# THE MUTUAL CULTIVATION OF SELF AND THINGS

## A Contemporary Chinese Philosophy of the Meaning of Being

YANG GUORONG

FOREWORD BY Hans-Georg Moeller

TRANSLATED BY Chad Austin Meyers

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# THE MUTUAL CULTIVATION OF SELF AND THINGS

WORLD PHILOSOPHIES

Bret W. Davis, D. A. Masolo, and Alejandro Vallega, *editors*

# Foreword

## *Contexts and Concepts: Yang Guorong's Concrete Metaphysics*

HANS-GEORG MOELLER

YANG GUORONG IS one of the most creative and prominent Chinese philosophers of our time. He is a truly "Chinese" philosopher not because of his citizenship, ethnicity, or workplace, but because of the nature of his work. Yang makes ample use of the complete range of sources provided by the Chinese philosophical tradition, including all its periods and all its schools (in addition to his reliance on the Western philosophical canon). Thus to call him, for example, a "Confucian" would not do justice to the breadth of his approach. More important, however, Yang is also truly a "philosopher," because he does not only study the history of philosophy or engage in specialized debates within the academic discipline of philosophy but has developed his own comprehensive philosophical system.

The core of his philosophical work is an outline of his "Concrete Metaphysics" (*juti de xingshangxue* 具体的形上学) published in three volumes in 2011: *A Treatise on Dao* (*Dao lun* 道论), *Ethics and Being: Treatise on Moral Philosophy* (*Lunli yu cunzai: daode zhexue yanjiu* 伦理与存在—道德哲学研究), and the present *The Mutual Cultivation of Self and Things* (*Chengji yu chengwu: yiyi shijie de shengcheng* 成己与成物—意义世界的生成). Taken together, these books present an elaborated and encompassing philosophy, addressing perennial ontological, epistemological, and ethical questions. Yang thereby follows the trend of major twentieth-century Chinese thinkers who tried to renew the Chinese philosophical tradition of Neo-Confucianism and its efforts to merge Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism into an overarching whole while at the same time incorporating the metaphysical, historical, and existential approaches of modern Western systemic philosophy as represented by authors like Kant, Hegel, and Heidegger. In short, Yang's project establishes a unifying "grand philosophy" by combining traditional Chinese and Western conceptualizations into a systematic synthesis expressed in contemporary language.

Yang's philosophy is called a "metaphysics" for two major reasons. First, he thereby connects with the systematic *methodology* of Western philosophy beginning

(arguably) with Plato and Aristotle. A systematic philosophy integrates all traditional fields of enquiry, that is, ontology, ethics, and epistemology. Thereby, it naturally cannot be confined to one of the contemporary professional "areas of specialization" such as philosophy of science, political philosophy, or philosophy of mind, and much less be concerned with debating (or "solving") specifically isolated or constructed questions as sometimes attempted in contemporary analytic philosophy. A systematic philosophy will, of course, also deal with specific questions, and it will address ontological, ethical, and epistemological issues, but it always does so with an overarching *coherence* in mind. The "truth" that emerges within or from a philosophical system cannot be grasped by summing up the truth values of its propositions, but by developing the capacity to see the connections that bind the various parts of the work together. The reader's task is not to measure up the qualities of each individual component on its own, but rather to appreciate the intricate architecture of the systematic edifice.

A true metaphysics does not "abstract"—in the sense of "de-contextualize"—its objects, but, to the contrary, always looks at them in conjunction with, to speak with Kant, the conditions of their possibility. Any object of cognition, for instance, is to a certain extent constituted by the cognitive subject for which it is an object. In this sense, metaphysics is, methodologically speaking, the art of contextualizing knowledge by not only trying to know something as something, but by also reflecting on the constitutive conditions that make something appear as that which it is. Or, to put it quite simply in Hegel's famous words: "Das Wahre ist das Ganze" (the truth is the whole.)

Second, as to its *contents,* metaphysics, in the sense of the term in the European tradition that Yang relates to, is concerned with reality, or, again, in more succinct Hegelian language, with *Wirklichkeit.* The German word *wirken* shares the same etymological root with the English word *work.* Thus, a true metaphysics is not merely concerned with how the world "is," but more precisely with how it "works." The contents of a metaphysical investigation are thus not just "things," but, in the terminology of Yang Guorong and the Chinese tradition he connects with, "affairs" (*shi* 事). Reality is not an assemblage of "facts" that philosophy can establish or find "out there"; rather, it is a "work in progress," a living body of relations, effects, powers, conflicts, combinations, and so on, within which philosophy itself partakes or "works." Thus, metaphysics does not primarily focus on the simple and narrow "meaning" of whatever it deals with, but on "the world of meaning" (*yiyi shijie* 意义世界) and its genesis, or, in other words, on "significance." A street sign or a word, for instance, may have the specific meaning "stop," and once we become aware that this means that we have to halt whenever we see the sign or hear the word, we may claim to *know* its meaning. This sort of knowledge, however, is "poor" knowledge; it is a form of knowledge a child can acquire, and it may be call it "pre-metaphysical." In order to *understand* the sign

or the word, we have to be able to see it as an "affair" that has not only a narrow meaning, but also *significance*. A "metaphysical" understanding that opens up a "world of meaning" will point to the way a word or a sign "works." In fact we can then see that it functions as an expression, for instance, of a context of power relations, of legal institutions, or of moral obligations. In this way, we are no longer limited to a mere perception of a sign—however "true" or "correct" it may be—but by seeing how it "works" we get to comprehend it in a more complex fashion, and rather than being stuck with one and only one particular "meaning" we are *free* to interpret it and not to just do what it seemingly asks us to do. If we only know the meaning of "stop," we will come to a halt. Once we understand its significance, and the genesis of meaning that we, as humans, are engaged in, we can move on. In this way, metaphysical knowledge is intrinsically connected, as Yang Guorong stresses throughout this book, with cognitive and practical freedom.

For both Hegel and Yang, metaphysics is thus first and foremost *wirkliches Wissen* or "working knowledge"—knowledge that works rather than merely informs. For this reason, Yang calls his overall project a "concrete metaphysics," a metaphysics that neither, like the positive sciences, deals with abstracted facts, nor, like a secular theology, with transcendent abstractions. Instead, it gains concrete significance in the sense just described. Yang links himself with Heidegger whom he credits with rightfully criticizing a metaphysics that had deteriorated to a state where it had forgotten about its essential connection with "being." Yang now wants to go a step further than Heidegger and revitalize the concrete dimension of metaphysics and its concern with living, dynamic, and humanist "being." This being "has an essentially historical character" and "as opposed to beings or a being, is rooted in one's own being and unfolds as the humanized world; it differs from any abstract substance hiding behind both individuals and particular beings, and it appears in a concrete form through blending together the universal and the particular as well as the general and the specific."[1] A concrete metaphysics that is thoroughly embedded in the "humanized world" is thus not only reconnected with its Greek ancestors, but also, and even more crucially for Yang, with the Chinese philosophical traditions and their immersion in the living world of human society and nature.

A metaphysics, however concrete it may be, necessarily expresses itself in language. Its core linguistic repertoire consists of concepts. A philosophical system is built from the interrelated concepts representing its constitutive ideas. Concepts are, again, not abstractions, but rather *comprehensive* crystallizations of thought. They are the linguistic manifestation of philosophical *comprehension*. Rather than simply having a meaning, they indicate philosophical significance. Or, in the words of Yang just quoted, they blend together the universal and the particular. The specific meaning of "work," for instance, is to engage in a particular productive activity, and if I say to a child "work," I hope she will understand

the meaning and continue her homework rather than watching TV. But one can also have a more encompassing, "narrative" understanding of work, and, for instance, connect the term with images of laborers in a factory or farmers on their land, as in the images of Socialist Realism. A conceptual understanding of "work," however, will "sublate" the understanding of the term to a level where its historical, existential, and cognitive significance is realized. Only on the basis of a conceptual comprehension of work, which is inclusive of and developed on the basis of its particular and narrative understanding, can a metaphysics outline how work is a *universal* aspect of human life that essentially makes us into what we are as human beings. The concept is the integral linguistic form in which an idea can become philosophically relevant.

The conceptual vocabulary of Yang's concrete metaphysics is mainly derived from two sources. First, from the conceptual apparatus of modern Western systematic philosophy, which in turn is to a certain extent derived from ancient Western philosophy, and second, from the ancient Chinese philosophical vocabulary and its modifications and conceptualizations by the Song-Ming philosophers and twentieth-century Chinese systematic philosophy. It is not an easy task to translate this vocabulary into contemporary English. While, on the one hand, English translations of some of the "technical terms" of ancient and modern Western philosophy have been established (e.g., "being," "things-in-themselves," "substance"), this is decisively not so with respect to the Chinese philosophical notions. Moreover, in Yang's new adaptation of the Western philosophical vocabulary and its conjunction with the Chinese terms, an altogether new conceptual network, at least in part, emerges. Given this complex situation, the present translation has to be regarded as an exceptional accomplishment. It succeeds in elucidating the complexities of Yang's system and, at the same time, doing justice to the historical and cultural depth of his work.

In a footnote to the initial publication of Yang's Introduction to the present book,[2] translator Chad Austin Meyers explains in detail the philosophical rationale for his rendering of the book title, and, in particular, of the decisive word *cheng* 成, which he translates varyingly as "maturation" and "refinement" in the title itself, and then in other ways throughout the book. I think that his method is philosophically sound and convincing, and ultimately superior to deciding on one single English term for *cheng*.

Of course, however, a translator of philosophical texts not only has to resolve conceptual complexities, but semantic and syntactical ones as well. As this book progresses, the concept *cheng* evolves as it traverses not only the variety of conceptual components, which compose it from within, but the other concepts and problems that connect to it from without as well. As these conditions amount, conceptual terms must metamorphose if they are to resolve such intensifying perplexities whose dimensions are just as much syntactical as they are conceptual.

As the translator intimated to me, he had only discovered the final stages of development of this term when refining his translation of the book, where he realized that *chengwu,* though encompassing the middle stage of a progressing work, that is, the stage of "refining" or "cultivating" something, stresses more specifically the final stage of "accomplishing" something. His foresight of this was, in fact, the translator's rationale for choosing the term "maturation" for the original publication of the introduction to this book. However, as the translator continued to explain, due to the fact that the present progressive "maturing" doesn't naturally take a direct object, he was left with the following dilemma: either pair "the self" with the semantically fitting, but grammatically forced match "maturing" or with the perfectly grammatical, but more semantically forced match "accomplishing." Since "accomplishing things" is a most natural phrase, and moreover, a most fitting counterpart for the term *chengwu,* and since "having a sense of self-accomplishment" is no less natural in the English-speaking world, the translator has weighed in favor of pushing the reader to work with "accomplishing oneself" as the phrase, which refers to the practice of pursuing and attaining such a sense of self-accomplishment. In translating languages with little in common, there is always a trade-off: a small loss in common familiarity may be a big gain for philosophical consistency. This problem, which the translator has elegantly solved, points to a more general problem regarding translations of a book like Yang's—or that of any other systematic philosopher in both East and West—into current English. Now, the value of a solution must be estimated according to the depth of the problem it grasps. Measured accordingly, *The Mutual Cultivation of Self and Things* is a serious accomplishment in the field of Chinese to English translation.

Contemporary Anglo-American philosophy, for better or worse, has not really embraced the method and "style" of systematic metaphysics. Its conceptual reservoir, therefore, is, comparatively speaking (and again: for better or worse), somewhat limited. Given Yang's extensive reliance on Kant, Hegel, Marx, and Heidegger, it might have been an easier task to translate his book into German. In German for instance, the title of the book could have been translated rather simply as *Selbstbildung und Weltbildung,* making use of Hegel's central concept of *Bildung,* which seems to have strongly informed Yang's innovative usage of the Chinese term *cheng.* In many ways, I think, Yang's whole philosophical project revolves around this very concept. In English, however, there exists no single standard conceptual translation for *Bildung,* not even among the professional translations of Hegel's major works. Translators have therefore chosen to translate it with various different English words in different contexts.

The close ties between Yang Guorong's metaphysics and the Chinese and German philosophical traditions explain its thoroughly historical approach (and thereby distinguish it from current Anglo-American metaphysics). Yang's

concrete metaphysics reflects on "being" and on human existence in the world as being in time; only in time there is life, and only in time can life be concrete. Consequently, a concrete metaphysics does not aim at constructing a "museum" of thoughts and refrains from presenting its contents as mummified extractions from passing time. Metaphysics cannot not be abstracted from historical contexts, it finds and locates itself within the history of ideas, the history of culture, and the history of language, and thus contributes to shaping the course of this history. Accordingly, Yang's metaphysics, by incorporating the conceptual heritage of Western and Chinese philosophies, inscribes itself into this history. In order to understand Yang's work, it is therefore necessary to be aware of the past that it makes its own and of the direction it thereby gives to itself.

Yang begins his book by introducing a conceptual distinction derived from the *Yijing* (*Book of Changes*), one of the oldest philosophically relevant texts of China, which served as a source for most philosophical traditions that later emerged. Implicitly, he thereby already claims the deep immersion of his metaphysics into the history of Chinese philosophy. The last two hexagrams of the *Yijing* are named *weiji* (未济) and *jiji* (既济), or in Yang's conceptualized understanding "incomplete being" and "complete being." These two concepts represent the basic dichotomy on which a metaphysical system is built. Humans find themselves in a world of "incomplete being," a world that they have to engage with both cognitively and practically. All human thought and action thus happens as the transformative work between the two poles *weiji* and *jiji*. We are, so to speak, thrown into a world that we yet have to make our own. Our existence consists of manifold efforts to humanize the world. Human consciousness and human practice are the means by which the world is moved from the pole of incompleteness toward the pole of completion.

Human civilization in general is thus described within a framework that Yang relates back to the most ancient philosophical materials of the Chinese tradition. This indicates that for him all philosophy, East and West, and North and South, is seminally contained within these parameters. The unfolding of the history of philosophy is, so to speak, merely the fulfilment of the task of humanizing the world that was already outlined, albeit it in "incomplete" form, in the Book of Changes—and, accordingly, Yang's philosophy, along with all others, is working toward the completion of this task.

Confucianism has conceived of its purpose as "helping transform and nourish the world." The Confucian tradition is accordingly understood as a most fundamental exercise of transforming the world (or "accomplishing things") through self-cultivation (or "accomplishing oneself"). For Yang, the core Confucian value of *ren* (仁) or "being humane" indicates an ethical humanist project of "civilizing" ourselves by forming social relationships, or, in Yang's words, by becoming a "systematic nexus of relationships" (*The Mutual Cultivation of Self and Things,*

p. 112). Ultimately, the transformation of the incomplete singular human being into a more complete cultural and communal being that thinks, acts, and generates meaning within and through social connections also extends to the natural world. Particularly for the Neo-Confucians of the Song and Ming dynasties, the relational form of being humane is extended toward a relational form of being in the world. Meaning cannot only be found in one's social environment, but also in the world as a whole. Thereby, the self-transformative process of "being humane" comes to an even more comprehensive completion. Overall, though, according to Yang, the Confucian tradition, including the Neo-Confucians "limited this process to the ethical domain of cultivating virtue, wherein human capacities are restricted to developing ethical knowledge of what is virtuous, which inhibits the expression of the entirety of human being's essential powers." Yang concludes that, "Orientated in this way, the human state of mind cannot avoid appearing speculative and mystical (ibid., p. 334).

Yang Guorong does not deny differences between the Confucian and the Daoist tradition, but he looks at both as being complementary rather than contradictory. Even Zhuangzi is seen, as is not unusual for contemporary Chinese philosophers, as a "humanist" in a broader sense. Given Yang's systematic premises, all philosophers will by the very act of philosophizing and reflecting on the world necessarily contribute to the humanizing of the world, and the Daoists cannot be an exception to this. They, too, relate to the world as humans, and are, like the Confucians, interested in bringing human nature to completion, even though by different means. While the Confucians seek to embellish humaneness through a kind of social aesthetics, the Daoists tend to be sceptical about the effects of socialization on human nature. They fear that social inclusion may obstruct rather than help human self-maturation.

The Daoist retreat from social and cultural normativity and its pursuit, in Yang's words, of "the authentic person" and "natural human being" is not without problems. For Yang, it "logically leads to the elimination of purposiveness" (ibid., p. 430). Such an elimination of purposiveness can become unproductive and thus cease to further the efforts of self-maturation and world-refinement. On its own, the Daoist way can therefore be accused of a certain one-sidedness.

The history of Chinese Buddhism is highly complex and includes a variety of religious and philosophical branches. Moreover, it first incorporated vital elements of the Daoist tradition and was then in part integrated into Neo-Confucian philosophy. Thus it is difficult to clearly define or isolate Chinese Buddhism "as such." From his metaphysical vantage point, Yang Guorong is specifically interested in the philosophical developments represented by the Chan and the Hua Yan schools. Particularly the latter has considerably contributed to the philosophical understanding of cognitive "world-making," and thus, in Yang's terminology, to

the understanding of "the genesis of a world of meaning"—and therefore it deserves attention as an attempt toward the establishment of a systematic metaphysical epistemology.

One important Buddhist conceptual innovation is, for instance, the notion of *jingjie* (境界) or "state (of mind)." This term was taken over by the Neo-Confucians and others, and generally referred to a spiritual dimension that can be reached through, for instance, aesthetic or philosophical activity. It thus represents a specifically Chinese conceptual reflection on the human capacity to construct and to experience the world and one's self within it as significant.

The most immediate historical context within which Yang Guorong's Concrete Metaphysics is located and from which it stems, however, is much more recent than traditional Confucianism, Daoism, or Buddhism. Yang's work continues the efforts of modern Chinese philosophers to establish, on the basis of the Chinese textual and semantic inheritance, larger philosophical systems comparable to those of Western "masters" of metaphysics such as Kant or Hegel. Yang thus connects directly with twentieth-century Chinese thinkers such as Xiong Shili (1885–1968), Feng Youlan (1895–1990), Mou Zongsan (1909–1995), and, perhaps most importantly, his own teacher Feng Qi (1915–1995). All these predecessors were, like Yang, not only highly familiar with the history of Chinese philosophy, but also with both ancient and modern Western thought. They adopted the form, and parts of the contents, of "philosophy" as it was taught at major Western academic institutions of the time and succeeded in filling classical Chinese thought into this (from their perspective) new mold. Thereby, (academic) Chinese philosophy was born.

Although Yang Guorong does not expressively discuss Feng Qi's philosophy in the present book, his way of doing philosophy follows, but also extends, the path of Feng. In an earlier text, Yang wrote that Feng Qi, thanks to the profundity of his thought and his intellectual openness for a wide range of sources, "could make his own imprint on contemporary Chinese philosophy." He adds that Feng "traversed the paths of Western wisdom as much as he delved into the long stream of Chinese wisdom" and that "his intense reflections on the history of human knowledge were accompanied by a Marxist baptism by fire and a continuous interest in contemporary issues."[3] All this can equally be said of Yang Guorong himself.

The influence of Kant on Yang's philosophy is remarkable. Yang not only adopts some of the basic conceptual apparatus of the Kantian Critiques (such as the distinction between things-in-themselves and phenomena), but also Kant's critical intention to transform philosophy into a truly "scientific" (in the sense of *wissenschaftlich*) metaphysics that will not only clarify the cognitive relation of human consciousness to reality, but also the purpose of human life and the foundations of ethical normativity. For Kant, metaphysics opens up the avenue for

human freedom. The most foundational goal of human liberation expressed by the philosophy of the Enlightenment is quite emphatically shared by Yang.

Hegel, though, in Yang's assessment "discovered a much broader horizon" (ibid., p. 22) than Kant. It seems obvious that two of the main pillars of Yang's concrete metaphysics are highly indebted to Hegel, namely, as already indicated earlier, the notion of *cheng* ("accomplishment," "maturation," "refinement," or, in Hegelian terms, *Bildung*) as well as the thoroughly historical nature of Yang's thought. The mutuality and reciprocal accomplishment of self-maturation and world-refinement is essential to Hegel's account of the self-establishing and the growth of consciousness from simple forms of cognition to the "absolute knowledge" of the "world spirit." In the constant engagement of (human) consciousness with the world, and, of course, with other human consciousnesses, humanity matures and history evolves. Subjectivity develops in its cognitive and practical engagement with objects. This process is always active and productive, and leads, as with Kant, to increasing "spiritual" awareness and stages of liberation.

Yang is not an outright Hegelian, though, and agrees in principle with one of Marx's most basic criticisms of Hegel as an Idealist who failed to do philosophical and systematic justice to the importance of human practice. When Yang says that with Hegel "'being' itself, as well as the question of how 'what ought to be' transforms into actuality, stops and remains in the spiritual realm (including what he called objective spirit)" and that therefore his philosophical system as a whole was incapable of 'shaking off its speculative character,'" (23) he clearly echoes Marx's judgment. Yang agrees with Marx that the attainment of human freedom cannot mainly be a spiritual endeavor. It cannot be reduced to an effort of "self-cultivation" or it runs the risk to end up in forms of "mysticism" that not only German Idealism, but also the Chinese traditions (Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism) could not altogether avoid. Marx embraces Hegel's radically historical view of human "maturation" or the "refinement of the world" through human activity, but for him, this activity is a concrete material exercise of human power, constrained only by the material laws humans find themselves subjected to. Yang agrees with this Materialist turn of Hegelian dialectics.

But, for Yang, a Marxist Materialist appropriation of Hegel alone cannot complete a Concrete Metaphysics. He uses Heidegger to add an existential dimension to metaphysics that he misses in Hegelian, and, ultimately, in Marxist philosophy. Yang says that it was Martin Heidegger who "relegated the meaning of the individual's existence to a comparatively more important position" (23) than those before him. Heidegger's concern with (human) *Dasein* adds dimensions of the concrete experience of being in the world into the equation that neither Hegel nor Marx fully recognized. A concrete metaphysics has to properly take this dimension into account, which points to the "genesis of meaning" that occurs on the level of individual existence.

In the end, however, Yang Guorong is no more a Heideggerrian than a Hegelian, Kantian, or Marxist, just as he is no more a Confucian than a Daoist or Buddhist. His philosophy is rooted in the past, but it is supposed to point toward the future. Yang shares the hopes of his systematic predecessors in China and the West that philosophy can newly establish itself as a synthetic world philosophy that proves capable of integrating, or, perhaps better, "sublating," the philosophical, religious, cultural, aesthetic, and, of course, materially productive traditions of all civilizations within a dynamic and growing (concrete) metaphysics.

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