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**Review of: Himmel—Erde—Mensch: Das Verhältnis des Menschen zur Wirklichkeit
in der antiken chinesischen Philosophie (Heaven—Earth—Man: The relation of the
human being to reality in ancient Chinese philosophy)**

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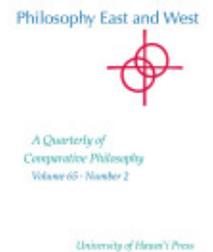
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Himmel—Erde—Mensch: Das Verhältnis des Menschen zur Wirklichkeit in der antiken chinesischen Philosophie by Philippe Brunozzi (review)

Rafael Suter

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Himmel—Erde—Mensch: Das Verhältnis des Menschen zur Wirklichkeit in der antiken chinesischen Philosophie (Heaven—Earth—Man: The relation of the human being to reality in ancient Chinese philosophy). By Philippe Brunozzi. *Welten der Philosophie* 8. Freiburg/München: Verlag Karl Alber, 2011. Pp. 236. €29, ISBN 978-3-495-48489-0.

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It is somewhat daring that Philippe Brunozzi's *Himmel—Erde—Mensch: Das Verhältnis des Menschen zur Wirklichkeit in der antiken chinesischen Philosophie* mentions in its title the triad of heaven, earth, and man, the harmonious unity of which has become a popular characterization *in nuce* of Chinese philosophy, however meaningless it may be. And it is apparently in an immediate attempt to outweigh this appeal to *cliché* that, already in the subtitle, the author specifies that it is the human being on whom his book concentrates. Indeed, Brunozzi probes if not a *cliché* then a view on classical Chinese philosophy that has become rather commonplace: What

is the textual basis of the widespread conviction that ancient Chinese thought is mainly interested in practical matters of everyday life? It is this preconception that Brunozzi intends to evaluate in a close reading of three classical Chinese works: the *Analects*, the *Mozi*, and the *Laozi*.

Brunozzi's book is a revised version of his Ph.D. thesis, consisting of three parts. The first is dedicated to challenging the above-mentioned preconception of Chinese philosophy and to the question of what I tentatively translate as the "actualization of man's relation to reality" (*Ein problematisches Grundverständnis und die Frage nach dem Vollzug des menschlichen Wirklichkeitsverhältnisses*) (pp. 17–48). Part 2, by far the largest, promises to test, in a close reading of the selected texts, the questionable premises presented in part 1 ("Die Überprüfung," pp. 49–209). The third part offers a summarizing assessment ("Die Auswertung," pp. 215–222).

The view of Chinese philosophy that Brunozzi puts to the test is the one advanced by interpretations such as those by Roger T. Ames or François Jullien. Brunozzi deserves credit for attempting, against fashionable trends, a philosophical reading of the mentioned works as *texts*. To this end, he employs Ricoeur's hermeneutical approach and his concept of the "world of the text," thus elegantly circumventing delicate issues of authorship and textual genesis. Another valuable contribution of Brunozzi's work is his innovative and sometimes highly appealing translations of the primary sources. Clearly tailored to the author's conceptual investigations, they nonetheless remain sufficiently faithful to the Chinese original. If there is a motif pervading the score of Brunozzi's work, it is his emphasis on the central role of the lived body (*Leib*) for reconstructing the relation of man to his environment in the works he analyzes.

Despite all the originality of Brunozzi's approach, there are problems with the study, some of which are perhaps due precisely to the approach. For one thing, the overall argumentative structure of Brunozzi's study could be more convincing. Given that it is explicitly designed to test the widespread view that ancient Chinese philosophy is focused on issues of practical life, it is astonishing that in his analyses the author at times readily endorses the validity of this claim himself. If Brunozzi is convinced that this view is correct in case a detailed investigation of the sources yields a more multifaceted picture of the human way of interacting with the environment (p. 217), he is probably too optimistic. If one sets out to test this view, why not try to read certain passages explicitly *against* it? To be fair, Brunozzi readily admits the limited scope of his own approach: "If Chinese philosophy was truly interested in concerns of the human relation to reality, one has to ask why the recommended approaches were not more explicitly and more systematically presented" (p. 221). He remains vague, however, when he proposes that complementing our "one-sided" philological approach to the texts by "overall practically oriented forms and ways of text interpretation" could lead to additional precision (p. 224). Further problems concern more specific points in Brunozzi's close readings of the Chinese sources, some of which I mention in the following chapter-by-chapter discussion.

The first chapter presents a reading of the *Analects*. Brunozzi admits that philological uncertainties make it impossible to determine either its authorship or its

precise date of composition. Nonetheless he is convinced that the philological imponderables do not imply that the text falls to incoherent pieces, but that, due to the overall topical and stylistic consistency, there is a certain degree of coherence in content. Brunozzi reconstructs the *Analects'* conception of reality via the concept of "heaven" (*tian*) (p. 53). For him, reality is here restricted to the actual course of things, with no "ontological spindle" hidden behind the concrete spectacle of reality. Heaven being no transcendent authority (p. 59), reality is conceived as "an immanent, self-active, relational process" (p. 61). While, for Brunozzi, the *Analects* lack any abstract or definite conception of what "the human being" is, he tries to show that what the text does say about the human being pertains to the process of "actualizing and moulding himself or herself" within the concrete environment (p. 63).

A considerable part of this chapter is dedicated to the *li*, "etiquette/rites." Brunozzi notes a tension between the *Analects'* emphasis on these traditional modes of behavior and his own reconstruction focusing on the "situational, bodily, and co-creative" experience of reality. He points to the "external character" of the *li* to reconcile this apparent opposition. On the basis of *Analects* 3.9, he notes that the rites come to the fore only insofar as they are enacted by concrete individuals. For him, this is evidence that they are no abstract entities. They are real exclusively as expressions of lived and actualized behavior, that is, in what Brunozzi terms their "outward" manifestation (p. 82). Hence, the *li* cannot be regarded as ideal rules of human interaction (p. 84). On the basis of the Master's biography in the *Analects*, Brunozzi eventually claims that it is by unveiling a way of "undistorted self-realization" (*unverzerrter Selbstvollzug*) that the *Analects* guide the human being toward a truly successful life (p. 103).

The second chapter is dedicated to the core chapters of the *Mozi*. Again, Brunozzi's investigation starts from the notion of heaven (p. 123). Just as in the *Analects*, heaven is said not to refer to a transcendent entity with which people could interact. However, when, in an informative footnote, Brunozzi interprets the Mohist emphasis on the role of heaven as a reaction against the increasing doubts on heaven's reliability to guarantee the proper course of human and natural affairs, one wonders if this might not be indicative that Mohists possibly expected more from heaven than Brunozzi is ready to admit. He argues that Mohists regarded the actuality of the process (*aktuell sich vollziehendes Wirklichkeitsgeschehen*) as the lived embodiment of heaven. Based on the "Fayi" chapter, he further identifies heaven with the *tendency* of the coherent whole of this process. The notions of "heavenly intention" (*tianzhi*) and "heaven" itself thus largely coincide. Still, for Brunozzi, this kind of "intentionality," manifest in the course of things, does not involve a conception of heaven as an independent, volitional entity.

Brunozzi argues that the Mohists characterize human beings by their essential dependence (p. 132), at the same time according to them an active part, a "supportive function," for the course of their concrete environment. Brunozzi regards *participating in relationships of mutual support* (p. 134) as the core of the Mohist human condition, thus admitting the possibility of human failure: any arbitrary emphasis on one of the various relationships to one's environment can harm the overall

balance and lead to devastating consequences. Human participation in various relationships of mutual support is no less than a duty (*Aufgabe*) assigned to *effectuate* (*Wirksammachen*) them to the environment (pp. 136–137). For Brunozzi, at the heart of “devastating disasters, severe calamities, and horrible famines” (p. 133, quoting the *Mozi*) is the human failure to live up to this duty. But is the idea of a human influence *via* heaven on the course of the seasons, on the growth of plants and animals, and even on natural disasters not just as plausibly an expression of an age-old religious or magical conception of reality, as it might be supportive of Brunozzi’s reading?

The Mohist notion of “standard” (*fa*) he conceptualizes as a means “mediating” between the individual human being and his immediate environment on the one hand, and between him and the shared experience of humankind on the other. For Brunozzi, Mohist “standards” are tools that can only be “situationally” effectuated, rather than abstract ideals (p. 153). Later, when Brunozzi discusses the Mohist notion of “distinction” (*bian*), he emphasizes that the stock examples here are terms for colors and flavors, just to appeal, again, to the “bodily awareness” of these perceptions. Yet, at least in the case of “black” and “white,” what he readily interprets in terms of his own emphasis on the lived body might just as well simply allude to what, in case of the blind man, strikes one as an obvious example of someone capable of using the words without knowing what they refer to. Do we really know enough about the way perception was conceptualized in ancient China in order to say with any degree of certainty that Brunozzi’s emphasis on the lived body informed by Bernhard Waldenfels, Gernot Böhme, Rolf Elberfeld, and Mathias Obert, among others, is not at least as alien to the Mohists as, say, syllogistics?

The third chapter concentrates on the *Laozi*. When, in his discussion of the text’s philological intricacies, Brunozzi remarks that it may have resulted “from a process of writing down aphorisms of various age and origin that had been passed down orally” (p. 167), he foreshadows the enormous difficulties any philosophical reading has to face. Brunozzi first discusses the term *dao*, translating it as “original movedness” (*ursprüngliche Bewegtheit*) or simply “movement” (*Bewegung*). As he had set out to question whether Ames’ and Jullien’s interpretations of early Chinese thought are actually supported by textual evidence, it is somewhat surprising that, at this point, he almost exclusively relies on their interpretation of *dao*. He starts his discussion by stating that “in spite of its permanence and independence . . . this pervading movedness does not point towards a timeless, eternal Being regulating the particular movements from either inside or outside” (p. 170). However, Brunozzi does not attempt to further substantiate this sweeping claim. That a “metaphysical” interpretation of *dao* is inappropriate may be correct. Still, as it so strikingly fits the view of those whose preconception of Chinese thought Brunozzi promises to evaluate, one would expect him to dig somewhat deeper here.

Brunozzi’s discussion on the genealogy of the Way in terms of an all-encompassing movedness, his interpretation of particular movements as inheriting the “spin” of the previous ones, is very illuminating in itself, and it certainly gestures toward one of the important reference points of the speculations in the *Laozi*: the continuity of

genealogical reproduction. Still, is it not one of the striking insights of this text that the *dao* as the first ancestor cannot be understood in a simple analogy to reproduction? Unlike any line of natural reproduction, this one has no beginning and no end in time. Is this not exactly the point, one would like to ask, where the Way is *more* than the entirety of this regenerative process, where indeed it is something “absolutely different”? Brunozzi underlines that “the human being does not have any particular status” (p. 185) in the *Laozi*, and for him the essential point of being human here lies in a human being’s “self-continuation” (*Selbstfortführung*). As Brunozzi sees it, the aberration of man according to the *Laozi* is caused by his fixation “on definite goals and values” that have him “lose sight of the actual context and the exigencies required by particular situations” (p. 187).

These rather general and abstract statements are then referred to the example of the infant in *Laozi* chapter 55. Unconsciously interacting with his environment, the nursing succeeds in gaining the care and affection of all surrounding beings. This picture is interpreted by Brunozzi as “bodily spontaneity” (*leibhaftige Spontaneität*) (p. 191). For Brunozzi, the lived body is here viewed in its original and immediate naturalness, and man is characterized by his ability spontaneously to meet with particular situations (*situatives Einfinden*) (p. 192). While this emphasis on the lived body may be intuitively plausible in the case of the infant, it appears less so if Brunozzi proceeds to the ruler. What is implicitly there in the picture of the infant winning over his entire environment is made explicit here: a sense of *dominance*. Yet, while one readily accepts the idea that the baby enchants his immediate environment entirely unconsciously, this is less plausible in case of the ruler. And even if the relevant passage of the *Laozi* seriously suggests to the ruler to stultify himself in order to adapt his own power to the baby’s unconscious charm, such a suggestion is ultimately proposed to a ruler as a *means* of domination. Is the relation of dominance not at least of the same relevance to this passage as the fact that the baby’s interaction with the environment is a kind of “bodily spontaneity”? This indicates a more general fault of omission of the present study of the *Laozi*. Given that the oldest extant commentary is found in the *Hanfeizi*, a text arguably less interested in the realization of human individuals than in the unconditional submission of his subjects to an omnipotent ruler, and in view of the fact that “to rule” is one of the basic meanings of the word *dao*, one wonders why the entire dimension of rulership is virtually absent from this study. Approaching the topic of “naturalness” in this context would plausibly have led the author to say more about the political and ideological dimension of the *Laozi*, from which he keeps away so carefully.

Among recent publications on ancient Chinese philosophy, Brunozzi’s study stands out by its highly original approach. Deliberately renouncing the drawing of rash and ready comparisons, he develops his insights in detailed reflections on his sources without losing track in a maze of philological leg work. In this sense, Brunozzi’s innovative phenomenological approach doubtlessly enriches the field. At the same time, it brings along its own difficulties and raises a number of problems that deserve further scrutiny. One of the obvious difficulties is the central notion of the “lived body”: What is the relationship between the historical and hence merely con-

tingent circumstances of its emergence and the apparently universal immediacy of bodily experience that it purports? Clearly, the question to what extent it can add to our understanding of ancient Chinese sources not least hinges on this. Irrespective of this, Brunozzi's study offers valuable and inspiring insights into the texts he investigates. Not least of all, Brunozzi's careful and multifaceted language also makes this book an enjoyable read.

Errata: On page 202, the spelling should be "Su Che" instead of "Su Zhe." The Chinese is usually given in traditional characters, but at times some simplified characters slip in (e.g., on p. 117).

De la continuité dynamique dans l'univers confucéen: Lecture néoconfucéenne du Zhongyong (中庸): Nouvelle traduction du chinois classique et commentaire herméneutique (Of dynamic continuity in the Confucian universe: A Neo-Confucian reading of the *Zhongyong*: A new translation from the classical Chinese and a hermeneutical commentary). By Diana Arghiresco. Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2013. Pp. 416. €35, ISBN 978-2-204-10026-7.



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When delving into traditional Chinese philosophy, it is tempting to search for an "original meaning" of the classical scriptures. However, this is a futile task for several reasons: First, we are confronted with a complex textual history, lacking a reliable "Urtext" version; much less can we rely on sufficient contextual information. Second, modern recipients—consciously or unconsciously—are prone to be influenced by orthodox interpretations, which have been dominating the discourse for several centuries. A good way to solve this dilemma is to take a close look at the most prevalent standard commentaries from the middle and late imperial era. This way we can not only increase our awareness for developments of the classical tradition, but also unlock its full epistemological potential for contemporary philosophical discussion.

In view of its reliable textual foundation and its prominent position in the living tradition in East Asia, it is striking that scholars have been hesitating so far to fully translate Zhu Xi's 朱熹 commentary to the Four Books (*Daxue* 大學, *Zhongyong* 中庸, *Lunyu* 論語, and *Mengzi* 孟子), the basic compendium of Confucian learning, which has served as the standard for elementary education and civil service examinations since the fourteenth century. In spite of their special importance, Western scholars interested in the Four Books' wisdom have concentrated on the classical texts and used Zhu Xi's extensive notes mostly as a stepping stone in order to uncover the "original meaning" of the canon. The new book by Diana Arghiresco, *De la continuité dynamique dans l'univers confucéen: Lecture néoconfucéenne du Zhongyong*,