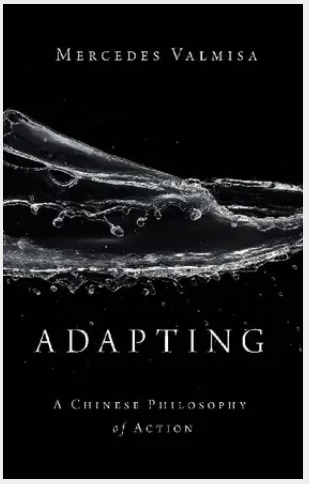
Valmisa

Adapting

A Chinese Philosophy of Action



If you are from the West, it is likely that you normally assume that you are a subject who relates to objects and other subjects through actions that spring purely from your own intentions and will. Chinese philosophers, however, show how mistaken this conception of action is. Philosophy of action in Classical China is radically different from its counterpart in the Western philosophical narrative. While the latter usually assumes we are discrete individual subjects with the ability to act or to effect change, Classical Chinese philosophers theorize that human life is embedded in endless networks of relationships with other entities, phenomena, and socio-material contexts. These relations are primary to the constitution of the person, and hence acting within an early Chinese context is interacting and co-acting along with others, human or nonhuman. This book is the first monograph dedicated to the exploration and rigorous reconstruction of an extraordinary strategy for efficacious relational action devised by Classical Chinese philosophers, one which attempts to account for the interdependent and embedded character of human agency-what Mercedes Valmisa calls "adapting" or "adaptive agency" (yin) As opposed to more unilateral approaches to action conceptualized in the Classical Chinese corpus, such as forceful and prescriptive agency, adapting requires heightened self- and other-awareness, equanimity, flexibility, creativity, and response. These capacities allow the agent to “co-raise” courses of action ad hoc: unique and temporary solutions to specific, non-permanent, and non-generalizable life problems. Adapting is one of the world's oldest philosophies of action, and yet it is shockingly new for contemporary audiences, who will find in it an unlikely source of inspiration to cope with our current global problems. This book explores the core conception of adapting both on autochthonous terms and by cross-cultural comparison, drawing on the European and Analytic philosophical traditions as well as on scholarship from other disciplines. Valmisa exemplifies how to build meaningful philosophical theories without treating individual books or putative authors as locations of stable intellectual positions, opening brand-new topics in Chinese and comparative philosophy.

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