

# Coming to Terms with Timelessness

Daoist Time

in

Comparative Perspective

edited by

Livia Kohn

Three Pines Press  
www.threepinespress.com  
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9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America  
This edition is printed on acid-free paper that meets the American National Standard Institute Z39.48 Standard.  
Distributed in the United States by Three Pines Press.

Cover Art: "Measuring Flow: Clock over Yin-Yang and Planets." Design by Brent Cochran.

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### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Kohn, Livia, 1956- editor.  
Title: Coming to terms with timelessness : Daoist time in comparative perspective / edited Livia Kohn.  
Description: First. | St Petersburg : Three Pines Press, 2021. | Includes bibliographical references and index.  
Identifiers: LCCN 2021037123 | ISBN 9781931483506  
Subjects: LCSH: Time--Religious aspects--Taoism. | Taoism--Relations.  
Classification: LCC BL1942.85.T56 C66 2021 | DDC 299.5/142--dc23  
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021037123>

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# What is a Situation?<sup>1</sup>

MERCEDES VALMISA

Sometimes we “walk into a situation” without even realizing it and do not know how to walk out of it. While we often “encounter a situation” that we must immediately “face,” at other times we may be able to sit back and “see how it unfolds” before taking any action. All these idioms, expressive of our conventional understanding, suggest that a situation is something that exists before our encounter with it; something that is out there before we can even notice and acknowledge it; something that, in sum, possesses a separate and independent existence with identity and boundaries of its own.

My analysis of what a situation is leads me away from this essentialist commonsensical understanding toward a view that at first sight might seem counter-intuitive, but which I expect to become self-evident for the reader by the end of this paper. In my analysis, I will be using interpretive keys and concepts from two main sources: the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 and José Ortega y Gasset’s (1883-1955) *Unas Lecciones de Metafísica* (Some Lessons in Metaphysics). That is, a multifarious philosophical compilation from the Warring States (ca. 4<sup>th</sup> c. BCE) and the transcripts of a course on metaphysics by a Spanish philosopher of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I presented an earlier version of this paper at the Scott and Heather Kleiner Colloquium Series in the Philosophy Department at University of Georgia in September 2020. I thank all the participants for the engaged discussion, and the many relevant questions and insights they offered.

<sup>2</sup> The only surviving version of the *Zhuangzi* was edited and annotated by Guo Xiang 郭象 in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE. However, its materials may have originated in the Warring States through the Western Han period (5<sup>th</sup> c. BCE-1<sup>st</sup> c. CE). Some scholars point out that the *Zhuangzi* was entirely a product of the court of Liu An 劉安, King of Huainan 淮南 (2<sup>nd</sup> c. BCE), a hypothesis I find plausible.

Ortega y Gasset taught his course on metaphysics in Madrid in 1932 and 1933 at the tertulia of the *Revista de Occidente*, founded by himself in 1923, which served the purpose of periodical publication and perpetual seminar. His metaphysics lessons were published posthumously in 1966.

## Like a Building

Let us start to shape this counter-intuitive view by reflecting on the similarities and differences between a situation and a building: both are entities into which we may walk. If we turn the corner on Springs Avenue toward Bufford Avenue and walk a few meters, we run into the Gettysburg branch of the U.S. Postal Service. According to the substantialist realist account that still guides most of our intuitions about the world—a world composed of individual substances with independent existence, ontologically divided into subjects and objects, knowers and known, minds and matter, etc.—the bricks that make up the space that functionally works as the post office were firmly erected and remain relatively stable at this location regardless of whether anyone visits, sees, or interacts with them.

Is a situation in any respect similar in its spatio-temporal and ontological existence to the post-office building of the substantialist realist account? That is, how does a situation relate to time and space? Is a situation, like a building, something that is happening out there so that I can walk into it? Namely, has a situation an independent reality of its own regardless whether or not someone happens to notice it? Is a situation real in the same way as the post office is real? I will answer this last question both in the positive and the negative—the negative answer being most relevant for this particular discussion.

On the one hand, a situation is like the post-office building insofar both need to be recognized as such—i. e., given meaning—to exist. In John Searle's vocabulary, both the post office and a situation are not "brute facts" but "social facts" (1995, ch. 1). Without people to agree on the identity and function of the post office building, it would just be a collection of wood, cement, metal, clay, and other materials put together in a way that creates empty spaces inside. Likewise, I will argue, a situation is a subject-dependent, ontologically subjective reality, which needs to be acknowledged as such in order to exist.

On the other hand, in the case of the post-office building of the conventional realist account, the concrete bricks and the empty spaces they create in a given location continue to exist no matter whether someone notices them or not. They might not become a post office unless there is social agreement upon it, but the materials themselves necessitate no such recognition in order to exist out there in time and space. In this sense, which is relevant for this discussion, a situation is very different from the post-office building. A situation is not unless someone thinks of it, acknowledges it, interacts with it. Despite the expression, it is not some-

thing we can just walk into as if it preexisted our noticing. Rather, a situation is created along with our act of noticing.

Nevertheless, were we to take issue with the conventional account that emerges from a substance metaphysics—one that assumes the existence of individual “things” owning inherent properties and being “out there” in time and space—the post-office building would take on a very different look. If we understand a building through the lenses offered by particular accounts on contemporary quantum physics and the relational ontology systems consistent with them, our answer to the question will differ. For example, in Karen Barad’s account (2006), primordially there are not “things” but “phenomena” — neither individual objects nor mental impressions but entangled material agencies, a term that points at the inseparability of the object and the measuring agencies by means of which the object emerges with specific boundaries and properties. Phenomena, as opposed to individual objects, are configurations facilitated by particular practices among different agencies, both human and nonhuman, which both produce and are produced by these practices themselves.<sup>3</sup>

The world is not independent from our experimental exploration of it; nor are we independent from the world. There is no separation between object and subject (building and perceiver of the building) at an ontological level, for both emerge as distinct only as a result of particular practices of observation and measurement.

In this relational non-substantialist account, the post-office building emerges as a result of the specific materializations of which we are part. And yet a building is a real physical entity — though not inherently fixed and delineated in its boundaries and properties until a particular configuration of agencies delimits and determines it. As a phenomenon, a building is both the matter and the actions of measuring, conceptualizing, using, or interpreting (i.e., acting along with) the matter. It is neither inner nor outer but both: a constantly fluid enacting of boundaries.

A situation is much like the building in this relational view, but a crucial difference remains. The post-office building enjoys more ontological stability than a situation; it is objectified and stabilized through obstinate

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<sup>3</sup> As Barad notes, quantum physics is often romanticized as a less Eurocentric, androcentric, imperializing, etc. theory that saves us from Western essentialism. However, we must acknowledge that only *some* aspects within *specific* accounts of quantum physics may act in this way, helping us challenge the assumed separation between subject and object, human and nonhuman, natural and cultural, freedom and determinism, physics and philosophy, and other binaries that have structured Western thought (2006, 67-68).

and enduring linguistic, sociocultural, and institutional practices in ways that situations rarely do—as for example, through the practices of naming buildings and locating them in maps as points of reference. Situations in contrast to buildings are more ontologically fluid and dependent on moments of condensation.

In Classical Chinese, the word that most closely approximates the meaning of situation is *shi* 勢, “propensity” (see Jullien 1995). As Roger Ames notes, *shi* is “an ongoing process that includes agency within it, (and which) means at once ‘situation,’ ‘momentum,’ and ‘manipulation.’ *Shi* includes all of the conditions that collaborate to produce a particular situation, including place, agencies, and actions” (1998, 227). For ancient Chinese philosophers, *shi* was not something external to the agent or an entity the agent might encounter independently. Rather, it was a process that incorporated the conscious subjective agent as well as other entities and processes as constitutive elements. In contrast to its conventional usage in modern languages, a situation as we are going to understand it, is something made out of us as much as we are made out of it.

A situation, then, is not something externally recognizable that we can see from a distance, not in the way that we can see the bricks that constitute a building. Discussing the constitutive power of the gaze, Jean-Luc Marion observes that the look between two people remains invisible, for it does not belong to one pair of eyes nor the other but only exists in the relation between the two. The gaze itself “remains unable to be looked at,” and yet it is by means of being given to the other that it appears (2001, 115). In the same way, we can never look at a situation: we can look at agencies, events, phenomena, or processes that are at rest or in movement; we can look at changes that are given to us by their own appearing; we can look at happenings and our own feelings and reactions to them, but the situation itself remains evasive, ungraspable, invisible.

With the above discussion, we are getting at the following key fact: a situation is not identical with the discrete phenomena and events that we can discern in conjunction with the emergence of a given space-time. A situation is composed of certain available spatiotemporal affordances, but it is not reduced to them nor is it the sum of these parts. Those parts are just like the bricks of the post-office building: materials used to flesh out an entity that would not have a determinate meaning, identity, or boundaries without its entanglement with the agent’s recognition. A situation belongs with us, the thinking subjective entities who conform and indeed create it by thinking about it.

## The Role of Attention

“Seeing” a situation hence is an exercise of introspection where we become aware of our consciousness highlighting particular aspects of the world, providing them with meaning, and reifying them—making them a thing. In this way, seeing a situation is not so much looking outward as it is a form of self-awareness. By looking out and identifying a situation, we are looking in. And simultaneously, by looking in we discover which outward entities have been selected as the focus of our attention (the building’s bricks), for awareness and meaning are always of something.

In and out, self and world, agent and situation are interdependent to the extent that no dichotomy can be established between them and no side takes priority over the other despite their obvious asymmetry. After all, it is the subject—a consciousness with intentionality—that creates the situation by endowing it with existence and meaning, by making it a thing over all other possible configurations of relations that lie in the background, available to be picked out by any given consciousness.

A situation only arises in a coexisting mode of being recognized as such by a subjectivity. This action of recognizing is simultaneously an act of creation: it consists of establishing a focus on a fixed set of space-time relations. To further this analysis, we want to avail ourselves of Ortega y Gasset’s concept of *reparar* (2004, Lesson II). *Reparar* (notice, spot, bring to attention) is the action of becoming aware of something, bringing it to the focus of attention by discerning and establishing it as distinct from the rest. *Reparar* is to create a distinct foreground against an all-pervading background. Ortega’s notion of foreground (*primer plano*) becomes key for our analysis of a situation because, at any given moment in time and point in space, there is always much more happening than we can acknowledge at once. With my attention (*mi reparar*), I give a relatively stable and definite shape to a small set of relations that become highlighted over the extensive background.

Let us introduce an example à la Ortega to further explain this point. Imagine that you are a student sitting in my seminar and I am facing you as I speak in the classroom. I suddenly raise my right hand with a water bottle in it, asking: “What do you see?” You surely answer: “A water bottle.” Nevertheless, the water bottle is just one among many of the things that are currently visible to you in the classroom. It is only your attention that brings the water bottle to the foreground, turning it into the protagonist of all the events, processes, phenomena, and actions that are happening in conjunction with this place and time (and which in turn constitute the perceived place and time).



In fact, while you assert that you see a water bottle, focusing all your attention on this one object I have consciously conditioned you to privilege, there is a moth stamping against one of the lamp lights, a door that slightly vibrates because of drilling done in the hallway behind it, a student scratching his head, another one hiding a yawn, a piece of paper flying into the air from the teacher's desk, lots of scribbles and arrows on the whiteboard, and a warm light coming through the side window and falling onto the floor. None of these events, entities, and processes are worthy of belonging to the field of the visible and noticeable in answer to my question, "What do you see?" You only claim to see the water bottle.<sup>4</sup>

Why? Clearly because I manipulated your attention by raising my hand with an object in it and making this action coincide with my question. This trick serves to demonstrate that *reparar* (focus attention on) makes being seen and, by virtue of making being seen, it also makes being. This attention is the necessary subjective element, without which a situation cannot exist. To wit, we cannot simply walk into a situation, for the situation does not exist prior to our noticing it.

## The Ontology of a Situation

What, then, exactly constitutes a situation? What is its ontological status? We have already hinted at the fact that a situation is something that a subject creates with her attention. Ortega observes that attending to something leads to realizing or fully grasping (*per-catarse*) that something. In the example above, the classroom, the door, the chairs, the desk, the other students, the light, and the physical presence of the professor belonged to the field of what you passively knew was there and you accounted of—unconsciously relied on it as a background certitude requiring no attention (*contar con*) (2004, Lesson III).

Such background is formed by everything that appears without our noticing it, without demanding the slightest touch of our attention. But everything in the background, Ortega advances, has the potential to become a temporary foreground protagonist: we can always transform our *contar con* into a *reparar* by putting our attention to work.<sup>5</sup> This shift from a

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<sup>4</sup> See Brook Ziporyn's discussion of "the Gestaltist premise that when some 'one' appears as an explicit coherence in the above sense, it appears as a figure against a background" (2004, 46) and Hershock's "horizons of relevance" (2004, 63).

<sup>5</sup> Notice that Ortega does not directly discuss the ontology of situations. He is interested in what it means to be alive, describing the task of the human as a task of radical orientation. What Ortega asks his students to bring to the field of *reparar*

mere counting-on to a full realization of certain relations as appearing is how a situation is born.

We are claiming, then, that a situation belongs to the intentional look of the subjective agent. However, any intentional look also brings to the foreground entities other than the agent herself. *Reparar* is an introspective look upon oneself (what do *I* see?) that includes entities that are conceptualized as not being the self (I see a water bottle). In noticing the world we discover ourselves, and in reflecting upon ourselves we discover the world. With Ortega, we affirm that by the time we acknowledge something (ourselves or other), the world is already out there as a background that enables and affords any of the possible experiences and situations we may raise out of it.

The given world does not need my attention to exist, yet it is inextricably connected to me. In my switching from *contar con* to *reparar*, endless possibilities of situation-making are afforded. Which means that things *are*, but they are not this nor that. They are what Ortega calls *un problema*: “The radical and irremediable fact is that living man finds that neither things nor himself have being; that he has no choice but to do something to live, to decide his doing at every instant or, what is the same, to decide his being, and this includes, as we have seen, the being of things.”<sup>6</sup>

Situations are not what they are simply by virtue of the pre-existing elements that come to define them—agencies, entities, events, processes emerging along with a particular space-time—but they are by virtue of what they are decided to be: what a consciousness makes out of them. In this manner, the ontological status of a situation is that of not being *per se*. It has no ontology of itself.<sup>7</sup>

The *Zhuangzi* is a valuable source of utterances embodying this ontological claim, namely that the same “ingredients,” that is, a highlighted net of relations including spatiotemporal ones, may be constructed into dis-

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from the field of *contar con* is their own awareness of themselves (*yo*) and the world surrounding them (*mi circunstancia*).

<sup>6</sup> “El hecho radical e irremediable es que el hombre viviendo se encuentra con que ni las cosas ni él tienen ser; con que no tiene más remedio que hacer algo para vivir, que decidir su hacer en cada instante, o lo que es igual, que decidir su ser, y esto incluye, como hemos visto, el ser de las cosas” (2004, 224). Per convention in his times, Ortega repeatedly uses “man” and the male pronoun to refer to human.

<sup>7</sup> This is a claim that could be made about any given entity, the only ontology being that of the totality of interconnections and interdependencies seen as one and susceptible to become an infinite array of relational configurations by means of boundary-making.

similar, even opposite kinds of situations from an evaluative point of view, hence a situation *is not per se*.

One of the best-discussed stories embodying this claim features Confucius with some of his disciples being forcefully restrained and besieged between the states of Chen and Cai. The same elements (ingredients, relations) are acknowledged and brought to the foreground: there is no cooked food to eat, they find themselves in a physical state of great exhaustion, they are held prisoner, and Confucius is threatened to be killed with impunity.

However, where the disciples evaluate these elements as raising a situation of great distress or failure (*rucizhe keweì qiong yi* 如此者可谓窮矣), Confucius only sees success and good fortune (*tong* 通/*xing* 幸), the rationale being that they afford him opportunities to cultivate his moral capacity and externally perform his virtue.<sup>8</sup>

A second claim is that, ontologically speaking, a situation both is and is not. It is because it exists by virtue of the focus of our attention (*reparar*): what we notice and how we interpret it (given that it is *not per se*). It is also not because there is nothing to keep it together as a situation except for this momentary focus of attention. Which is to say, a situation has no essence nor identity, just temporarily imposed boundaries created out of cherry-picked relations that are brought to the fore.

These are zoomed in, and highlighted, by means of obscuring their extended nets of relations, as if we were to use a flashlight to illuminate a circle on a paper and then endow the illuminated circle with self-identity, essence, and independent existence. Everything that remains in the dark, the rest of the piece of paper but also the table where the paper lies, the

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<sup>8</sup> See the anecdote in *Zhuangzi* 28 (Guo 2004, 28: 981-83). It appears in many different versions in the *Zhuangzi* and other early texts, each framed differently to illustrate a different teaching (Makeham 1998). I point the reader to the version where we can see that a situation is not determined by its elements but by how it is decided by a subjective agent.

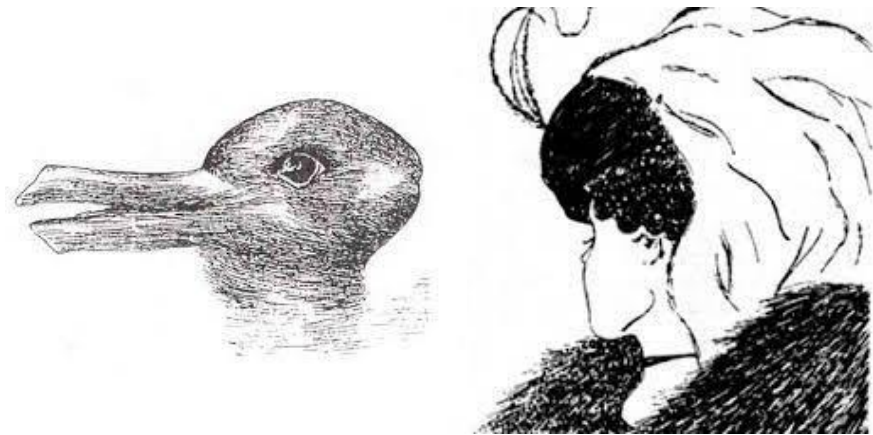
There are many other passages that embody this claim, as the famous discussion between Zhuangzi and Hui Shi over the use of a gigantic gourd in chapter 1, the dead dialogues in chapter 6, and the deformed Shu in chapter 4. All these (and many other) passages have in common that the same relations hold different meanings and are qualified as opposite kinds of situations in good-bad/right-wrong binary systems. The *Zhuangzi* uses this anecdotes and dialogues to show that the binary itself, as any other system of classification, is a human projection and delusion. Things are not *per se*, which does not mean that they do not exist but that they do not have fixed meanings, essences, nor functions until they become determined.

floor that holds the table, my hand holding the flashlight, etc., is not the situation *per se*, and yet it is a constituting part of what we call the situation, i.e., the circle illuminated by light.

The situation, then, is and is not in a nondual manner: being by virtue of not being, like the illuminated circle is by virtue of isolating it from and not attending to everything that is not the circle and yet constitutes it. Brook Ziporyn encapsulates this idea in the expressions “to be present as X is also to be present as not-X,” “there is more to any X than is known at any time,” and “there is an unseen back to anything” (2004, 62).<sup>9</sup>

When discussing nonduality with my students, I show them the optical illusions of the duck/rabbit and the old/young lady (see Ziporyn 2004, 159). I explain that they can only see one figure at a time (either duck or rabbit, young lady or old), and yet both figures not only coexist but, emphatically, cannot be without the other. The rabbit is constituted out of duck, and the duck out of rabbit. The rabbit appears by virtue of our attention that isolates it as much as by virtue of our *desatender* (neglect, omit) that negates the duck turning it invisible.

This implies that the rabbit is so much by virtue of what it is (a rabbit) as by virtue of what it is not (a duck). The same happens with the constitution of a situation. The identity of a situation depends on what is brought to discretion by our attention (*reparar*) against the background of everything else that constitutes the situation and yet is conceptualized in a negative way as what the situation is not.



<sup>9</sup> As Brook Ziporyn points out, the other that is the self is what Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) called “the invisibility of every visible” (2004, 63).

Only by negating the duck can we see the rabbit. Similarly, only by creating a temporarily irrelevant and diffused background can we raise a situation to the foreground. The situation is created by means of active exclusion or, in the *Zhuangzi's* terminology, “active oblivion” (*wang* 忘). When we identify a situation, we exclude the potentiality of all that is not selected as focus of our attention and neglect all other possible forms of relations that the particular space-time in which we are inserted affords us. And yet, the potentiality of the neglected relations is necessary for what appears as a determinate and identified situation, and it is constitutive of the situation as much as our look that neglects it—counting on it but not attending to it. This actively forgotten background that enables and affords for discrete entities to appear and for situations to be discerned consists of an endless net of relations with no fixed boundaries that connect every single thing with potentially any other single thing.<sup>10</sup>

To use yet a different image we may think of a doodle of numerous lines that intersect, each intersecting point being an entity, constituted of relations as its primary ontology. I too am one of these points at the intersection of many relations. My asymmetrical power, which I share with other human and nonhuman animals, is that I can pick out some of these intersections and reify them, so they temporarily appear as a thing that externally and independently lies in front of me. Yet at the same time I obscure with my active oblivion all other intersections and the larger nets of relations in which these are inscribed and by which they are constituted.

This temporary reification, by means of which I create a situation, this illumination that makes visible, is interdependent with all which remains in the dark as background. That is, all that is not the situation is also relevant for the situation, and in this sense, it in fact is the situation while being conceptualized as being not. A way of describing this ontology of “intrinsic and constitutive relationality” (in Roger Ames’ words) is the Chinese doctrine of *yiduo bufen* 一多不分, one is many and many is one: “It is,

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<sup>10</sup> In his recent monograph (2021), Roger Ames contrasts classical Greek “one-behind-the-many” ontology, which takes *eidōs* as a principle of individuation, with Chinese cosmology, which begins from the primacy of vital relationality and where everything is relevant to everything else (ch. 4). He talks of cosmology and becomings instead of ontology for the Chinese case, because he takes the word ontology to imply an essentialist view of individual entities as prior to relations. I am instead using the word ontology to simply mean “a discourse or understanding on how things are constituted.” I rescue the word ontology but eliminate the Greek foundational assumption of “one-behind-the-many” to apply it to Chinese discourses on what and how things are, much like we can rescue the terms agency, ethics, or subject and redefine them, seeing them evolve in usage and meaning.

simply put, the assumption that in the compositing of any ‘one,’ there is implicated within it the contextualizing ‘many’” (2021, 218). The principle of individuation is misleading: where we see one combination of relations raising as one situation, there are in fact numerous available combinations of relations at work, or again in Ames’ words, every focus has (and is constituted by) a field.

## Boundaries

This raises the question of the possibility of a situation being bounded, of having boundaries. If a situation (via focus, attention) is partially by virtue of what is not (via field, background), and the relational field of what is not is limitless and unbounded, then how can a situation come to be limited, determined, and brought to presence by means of individuation?

We may borrow from Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995) and Félix Guattari (1939-1992) the metaphor of a node in a field of forces or rhizome to describe how something appears as individuated while being a product of the collective: constituted and constitutive, in equal parts, of the totality (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980). How do these nodes in a field of entangled forces, or maybe knots in a net, or even hot spots in an ever-expanding continuum appear? Let us explore the arising of nodes, knots, or hot spots that individuate a situation as a thing happening out there against an actively forgotten background as concentrations of coalescing relations.

Once again relying on Ortega, we may indulge in an ordinary-life example. You are riding a bus back home from an excursion to the new park in the city. You are listening to music and vaguely looking through the window. Nothing is happening, except that so much is being given: a teen is reading a newspaper, another is looking at his phone, the bus driver keeps wiping sweat off her forehead with her sleeve, it smells like dirt and oil, you are digesting an apple, the chair in front of you looks worn out and discolored. And yet, nothing is happening for you: nothing is condensed enough to constitute a situation. There is no sufficient concentration in any of the described space-time relations and affordances to be brought to the fore, to demand the passage from *contar con* to *reparar*.

Notice that these relations would be more than enough to constitute an unforgettable, distinct, and well-bounded situation for a two-year old riding the bus for the first or second time—but not for you. Notice also that all these relations, including their particular intersection with you, are more than enough to constitute an unforgettable, distinct, and well-bounded situation for Karen who has never seen a black transgender person riding her bus before—but not for you.

Then you get a phone call, your friend asking, "What are you up to?" You reply, "I'm on the bus riding home." You just created the situation "on the bus riding home" by privileging certain space-time relations in order to bring yourself to presence along with what you deem to be your most relevant circumstance with regard to your friend's inquiry. In this case, your friend's question is the trigger to cause a condensation of certain relations that become privileged against a background turned irrelevant.

As you hang up the phone, the bus comes to a sudden and violent stop. Everyone gasps and shakes in fear and disconcert, grasping handles and seats. You look through the nearest window and see a bleeding person on the ground, probably hit by the bus or by a green car stopped beside it. You get off the bus along with the other passengers, grab the phone, and call back your friend: "There's been an accident."

Meanwhile, the sky is blue and radiant, sun rays heat up your skin, a group of sparrows of different sizes pick crumbs from a table, a little girl rushes down the sidewalk on her scooter wearing a helmet, classical music sounds off a balcony, the new sandals you are wearing make your feet hurt. The condensation of the relations that become "an accident," however, is such that it saturates your attention and creates an irresistible and all-excluding knot, hot spot, or node. Even the situation of "riding the bus back home" has now become just a germ, a history, a root, or a context for the true situation that "there's been an accident."

The knot appears because of our *reparar*, but this *reparar* may have different causes: self-directed awareness (I am to observe my breath for the next ten minutes), other-provoked awareness (What are you up to? What do you see?), or impromptu happenings that condensate or even saturate our attention because of their surprising, dangerous, or demanding nature (from a burgeoning fire that must be immediately extinguished to my daughter repeatedly and loudly requesting her snack). In this way we vindicate Ortega's claim that awareness and *reparar* are caused from encounters with *problemas*: events and phenomena that present resistance and imperatively demand our resolution.

This is also what Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) called "the irritation of doubt" (1877, IV). It is the itchy feeling that something needs resolution and forces us to struggle until it is resolved. He discusses doubt as an unpleasantness that leads us to do anything to escape that state by reaching a belief, possibly defined as a condensation of relations associated with a fixed meaning. This being so, the selection of matters for attention that become individuated as situations is a response to "problems" to be resolved. This holds true as long as we understand *problema* in the Or-

tegan sense of what irritates us, because it yet needs to be decided and defined – thus he characterizes life itself as an open project.

We need one extra qualification on how a condensation, node, knot, or hot spot of relations appears to raise a situation via our *reparar*. As hinted above, riding the bus was nothing for you, but it was a distinct and memorable situation for the toddler and the white lady (as long as you were on the bus), much as the accident provoked a saturation of attention for you and the lady yet not for the toddler.

The relational affordances that we actualize and reify at any given time as constituting a situation depend not only on what we are forced to see by things' resistance or imperative for resolution (their being a problem), but also by what we are trained, educated, and socialized to see – and not to see – when we look at and around ourselves.



Much like Karen at the sight of a black transgender person on her bus, Confucius freaked out at the sight of a someone leisurely and joyously swimming in the massive waterfall of Lüliang. He could not conceive of this occurring as anything other than an attempt at self-harm, unaccustomed as the great master was to demonstrations of natural adaptation to



one's environment or acquired, non-learned virtue (Guo 2004, 19:565-58).<sup>11</sup> Our expectations and conceptions of the normal and the good determine what catches our attention and also how we are to interpret those condensed relations that obscure everything around them.

## Co-Constituting

We are to consider with the *Zhuangzi* that our current set of expectations, beliefs, and values is the result of previous encounters and events that help “fully form our heart-minds” (*chengxin* 成心), namely making up our minds on rights and wrongs (*shifei* 是非), possibles and impossibles (*kebu* 可不可) (Guo 2004, 2:56). The I who creates and raises a situation is in turn itself a product of a series of previous situations which dictate the kind of situations it will in the future co-create. Situations and I, I and situations co-construct one another over time. The *Zhuangzi* says, “Without the other there is no I, but without I there is nothing to grasp” (*feibi wuwo, feiwo suo-qu* 非彼無我，非我無所取; Guo 2004, 2:55).

Let us explore the first part of 0 claim, which I believe to be more difficult to accept than the second. Indeed, after almost a century of social constructivism the European history of transcendental idealism, or perhaps simply because we have access to our consciousness, we can have a first-person experience of how our *reparar* and *atender* makes things be and become something and, as a result, we do not have such a hard time understanding just how we create things (“without I there is nothing to grasp”).

But how is the other (“perceived and conceptualized as different from I”), in this case a situation, constitutive of the I (“without the other there is no I”)? As Roger Ames explains, not only are fields constituted by their foci—such as history by events, families by their members, and, we may now add, “situations by persons”—but foci are also constituted by their fields, that is, events by history, members by their families, and persons by situations (2021, ch. 4). So, how am I made out of things that are not I?

There are at least two relevant senses in which situations constitute the person. The first comes from a narrative conception of the person and can be summarized as the process of acquisition of a fully-formed heart-

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<sup>11</sup> In the story, Confucius qualifies this situation as “suicide attempt” and sends his disciples to help, not being capable to even conceive that the swimmer is not in need of help. He is consequently ridiculed by the adept swimmer who, without giving it much importance, claims to know how to swim in those waters simply by living in them. See Galvany 2019.

mind. This involves the creation of horizons of expectations and conceptions of normality, which inevitably are associated with axiological evaluations of good and bad, right and wrong, possible and impossible. What I have experienced in the past influences and acts upon what I will experience in the future and how I conceptualize it and endow it with meaning.

My horizon of expectations dictates whether something is happening, whether something is to be seen, thought, considered, included, learned, or known. In other words, my previous situations—all which I am not, such as “there’s been an accident” —dictate who I become and the kinds of situations I will co-raise in the future.<sup>12</sup>

We are the product of our histories, both actors and patients in them. As Roger Ames remarks alluding to Alfred North Whitehead’s (1861-1947) holistic aesthetic order,

It begins from the assumption that all of the concrete and interpenetrating details of this particular painting and its unbounded context are relevant to the totality of the effect. When we move from paintings to persons, we must acknowledge that all of the narrative details—the entire field of events of our lives—are more or less relevant to the emerging identities of whom we are becoming as persons. (2021, 211)

The second sense comes from a transformational perspective or “transformation of entities” (*wuhua* 物化), the notion that every entity, defined as an emerging collection of interconnected relations with varying degrees of interdependency rather than as an individual substance, experiences continuous transformation along with changes in its constitutive relations. In his analysis of the *Zhuangzi*’s butterfly dream (Guo 2004, 2:112), where the term *wuhua* appears, Dan Lusthaus claims that different situations radically transform the subject of experience that raises and constitutes those situations (2003).

The dream makes us witnesses of such transformation where an entity called “I”—an intersection between plural and changing relations—experiences transformation between becoming a human subject named Zhuang Zhou and a butterfly subject. Lusthaus explains that each situa-

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<sup>12</sup> Unless I engage in an active self-cultivational work of self-aware deconstruction which may counteract the effects of my socialization, as the *Zhuangzi* describes with the process of “sitting in oblivion” (*zuowang* 坐忘; Guo 2004, 6:282-85). It is very much aware of the absolutist dangers of socialization but also acknowledges that there is no living without socialization and mediation. The proposal is to deconstruct the fixation of the items that have become reified as to return to them (and to oneself) their original ambiguous potentiality of being nothing per se.

tion carries its own distinct set of rules or, in the *Zhuangzi*'s words, "divisions" (*fen* 分), as they become individuated and singled out from a background.

It is obviously not the same to act as a person or as a butterfly, but it is neither the same to act as a writer—as I am doing right now, much aware of my situation as I actively self-direct myself to reflect on it—or to act as a mother—a role I am constantly forced into as I write with my young daughter at home. The subject, which creates a situation by noticing and bringing certain relations to the forefront, is in turn created along the situation that gains primacy and rises. Despite her asymmetrical power to reify relations via attention, the subject or I is just one more constitutive element in a situation, as dependent upon the rest of elements and relations as these depend upon her *reparar* to become.

Hence the person changes as much as all relations change and along with them, although this transformation is not always so radically visible as in the boundaries between a person and a butterfly. As Lusthaus notes, "Transformation involves radical novelty, such that it is not that a self-same object goes from situation A to situation B, but that person A in situation A becomes something else (butterfly, natural phenomenon, etc.) in situation B" (2003, 170).<sup>13</sup>

## Normative Considerations

Why is it important to understand the ontology of a situation? To my mind, theoretical reflection is interesting and engaging as such, a revealing exercise that helps us see less or more than what we ordinarily see. What makes it relevant and necessary, however, is its direct impact on doing, interacting, performing, and behaving. Different ontologies lead us to different models of what it means to act and live well (with)in this world. It is because of its guiding and normative power that I consider ontology and other branches of theoretical speculation more than an entertaining and eye-opening exercise: they substantiate and legitimize the kind of persons we are to be and how we are to treat others, and therefore must be taken seriously.

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<sup>13</sup> A critic may say that the person remains the same and only the action, role, or attitude changes, but that would be an essentialist approach to persons and entities as antecedent substance prior to relations for which we find no evidence to sustain. A change in situation represents a change at the ontological level of the constitution of the subject/agent/person/I as well as the rest of its constitutive interconnected relations.

By the time we ask a question about life we are already in it, said Ortega, which means that all our questions occur *a posteriori*. We find ourselves betwixt and between, always late to our appointment with the world. By the time we can inquire about who and how we are, we already are. By the time we come up with an answer about who we are, we have probably become something else.

At stake here is an ever-present primordial entanglement that cannot be unknotted. Many forms of philosophical analysis attempt to isolate discrete elements in complex relations in order to understand them separately and independently under the assumption that reduction to individual parts simplifies the task of thinking and leads us to the nature of things. I am starting from the opposite assumption: things are messy, intertwined, embedded, entangled, interconnected, interdependent.

There are not even “things” in the substance-ontology sense of the term, but only relations with hot spots that enjoy differing degrees of stability. We need theories that help us understand who and how we are in this messy, entangled, interconnected, relational manner, so that this understanding can help us devise more efficacious ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that are based upon our ontological status, on what we are. We are in the middle of intricate nets of relations that gain and lose temperature and condensation, both by means of these relations and constituted by these relations.

We are in and by the entanglement, an entanglement so intricate and vast that, as the *Zhuangzi* says, we can never know where anything begins nor ends, what constitutes being or presence and what constitutes nothingness or absence (Guo 2004, 2: 79). The moment we identify a beginning, a new beginning for that first beginning can be identified just by enlarging our perspective on its constitutive field, an exercise that can be repeated *ad infinitum*.<sup>14</sup> What our focus of awareness now deems a being quickly turns into nothing when we shift our attention to a brighter and newer stimulus, leaving our former being into the actively forgotten background of what eludes our *reparar*.

Beginning and end, being and nothing are both two and the same; they turn into one another just like the rabbit and the duck by the simple switching of our attention. A situation is just a focus of awareness upon certain relations which can always be ever extended by illuminating a larger focus or reduced by concentrating on ever-smaller relational fields.

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<sup>14</sup> This insight is crucial for Kyoto School founder Nishida Kitarō’s concept of place (*basho* 場所). See Nishida 2012.

If this is so, nothing is never just what it appears to us at first sight nor is it ultimately the meaning we ascribe to it.

The *Huainanzi* 淮南子 parable of the border man who lost his horse makes us realize that we never know whether what we notice to be happening (a situation) is fortunate or unfortunate, a beginning or the end of something, a thing or nothing (Liu 2003, 14:597-99).<sup>15</sup> The events play out to disprove our conventional notions of fortune, right, and good by simply adding a bit more of awareness over context and entangled relations each time.

In the story, a man's horse runs across the border into a different people's territory, that of the Hu, from where it cannot be recovered. Everyone (*renjie* 人皆) pities his loss, but he responds, "How do you know this doesn't constitute fortune?" Several months later, the horse returns bringing an excellent Hu steed along, and everyone rejoices. The man, however, asks, "How do you know this doesn't constitute misfortune?"

Next, his son falls while riding and breaks his thigh, to which everyone reacts in dismay. Once again, the man wonders, "How do you know this doesn't constitute good fortune?" A year later, the Hu invade the area and all able-bodied men are drafted. Nine out of ten die, but not the man's son, who could not serve due to his lame leg.

The story shows how fortune and misfortune are interdependent, nondual just like the rabbit and the duck—each constituted out of the same set of relations and available to be brought to the fore depending on our *reparar*. It contrasts conventional morality and standard axiological evaluations by teaming everyone against "the man," who is described as an expert in mantic arts, implying that he understood that there is always more beyond the small frame of what appears to be in the here and now. He knows that things are neither this nor that, but an open problem without any essence of their own. They only become fixated and determined via our focusing contextualization. In consequence, moral and critical evaluations must vary, and he maintains an open attitude, refraining from short-sighted extreme reactions like those of "everyone."

Things are messy, intertwined, interconnected, entangled relations with no fixed beginnings nor ends. However, we can and do privilege starting points every time that we deem something so, affirm something right, or notice that something happens—we raise a situation. That is how we create worlds (*mundos*): the privileging of a knot to act as a starting

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<sup>15</sup> This *chengyu* 成語 (phrase, idiom) inspired by the *Huainanzi* story—*saiweng shi-ma* 塞翁失馬, "a man on the border loses a horse"—remains in Mandarin today, meaning that a loss may turn out to be a gain, or vice versa.

point, as a source of narrative and causal meaning for a larger set of relations.

Ortega says, "World is that of which we are certain."<sup>16</sup> What a magnificent thought! We cannot live in the messiness of our circumstances. Without a starting point, a fixed anchor, a set of beliefs and values, a standard against which to measure things. Reality is like moving water—we fall, we sink, we are drawn down. Insecurity (Peirce's "irritation of doubt") forces us to fabricate security: certainty, a solid stepping stone. Ortega insists that it is our own believing in our own fabrication that saves us from drowning, that keeps us safe. This is why against an essentially inhabitable reality we establish a world that is habitable by virtue of our certainty, of the trust we put into it. When we build safety nets against the itching unpleasantness of incertitude, we create worlds that come to possess causal power by being shared by many: they all intersect yet never fully overlap.

But what happens when we are so certain of something? When we trust something to be so, true, and right? We become blinded by our own comfort and unable to see, affirm, and find existential security in alternative yet equally legitimate worlds. The *Zhuangzi* equates the worlds we raise through certainty, our stepping grounds for the creation of meaning, with points in a circle.

Each point is a beginning, from which to interpret with security our lived experience. Each point has grounds on which to be formulated, legitimized, affirmed, and accepted, but by the same logic each point also has grounds on which to be falsified, negated, disproven, and rejected (Guo 2004, 2:66). Each point is a position that leads to affirming certain situations and endowing them with particular meanings via our belief—defined as a condensation of relations associated with a fixed meaning.

This entails that each point and the situations and axiological evaluations it raises have their own enabling and limiting factors. They make certain standards emerge or submerge, be visible or invisible, possible or impossible, right or wrong, under particular conditions. As the *Zhuangzi*'s says:

Among things, 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 from which position you approach something, you will know an aspect or another of it. Therefore, it is said: "that" position comes from "this" position, and "this" position also ex-

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<sup>16</sup>"Mundo es aquello de que estamos seguros" (2004, Lesson X).

ists because of “that” position. [The existence of] “this” and “that” is what we call co-dependent origination. Although that is the case, as things live they die, and as they die, they come to life again; things 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. (Guo 2004, 2:66)<sup>17</sup>

Each one of the many possible worlds is but a tiny point in the circle that, by its own raising, closes up and obscures the endless number of alternative positions from which to look at ourselves, feel an emotion, think a thought, react toward an event, interact with another. Each point is a position of openness and closure at the same time.

By enabling my seeing something, it blinds me to all that, from that position, cannot be seen. I claim to see the water bottle in detriment to the moth, the vibrating door, the ray of light, my own body. As Dan Lusthaus exclaims, “What limits us is ironically the very absence of limits!” (2003, 185). Now a butterfly now a Zhuang Zhou, now a rabbit now a duck, now “this” now “that,” but never both at the same time.

We need to focus, determine, choose, and take positions. We can make worlds thanks to these starting points we secure and occupy, but we are equally blinded by them, since they force us into obscuring all other possibilities that cannot be simultaneously acknowledged for my world to make sense and function well. The normative aspect consistent with the ontology of a situation is that there is always a plurality and heterogeneity of values, standards, worldviews, and worlds of experience. They coexist and are constantly available to us, but we rarely take advantage of them.<sup>18</sup>

Most people do not even take joy in knowing that these plural and heterogeneous worlds exist and, as a result, work hard to deny their legitimacy and see them enclosed behind walls to prevent them from overflowing. The great María Lugones (1944-2020) repeatedly denounced this phenomenon in her work, while also offering practical advice on how to travel between worlds with a playful attitude (1987).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>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。

<sup>18</sup> Dan Lusthaus discusses this important point while analyzing chapter 17 of the *Zhuangzi* (2003, 173).

<sup>19</sup> I heard the sad news of her death as I was completing this article in July 2020 and could not resist the opportunity to pay homage to her, however short and simple.

## Living Temporally

As much as we need our world to be safe and certain in order for it to be habitable, there is no point in fixating our standards and values onto something that is contingent and partial, namely onto something that by definition is not and will keep changing along changes in its own constituting relations, eventually disappearing and never returning to presence in the exact same shape (like youth, like health).

There is no point in affirming something as absolute and true just because it is the easiest straight peek from our window. There is no point in imposing our lived experience and situations over all other lived experiences and situations that are created along with similar space-times. There is no point in spending our life mourning for what we are not, cannot have, is gone, or on the other side of the line of time, anticipating what is to come, we will become, and hope to achieve. Of course, there is no escape (nor need to escape) from noticing and bringing to present through our attention, from creating entire worlds made up of situations where everything is fixed, monolithic, uni-dimensional, and straightforward, where what you see is what you get.

Like the *Zhuangzi* says, if we follow our fully-formed minds and make them our teacher, who could ever be without a teacher (read “authoritative guide”) (Guo 2004, 2:56)? Both the intelligent and the fool create fixated worlds just by selectively foregrounding relations out of the totality. We cannot live in nothingness: we would sink and drown, so we make ourselves masters of our worlds. Each point, each moment, is filled with a determinacy: my this, my right, my so. But “to claim that there are any such things as right and wrong before they come to be fully formed in someone’s mind, that is like saying you left for Yue today and arrived yesterday,” that is, self-contradiction, nonsense, or a play in words (Guo 2004, 2:56; Ziporyn 2009, 11).<sup>20</sup>

The person who refuses to inhabit just one point in the circle but relocates to the center (*huanzhong* 環中), from which each point—position, perspective, worldview, set of standards—is equally accessible and easy to let go of, does not commit to any single world. Such a person refuses to fix the meaning of right, good, and possible, and refrains from reifying situations and endowing them with a closed meaning.

If we keep in mind the empty ontological status of the situations that define what we are (not being per se, and being by virtue of not being), we will find it easier not to absolutize our reduced, biased, and contingent

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<sup>20</sup> 未成乎心而有是非,是今日適越而昔至也。



views, and to switch from one view to another as needed. The *Zhuangzi* puts it most appropriately:

Therefore, the sage does not proceed from this [vicious circle of co-dependence], but gets illumination from heaven so that his affirming “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 Dao. The axis obtains the position of the center of the circle, and uses it to respond 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.” (Guo 2004, 2:66)<sup>21</sup>

Ontology gives us clarity. We can never illuminate the totality of the constituting field of relations for any given focus. In this way, the position at the center is not an absolute one in terms of knowing and seeing – as the term “sage” may imply for the reader. Rather, it is a methodical position that guides how to react to our own views, ideas, and feelings as they arise and how to create paths for relativizing and enlarging our understanding of them. This in turn informs us how to act toward any given situation and any given other, and how to move in between worlds.<sup>22</sup> We humans have an incredible capacity to create situations, not only to deal with them or to walk into them, but to create them out of the endless indeterminacies that are available to us at any given space-time – always at hand (*a la mano*), always possible.

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<sup>21</sup> 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」。

<sup>22</sup> The person located at the center of the circle is just occupying a position for situation-opening and boundary-creation, and he knows it. There are limits to what can be illuminated at any single time: limits by positionality, relationality, and perspective, and even those who illuminate more cannot illuminate the entire totality of the cosmos at once. Thinking through the image of “getting illuminated by Heaven,” even such major light that illuminates half of earth fails to illuminate the other half and itself (heaven). Much as with yin and yang, the sunny side depends on the shadowy one, and it would take a zero absolute perspective to see the whole at once, a premise that is not given nor accepted here.

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