid. In other words, nothing about the naturalness and phenomenal legitimacy of perspectives, values, and paths makes them right, not in moral nor instrumental terms.

Just as ordinary people, the sage of the Treatise also *affirms* (*shi* 是), that is, takes positions, makes judgments, and chooses concrete courses of action.

But the sage escapes from the vicious circle of disputation by affirming and negating in a way different from ordinary people's: his affirming is adaptive (*yinshi* 因是). Analyzing the metaphor of the circle or "axis of *dao*" (*daoshu* 道樞), where the sage takes position, helps us understand how the agent affirms adaptively.[42] Points in a circle are not mutually exclusive. Instead of understanding different positions as binary opposites of which only one can prevail, situating positions in a circle helps us see them as nonexclusive and coexisting. Given these non–mutually exclusive and coexisting positions, how does the centered sage interact with them? How does the sage choose how to act? First, the center of the circle is at the exact same distance from every single point that can be traced on it. From the center, the sage has equal access to every single position and is capable of using them all. Second, the number of points that can be traced is infinite—a quality the sage parallels with his limitless capacity of response (*wu qiong* 無窮). Third, as Guo Xiang remarks, the center of the circle is empty (*kong* 空), for what we are translating as a circle was probably a jade ring.[43] The feature of emptiness speaks of the epistemic neutrality of the sage, who does not show preferences for any individual perspective or value judgment a priori. The sage has equal access to every single perspective from which to judge phenomena and can respond to them all with neutrality and without being influenced by them in turn. Finally, the center is but one more point of the space endorsed by the circle, but it enjoys a privileged position.

This suggests that the difference between the sage and ordinary people (who cling to partial perspectives as if they were absolute) is not one of nature, but of epistemic perspective. The sage's epistemic perspective is termed "illuminated by Heaven" and "finding clarity." The images of light, clarity, and discernment refer to the realization that all positions are valid yet do not allow this realization to lead to an action-impeding relativism. Each position and action are distinct and definitive, unambiguous. The sage can take one position each time—the most fitting according to the situation—while keeping the flexibility to change positions, perspectives, and judgments when it is necessary under certain situational conditions.[44]

The monkey keeper is presented as an illustration of the person with discernment or clarity (*ming* 明) who, located at the epistemic center, can take situationally adaptive positions (affirm *this* or *that*).

狙公賦芧 ，曰 ："朝三而暮四"。眾狙皆怒 。曰 ："然則朝四而暮三"。眾狙皆悅 。名實未虧 ，而喜怒為用 ，亦因是也 。是以聖人和之以是非 ，而休乎天鈞 ，是之謂兩行 。[45]

The monkey keeper was handing out nuts, saying: "Three in the morning and four in the evening." The monkeys were all furious. The monkey keeper said: "If so, then four in the morning and three in the evening." The monkeys were all delighted. There was no discrepancy in what he originally claimed he would do (*ming* 名), and what he eventually did (*shi* 實), but joy and anger were put to use [in the monkey keeper's decisions], which is also a case of affirming adaptively. Thus, the sage harmonizes with entities by means of affirming and negating, and rests on the heavenly potter's wheel. This is what is called "walking both [paths]."

Each of the choices that the monkey keeper offers represents one distinct, constitutive, partial, inflexible, and unambiguous position. Like stubborn absolutists, the monkeys can only agree with one of these positions, passionately rejecting its opposite. The monkey keeper also takes a distinct position each time, but he is flexible and open to change his "affirming" when necessary.[46]

Returning to the metaphor of the circle, from his location at the center, the monkey keeper has a unique perspective from which to view all possible options and design means to reconcile or accommodate them. The perspective of the center is not a transcendental or final perspective, such as the eye of god. Instead, the center allows one to understand the grounds on which agents make choices, to approach the infinite network of possibilities wherein one is embedded while not committing to any of them. The axis of the *dao* is not external to the social network in which all humans function. The Treatise's authors make this clear when they interrogate their own positions, acknowledging that, as any other, they are part of the intricate web of paths in which all entities are immersed and from which they cannot escape.

At the center, the adaptive agent represented by the monkey keeper recognizes the partial understanding of the monkeys (*xiao zhi* 小知) and works with it from a larger perspective (*da zhi* 大知), which the passage phrases "walking both paths at the same time" (*liang xing* 两行). Most scholars interpret *liang xing* as being flexible (offering now three and four, then four and three), a commitment to walking not only one's own path but other people's, too, in order to better understand and accommodate other perspectives. It may also refer to being able to simultaneously use the two types of understanding. The adaptive agent overcomes both absolutism (as he can appreciate things from different perspectives) and relativism (as he

can make decisions and engage in efficacious action). As a meta-model for action, adaptive agency produces courses of action that are both provisional and definitive. They are definitive for a particular situation since a clear stance is taken and acted upon. From a larger perspective, nonetheless, these courses of action are temporary.

Educating in Adaptive Agency

All there is left from the wise figures of the past—early kings and sages—is a narration of their actions by later-day scholars, an account of the regulations and measures they established, or at best a short quotation of their words. We seldom have access to the reasons why they thus spoke or the means by which they decided to enforce certain regulations in detriment to others. Through written accounts, the great feats of culture heroes and sage kings stay in the collective memory, but the situations and thinking processes (*suoyi* 所以) that led them to act in the way they did are missing.[47] This is the point of the *Huainanzi* when it says that "The regulations of the sages can be comprehended, but the means by which they raised these regulations cannot be traced" 聖人之法可觀也，其所以作法不可原也.[48] Geaney reflects on the fact that these invisible processes account for the capacity to produce successful actions that are attuned to the situation to which they respond.[49] Even if recorded, an adapted course of action is but an individual illustration of a past efficacious behavior, which can never become a model to follow. In other words, what counts is not the action per se, but the capacity to act adaptively in each given occasion. This capacity, or *suoyi*, at the basis of the meta-model of adaptive agency remains what can hardly be transmitted and yet what must be learned.

In response to texts that discuss the impossibility to transmit an unperceivable *suoyi*, Geaney says that "teaching itself is at fault because—whether in speech or action—adjusting and responding to circumstances cannot be taught."[50] I would say, nonetheless, that the transmission of the *suoyi* of adaptive agency constitutes precisely the point of teaching in early China, the reason why many early texts show concern with the difficulties involved in transmitting the *suoyi*. Unless we are dealing with the transmission of technical knowledge such as astronomy or bronze casting, most educational texts in the classical period are concerned with teaching the capability to act and adapt to different situations. Teaching manuals and encyclopedias of knowledge such as *Lunyü* 論語, *Sun Bin bingfa* 孫臏兵法, *Lüshi Chunqiu*

呂氏春秋, and *Huainanzi*, as well as parts of the *Han Feizi* present anecdotes showing how past figures reacted to situations, whether it is speaking in an attuned manner or responding to a problem. The goal is not for students to repeat the exact instantiation of action; they must learn to identify relevant information from a situation in order to produce their own unique response. These texts often discuss the need for adapting in explicit terms. They were structured in a way conducive to educate one in adaptive responsivity. They confronted the student with a multiplicity of situations, as well as with successful and unsuccessful ways of handling each one of them. Rather than teaching a particular content, they trained a capacity. From repeatedly discussing and interpreting these anecdotes, probably together with a master and colleagues, students would learn the ropes of adaptive agency.

Beyond the pedagogical master–disciples model that involves discussing situations, another way of educating in adaptive agency was through performative texts. An example is found in a Western Han manuscript excavated at Mawangdui 馬王堆 in the early seventies, *Entities Necessarily Have Forms Chart* (*Wu ze you xing tu* 物則有形圖; hereafter WZYX).[51] Composed as a chart (*tu* 圖), it had the function "not just to reflect or embody the way the world was configured, but also to facilitate and engineer correct modes of perceiving it."[52] *Tu* were not only performative texts—that is, texts that performed their own theoretical content—they also were texts that helped the reader act in certain ways deemed efficacious as a result of a given knowledge and perception of the world.[53] In the case of WZYX, the philosophical content that the text performed and helped the reader perform was adaptive agency.

The main philosophical tenets of the manuscript resonate with other early texts that advocate adapting. (1) Entities have particular forms, and relations constitute particular structures. (2) Acting always is co-acting, interacting, or responding. (3) As a result, there are appropriate ways to interact with certain entities and their nets of relations. Responses or courses of action cannot be randomly decided nor based on individual preferences; they must adjust to the entities the agent is interacting with. The particularity of this manuscript is that, apart from theoretically advocating for adaptive agency, it also affords readers opportunities to perform adaptive responses as they interact with the material text. Let us first examine the theory of action in the WZYX.

應於淦 (= 感)，行於 (誰 = 推)，心之孛 (= 理)也。不淦 (= 感) 无 (= 應)，(誰 = 推) 无不行。淦 (= 感) 至而 (= 應) 和，非有入也。蔡 (= 察) 解而忘，非有外也。[54]

A response comes from a stimulus; an action comes from a push. This is the pattern of the heart-mind [how the heart-mind works]. [This also implies that] Without a stimulus there is no response, and there is no push that is not followed by an action. If when the stimulus arrives, the response harmonizes with it, there is no inner. If you investigate and understand [the circumstances], and then forget about them, there is no outer.

A theory of adaptive action implies an interconnectedness between inner and outer, where there is neither an independent agent imposing a fully autonomous action upon an external world, nor an external world that is unable to come into the discrete inner realm of the agent. Agent and world are woven together, feeding one another—the reason why acting is always co-acting.

Any action the agent takes is a response to a series of relationships wherein he is embedded and which pushes (*tui* 推) and stimulates (*gan* 感). Actions must not be imposed (the forced *wei* 為), random and disharmonious (*bu he* 不合 , 不和), or self-centered (*si* 私), but harmoniously co-created in association with the nets of relations established by the other entities involved. The agent's action "has no inner" because it is not conceived in isolation or rejection of its context, and therefore it cannot be called a pure product of an atomistic mind. Neither are actions fully heteronomous, ruled by external demands or "outer." The agent knowingly acts in accordance with an ephemeral set of circumstances which he is ready to leave behind right after the fact. Oblivious to the external set of stimuli which demanded a particular course of action in the past, the agent is newly empty to take in a new situational configuration with which to interact in his next endeavor. Adaptive actions are the result of subject and world rising together in harmony: the ephemeral kiss of a continuously changing encounter.

物則有刑 (= 形) -, 物則有名 -, 物則有言 = (= 言) 則可言[55]

If there are entities, then necessarily there are forms; if there are entities, then necessarily there are names. If there are entities, then necessarily there are words; if there are words, then it is possible to speak (about them).

The manuscript discusses adapting from the point of view of both visible actions and aural speech. The defining characteristic of an entity is to have physical boundaries or forms (*xing* 形). Since entities inherently have particular features that make them discrete, entities must also have particular

names (*ming* 名) and ways of speaking about them (*yan* 言). Much like action, or precisely as a type of action (speech acts that make things happen), speech must be adjusted to the entities it describes. This text opposes patterned and absolutized forms of speech, rendered irrelevant in the best case and dangerous in the worse, and advocates for forms of speech that are self-aware of their socio-material and spatio-temporal binds, able to adapt to situation-embedded entities and to co-rise with the world.

Waring discusses the transition from the empirical *ze* 則 (if *x*, then necessarily *y*) to the normative *ke* 可 (possible, allowable, appropriate); that is, from the observation of how things are to the legitimacy of a certain course of action. We have seen the same transition in the *Zhuangzi*'s Treatise: the observation that entities necessarily appear and that they all have grounds on which to appear endows them with phenomenological legitimacy. We may also want to read a normative appropriateness of doing things in a certain way. It is appropriate to speak about entities as long as our speech is produced as an attuned response to the features (or forms) of the entities under discussion.[56] However, the fact that entities have names does not imply that names are fixed. Entities' names will change as these embark on different kinds of correlations with other entities. Bound by their relationships to others, entities only exist in co-dependence with equally contingent and co-dependent entities, and therefore, as their names, they are bound to change.

Most interesting is how the arrangement of the text on the silk medium performs the message and affords readers the opportunity to become adaptive agents as they manipulate the manuscript. The agency of the material support and visual design of the text does not force but invites and affords readers to act in a certain way. As Waring has shown, readers must rotate the manuscript in their hands in a clockwise direction from the inside outward to decipher the written text.[57] The gesture is like that of an adaptive agent responding to the temporary set of interrelations in which he is embedded when taking action. Each position represents a timely yet ephemeral encounter with the world. Reader-agents must react to each new position of the text captured on the physical manuscript as a new situation, adjusting eyes and actions to what stands in front of them, without prejudice or fixed responses. At the same time, each new position and each previously rehearsed course of action must be forgotten to avoid the formation of fixed patterns and to keep an empty heart-mind welcoming of new encounters. In the interaction reader–manuscript/agent–world, there is no outer that fully rules one's behavior; neither is there inner ruling of the external world. The

order of the mind-heart comes from co-acting with the world, co-authoring agency as a shared effort of harmonization.

The purpose of the manuscript's design was to afford readers an educational experience of the change in positionality that is associated with a change in perspective and which hence must elicit different responses and modes of speech (what we have previously called "without a method," *wu fang* 無方)—both visual and aural forms of adaptive action. Since the manuscript demands to be manipulated in a certain way, the very fact of succeeding in reading it demonstrates a victory of adaptive agency.[58] This is the main message of WZYX. One receives a particular stimulus, which leads to co-creating an action along with the source of stimulation—in this case a text. This action does not come fully from the outside (the text does not force the reader to read or rotate it). It does not come fully from the inside either (the reader does not independently decide to read the manuscript through a rotational operation). The successful reading of this text is a co-action. A co-operation between inside and outside. There is a goal—to read the text—and there is an affordability of the text's features. It is only in the conjunction of both that an efficacious action might rise.

In reading the manuscript by rotating it, reader-agents are already doing what the text they attempt to decipher and understand teaches one must do. One must analyze the situation and come up with the best course of action along with all other agencies involved in it. Agents that succeed in reading the manuscript have already done that, and only after having done it can they read the words that suggest that they should do it. The text does not only teach how to act adaptively, but also evidently demonstrates that adapting is not an unreachable ideal for it can be done and the reader has already succeeded in doing it. This is the pedagogical force of the manuscript. Moreover, despite its philosophical content being quite widespread in the Warring States and Han periods, the manuscript makes an effort to transmit the *suoyi* (the means by which, or the how to) of adaptive agency and its feasibility.

In sum, there are two main platforms for educating in adaptive agency in early China: critical discussion of situations and scenes and performative texts. The discussion of situations and scenes involves the discernment of the processes previous to decision-making, as well as the consequences of certain kinds of actions under a given set of circumstances. Performative texts such as WZYX embodied their teaching and afforded readers an opportunity to perform adaptive actions themselves, moving from an armchair theoretical exercise to the physical first-person experience of adaptive agency.