The Philosophical Challenge from China

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Harry Frankfurt introduced an understanding of action defined in part by a notion of guidance:

An explication of the nature of action must deal with two distinct problems. One is to explain the notion of guided behavior. The other is to specify when the guidance of behavior is attributable to an agent and not simply, as when a person’s pupils dilate because the light fades, to some local process going on within the agent’s body. The first problem concerns the conditions under which behavior is purposive, while the second concerns the conditions under which purposive behavior is intentional.¹

In considering this problem, David Velleman adverts to the idea of effortless action in Zhuangzi (fourth century BCE) along with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s psychological construct of flow to conclude that

Actors in flow have ... achieved a higher wantonness [Frankfurt’s term]. They act wantonly in the sense that they have dispensed with self-regulation. But they have dispensed with self-regulation only because it has been so effective as to render itself unnecessary. And their capacity for self-regulation remains in reserve in case it is needed. Hence, their wantonness is also a consummate example of agency.²

In the end, Velleman says that there is no contradiction in the fact that a person can simultaneously be a wanton (characterized by a “mindless indifference to the enterprise of evaluating his own desires and motives”)³ and a human agent in the normal philosophical sense of the term. And yet, surely, there is. Velleman himself says:

Lacking a human essence, in the Zhuangzi’s sense, must entail lacking that “concern with our own motives” that makes us “care about what we are.”⁴ It therefore entails lacking what Frankfurt identifies as the source of human agency.⁵

According to Velleman, the resolution of this paradox of agency without agency lies in Frankfurt’s notion of guidance—wantonness is not entirely wanton because it is still under the guidance of the agent. But there is still no explanation of how an agent can be present as guide while also being absent as agent. Without a more robust
explanation, *agency without agency* as part of a solution to the basic question “What is action?” comes frightfully close to question begging.

Velleman notes a deeper problem in passing:

When a human being “finds flow” in the exercise of a skill, does he instantiate agency, as Frankfurt conceives it, or does he instantiate wantonness instead? Or is this case, rather, a challenge to the categories of agent and wanton altogether?  

This question seems to be more to the point. Perhaps we (Frankfurt, Velleman, and most holders of theories of action that fit the traditional framing of the issue) have a conception of agency that does not fit all the facts of human action. As Velleman notices, Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of flow presents a good opportunity to reassess what notions of agency and action really amount to. As a way of exploiting this opportunity, I will shift focus slightly. Discussions of human agency inevitably begin with the human side of the problem, asking: what is human action and what is its relationship to other motion in nature? This question, while not necessarily presupposing that human action is of a different order from natural motion, begins with a distance between the two. In what follows, I will begin, instead, from a key concept of motion in nature and try to understand how that can function as a model for human action. The project will presuppose that humans are fundamentally of a piece with nature and so aim to place human action in a framework of natural motion, and from there explain what sets some kinds of motion apart, as distinct, as action rather than motion *simpliciter*.

1 The Problem

There are two sources of the paradox of natural human action, but the basic idea is this: human action must be natural insofar as human beings are part of the natural order, and yet, a persistent philosophical distinction between the human realm and the natural realm rules out *natural human action* in principle by mutually exclusive definitions of “the natural” and “the human.”

1.1 Version 1: Aesthetic Appreciation

An enduring question in aesthetics is how to account for the different experiences one has when appreciating an aesthetic object with natural origins vs. an aesthetic object made by the hands of a human artisan or artist.

It is often pointed out that when appreciating an artifact such as that shown in figure 13.1, we consider such things as the usage of particular materials for particular ends in creating the artifact; techniques employed by the artist to create specific effects; how the work of art fits into the history of art, into the contemporary intellectual milieu, and into the own artist’s body of work; and what the intentions of the
Figure 13.1
artist may have been in creating the work. By contrast, none of these questions is available in appreciating the scenery in figure 13.2 (in situ, not as a photograph). Observing a vista in nature, it is not part of one’s experience of appreciation to inquire into techniques, materials, lineages, or intentions. The distinction comes clearer if one attempts to appreciate the two rocks in figures 13.3 and 13.4.

We can begin by appreciating their luster and try the feel of the texture, but to go further, we must wonder at their genesis, at whether they were carved and worked by human hands or whether they were fashioned from the forces of nature. The answer would put each in a very different light with respect to its alternative. For instance, one feels a certain astonishment to realize that the rock in figure 13.4 could come to be entirely by the forces of nature. And upon learning that figure 13.3 is a Brancusi (Sculpture for the Blind), a naive feeling of wonder gives way to an intellectual curiosity about such things as how this piece fits into Brancusi’s larger oeuvre and what meaning he could have been trying to convey.

The upshot of the distinction between appreciating objects as natural vs. appreciating them as artificial is that a mutually exclusive dichotomy forms, separating the human from the natural. The exact contours of this dichotomy come clear when we look at how current philosophers of aesthetics handle it:

The aesthetic appreciation of nature … is identical with the aesthetic appreciation not of that which is nature, but of nature as nature and not as art (or artifact).8
Figure 13.3

Figure 13.4
Copyright 2014 Nebula Stone.
Natural objects ... lack a human maker.\textsuperscript{9} 
Aesthetic experience of nature always demands our realizing that nature itself is a nonartistic object, not designed by any artist for our admiration, not framed or put on a pedestal—all this is much of the secret of nature’s aesthetic power, construct though we may the aesthetic categories through which such nature is experienced.\textsuperscript{10}

In analyzing the issue of aesthetic appreciation with respect to nature vs. art, philosophers have defined the human and the natural in contrast to each other. As a result, the unity of the human and the natural in this domain becomes a theoretical impossibility. To speak of \textit{natural human action} as an object of aesthetic appreciation (as in dance) would be a contradiction in terms.

\subsection*{1.2 Version 2: Philosophy of Action}

In the philosophy of action, something similar happens. From the time of Aristotle, it has been of paramount importance in ethics to be able to ascribe responsibility to others for their actions. Book III of the \textit{Nicomachean Ethics} begins as follows:

Since virtue is to do with feelings and actions, and since voluntary feelings and actions are praised and blamed, while the involuntary ones are pardoned and occasionally even pitied, presumably anyone considering virtue must determine the limits of the voluntary and the involuntary.\textsuperscript{11}

As Aristotle says, responsibility ascription depends on determining whether an action is voluntary or involuntary. Aristotle defines the involuntary as “things that happen by force or through ignorance” and says “what is forced is what has an external first principle, such that the agent or the person acted upon contributes nothing to it.”\textsuperscript{12} Of the person who acts voluntarily, he says “the first principle of moving the limbs that serve as instruments lies in him.”\textsuperscript{13} There is more to be said of what exactly counts as human action for Aristotle, which I discuss elsewhere,\textsuperscript{14} but the difference comes down to drawing a bright line around the rational adult human. Sarah Broadie offers this comment on the passage quoted just above:

“In him” may mean, “in him as a rational or potentially rational individual.” Cf. 3, 1112a32–3, where man and nature (which includes human biological nature) are contrasted as distinct types of cause.\textsuperscript{15}

I take this interpretation to be correct. While natural movement in Aristotle is marked by necessity and chance, human action, for which one may be held responsible, is marked by rational deliberate choice.\textsuperscript{16}

With this distinction, it is not an exaggeration to say that Aristotle determines the framework for much of the entire Western tradition of philosophy of action. For both the human and the natural, atomism prevails—the human as a discrete essence initiating action, and natural objects as discrete entities banging into each other.\textsuperscript{17}
In later philosophers, the concept of the human essence becomes further refined with reference to the will and terminates as a vanishing point of agency outside of the natural laws that determine the movement of everything else. And so, human action is conceived as that which is not natural, and natural movement is everything but human action. Again, natural human action becomes a theoretical impossibility.

The paradox with which aesthetic appreciation and the philosophy of action leave us cannot be easily resolved without either eliminating the very useful human/nature distinction or ruling out “natural” as a possible descriptor of human action. This chapter takes a third route, which is to reconsider human action from a core feature of natural motion, namely, self-organization. This concept, often employed in the sciences but absent in discussions of human action, allows for a new distinction in the concept of the human self that will do the work of the old human/nature distinction while still allowing for human action that can be categorized as natural. A second, related, concept will be introduced, as well—the plural self. In Frankfurt and Velleman’s notion of action and guidance, the agent is allowed different levels (“orders”) of reflection, but, following Aristotle, the agent, itself, is understood as irreducibly singular, or monadic. A self conceived as plurally self-organized, in contrast, allows for both unity and disassociation.

To draw these distinct lines of exploration more clearly together, in what follows I take the two paradoxes above—the paradox of agency without agency announced by Velleman and the paradox of the impossibility of natural human action explained in this section—to be essentially the same problem. In fact, just seeing them as the same problem points to a plausible resolution of both paradoxes: for a human being to act naturally involves surrendering a sense of agency—it is action without agency. But how to build a theory that makes sense of such a thing without relying on paradoxical locutions? That is the purpose of what follows.

2 Self-Organization and Natural Action

The enduring problem in philosophy of action has been reconciling the subjective feeling of freedom with the objective nomology of natural regularity. Natural nomology is commonly understood as significantly deterministic, taking a more or less clockwork view of the universe as a model for natural motion, and human subjectivity is commonly the starting point for explorations of the difference between what humans do in acting and the motion that happens in the rest of the universe. Classical efficient causality predominates as a fundamental presupposition for explanations of natural motion. The problems and paradoxes that result from this approach require no rehearsal here, as they still populate the pages of journals and monographs. This chapter takes a different approach. Rather than beginning with human
subjectivity, we shall begin with an exploration of a fundamental kind of natural motion known as *self-organization*.

Self-organization is a well-entrenched working concept in the sciences.\(^{21}\) The earliest reference that I can find goes back to 1906 in a French article on the nature of chemical reactions.\(^{22}\) The concept gained some theoretical traction in the 1950s, the 1960s, and the 1970s, largely in the fields of biology, chemistry, and cybernetics. Major works include John von Neumann’s *Theory of Self-Reproducing Automata*, Manfred Eigen’s “Self-Organization of Matter and the Evolution of Biological Macromolecules,” and Ilya Prigogine’s *Self-Organization in Non-Equilibrium Systems*. From the many discussions of self-organization in the literature, one can extract a minimal working definition that is appropriate for the issue under discussion: self-organization refers to *any event in which multiple entities interact to create order among themselves without external direction*. A contradistinction is often made with the second law of thermodynamics, in which isolated systems are described as necessarily tending toward disorder. Examples of self-organization are found all around us and include galaxies, clouds, cells, crystals, leaves, animal populations, wind, and so on. Wherever there is an appearance of order in nature, we generally have an instance of self-organization. Examples of exclusions would be such things as the dung ball of a dung beetle and the striations on driftwood, which are created by significant input from external forces.\(^{23}\)

From this distinction among good and bad examples of self-organization, it becomes evident that “self” in the term “self-organization” plays a dual role. It refers not only to the newly formed entity composed of the original multiple entities (the boundaries of a self-organized system are the boundaries of a self), but it also refers to the process in which the event occurs absent an external directing force (to *self-organize* is to organize *of one’s own accord*, without significant external direction).\(^{24}\) In the former role, it is nominal; and in the latter role, it is adverbial, describing a process or an activity. There are similar instances of an adverbial “self” in English—for example, in the terms “self-govern,” “self-propel,” “self-generate,” “self-fertilize,” “self-sustain,” and “self-replicate.” Each of these terms denotes a process or activity by which multiple entities cooperate as a single entity in the execution of that activity or process, without external direction. This grammatical distinction is important because of the contrast it provides with another adverbial usage of “self.” In examples such as, “self-enrich,” “self-doubt,” or “self-immolate,” we see something quite different. While “self” still functions in an adverbial role, we no longer see multiple entities cooperating and instead see a single entity directing action toward itself: the self as subject doubts the self as object; the self as subject enriches the self as object; the self as subject immolates the self as object. From these two senses of the adverbial “self,” it becomes clear that two distinguishable phenomena in the world are being described. The first is what may be called a *plural self*, in which the elements that make up an entity act through mutual cooperation as a unified entity, without a sense of a single
directing force, internally or externally. The second may be called a *monadic self*, in which there is a sense of a single, internal, directing force, which is a subject in a world of objects. The distinction can be made explicit as follows:

*Plural self*: structure is complex; motive impetus is internal, multiply sourced, and interactive

*Monadic self*: structure is simple; motive impetus is internal, singly sourced, and directive

It is probably evident by now that the monadic self is exemplified in phenomenal consciousness, where the questions of the philosophy of action generally begin—for example, “What am I doing *mentally* that makes my action different from what occurs in nature?” However, for present purposes we want to begin in nature, not in the human being. The plural self, then, is our potential source of action in nature.

In order to make the leap from self-organization in nature to self-organization in the human, we may extend the plural/monadic distinction from the natural to the human by positing a further instrumental distinction. From the notion of the plural self, we may posit the *c-self*—any self-organizing complex in the natural world. This will include all natural systems, including the human being. They are characterized by their persistence over time, and they can give rise to a phenomenal self. The phenomenal self (*φ*-self for short) is an exemplification of the monadic self described above. It is found in human beings and some other animals, is characterized by intermittence (e.g., it vanishes during sleep), and is rooted in a *c-self.*

Having made the above distinctions, not only in terminology but also among phenomena instrumentally denoted by the terminology, we can return to one of the paradoxes that prompted this line of thought. The paradox was the theoretical impossibility of natural human action despite the fact that human beings are inescapably natural creatures. By beginning with motion in nature via the common phenomenon of self-organization, we have arrived at a taxonomic hierarchy. The *c-self* is the basis of all motion arising from self-organized systems. Out of the *c-self*, a phenomenal self may arise, which is the source of what is generally understood as human action. By virtue of this taxonomic hierarchy, the human being is situated within the realm of natural motion, and so without a strict dichotomy separating the human from the natural, we have an avenue for the possibility of human action that is also natural. But we cannot stop here and conclude that all human action is natural because that would eliminate the useful distinction between the natural and the artificial. Instead, we must define the natural and the artificial without reference to the human. To do so, we must reconcile the notion of action with the notion of the plural self.

The *φ*-self as defined above was an example of the monadic self, which was characterized as having a simple structure and a motive impetus that is internal, singly sourced, and directive. We see in this description a traditional (Aristotelian)
characterization of human action—motion that arises from a single, directive, internal source. Going forward, we shall use this understanding to stipulate that action arising from the φ-self is *artifice*. In contrast, we shall stipulate *natural behavior* as any behavior arising from a self-organized system by dint of that self-organization. I must appeal to the reader’s own intuitions as to whether these stipulations are allowable within the normal parameters of the terms “nature” and “artifice.” I submit that they are. Now, notice that there is an important gap between artifice and nature—we have not aligned the human being, or human action, with either side. Though we may reflexively align the human and human action with artifice and the φ-self, I will demonstrate below that this does not have to be the case—we can also align the human and human action with nature and the c-self.

The first step in aligning human action with nature is to acknowledge the following. Because the φ-self is subject to intermittence (e.g., in sleep) and decrements (e.g., inebriation) and because the human being does not necessarily cease moving during these episodes, any overt behavior during such episodes cannot be entirely attributed to the φ-self and so must be attributed, at least partially, to the c-self. Therefore, if we can identify human c-self behavior that is demonstrably and uncontroversially characterizable as action, absent significant contribution from the φ-self, then we will have resolved the double paradox above. We will have found action without agency, and we will have identified *natural human action*.

### 3 Three Candidates for C-Self Natural Action

In virtually all lines of action theory in which a definition of action is sought to explain how human action is distinct from other kinds of motion, an intimate relationship is either stated or implied among action, volition (or something like it, e.g., intention, purpose, guidance, etc.), and the sense of the self as the seat of volition (or something like volition). We can understand this relationship as a three way mutual entailment with volition as the middle term. There is *action* (or potential action) just in case there is *volition*, and there is volition just in case there is a *phenomenal sense of self* as the seat of volition. Lacking a phenomenal sense of self, there is no seat of volition, no sense that there is an agent choosing to perform an action. Without a sense of volition, behavior is not distinguishable as action. Action depends on agency, and agency is reducible to volition (or something like it) plus a sense of a self. This formula holds even for theories that eschew overt mention of volition, such as Frankfurt’s and Audi’s theories of guidance. Action under these theories presupposes a *sense of agency* as the guiding force, whether one invokes the term “volition” or not.

It is this relationship of mutual entailment in the dominant theories of action that sets the dividing line between action and other motion at the boundary of the human.
In what follows, we shall see that action can persist in the human sphere even after this entailment has been broken, giving us a way to free the concept of action from the exclusively human and paving the way for action that is both human and natural.

Under what conditions can human behavior persist absent a phenomenal sense of self? In what follows, I shall describe three candidates, progressively approaching a case that is demonstrably and uncontroversially a case of action but absent the φ-self, absent a sense of subjective agency. As c-self action, it will belong to the natural sphere, though performed by humans, and thus qualify as natural human action.

Before continuing, we must first be clear that even though the φ-self is commonly conceived in action theory as an indivisible monad, and even though it is felt in experience to be indivisibly monadic, it is actually divisible. It is a unity composed of numerous phenomenal components, such as thoughts, feelings, desires, goals, memories, self-consciousness, a sense of effort, hopes, skills, etc. In a normal phenomenal state one can reflect on the magnitude of each of these in what James and others have called the specious present. In a diminished phenomenal state, one or more are no longer accessible to such reflection. For instance, in amnesia, one's long-term memory is no longer accessible. One still has a unified sense of self as agency, but it is a diminished sense, and when that sense diminishes to the point that one's actions can no longer be attributed to it, we have crossed over into c-self behavior.

In the following three subsections, I offer examples in which the phenomenal self is compromised. In each, I make a case for how one could argue that it is a bona fide case of c-self behavior. As the examples progress, the behavior increasingly resembles action, until we find a genuine case not just of c-self behavior but of c-self action.

3.1 Sleepwalking
Sleepwalking is a classic case of human behavior with a diminished φ-self. Although physiologically asleep, a sleepwalker can get up and carry out a wide range of purposeful activities, including talking, writing, cooking, driving, and sex. In normal phenomenal experience, all such activities would qualify as actions, as they entail both volition at some level and a sense of self underlying the volition. In the case of sleepwalking (sleep-activity), when the φ-self has blinked away, the situation is no longer so clear cut.

EEG activity during sleepwalking shows a “dissociation between mental and motor arousal.” A brain scan study during sleepwalking showed that

The decreased regional cerebral blood flow in the frontoparietal cortices found during sleepwalking is consistent with the view of sleepwalking as a dissociated state consisting of motor arousal and persisting mind sleep. This deactivation of prefrontal cortices during normal sleep and sleepwalking also explains the lack of self-related awareness, insight, and recall that characterise both conditions.
In sleepwalking, clearly the movement is happening at the level of the c-self. Clearly, there is neither volition nor a sense of a phenomenal self guiding the behavior, and without them, no sign of genuine action, which is not surprising because behavior performed while asleep is generally at a quite low level of competence. Indeed, sleepwalking is as close as humans get to what philosophers of mind call zombie-like behavior. So, although we cannot take sleepwalking as a case of natural human action, we can identify it as a case in which the c-self is guiding behavior that has a semblance of normalcy while the $\phi$-self has been diminished to the point of irrelevance. What if it were possible for the c-self to guide behavior while the $\phi$-self had been diminished to the point of irrelevance and it looked for all intents and purposes like action? Let us consider two further cases.

3.2 Hypnosis

In hypnosis, we have another example of behavior under a diminished $\phi$-self. Rather than canvassing the many manifestations of this phenomenon, I will focus on one particular study that highlights its relevance. Amir Raz and Natasha Campbell hypnotized subjects and ran them through the Stroop task. Under normal circumstances, when one performs the Stroop task, one’s ability to read will interact with one’s ability to identify color such that when one is asked to identify the color of a word that is printed in color, one’s reaction time slows if the color differs from the meaning of the word (interference effect) and increases if the two are the same (facilitation effect). Raz and Campbell hypnotized subjects and implanted a post-hypnotic suggestion that temporarily stripped them of their ability to read. Performing the Stroop task under hypnotic suggestion, some subjects accomplished something never before accomplished—they were able to perform the identification task absent an interference effect—there was no lag in their reaction times when the meaning of a word and the color of the word conflicted.

In the theoretical terminology introduced above, subjects in Raz and Campbell’s study performed a task with a diminished $\phi$-self—they had lost the skill of reading, a core phenomenal trait of contemporary adult humans—and yet performed better than when in a normal phenomenal state. In this case, one cannot say that what occurred was not action, especially when the performance was improved over normal performance. While it may appear that the action occurred entirely under the influence of the $\phi$-self rather than the c-self, a close reading of the study shows that while the interference effect was stifled, the facilitation effect was not. And so the skill of reading must have still been functioning at the sub-phenomenal level, at the level of the c-self. Here is a case in which one could claim to have not had the experience of reading, and yet the experimental results demonstrate that reading was in fact taking place in cooperation with the goal to perform well on the task. As such, we can see that a subject was performing the action of reading absent phenomenal
awareness or a sense of volition (or the like). Thus, we have our first clear case of action without agency, of action that qualifies as both human (performed by a human being) and natural (the result of a self-organized system’s goal-directed behavior).

One may object and claim just as adamantly that this is not action, exactly because the three-part biconditional relationship was broken—if the person’s phenomenal experience was one of non-reading, with no prior intention of reading, then we cannot attribute the reading to her. But isn’t it the case that in any complex action, there are many things we are doing that are beneath awareness? Here, as she performed the Stroop task, she read to improve performance—just as a person walking bobs beneath awareness in order to conserve momentum and increase efficiency. In this controversy, we have moved from the ontology of action generally to a mereological problem—which parts of action count as action per se? Rather than try to resolve it, let us move on to a more definitive example.

3.3 Autotelic Experience

It is easy to dismiss cases of sleepwalking and hypnosis as so far removed from normal life that although they may be interesting boundary cases, they do not have a bearing on the central features of action theory. What we need is a case that is at once in the realm of normal human behavior and meets the conditions for c-self action explained above. Aside from hypnosis and sleepwalking, there are many varieties of diminished $\phi$ states: inebriation, dizziness, dreaming, adrenaline rushes, daydreaming, schizophrenia, etc. But all of these are, again, far enough removed from normal phenomenal experience that any behavior resulting from them would not necessarily qualify as genuine action. There is one kind of experience, however, in which (1) there is a diminished $\phi$-self which (2) is an important part of normal human experience and which (3) results in genuine action. It is the one that Velleman brings up in relation to the Zhuangzi, known through its technical term, autotelicity, and more broadly as flow.

The circumstances and features of autotelicity have been detailed in many different publications. For the purposes here, we will concern ourselves with the following characteristics of autotelic experience:

- altered sense of time
- high level of concentration
- confidence and comfort in meeting each new high challenge
- absence of felt effort
- absence of self-consciousness

Autotelicity occurs when one’s level of skill comports with an activity’s level of challenge such that one’s attention is fully engaged in the activity. This is the notion of high concentration. It is importantly distinct from highly habituated but “mindless”
behavior in which one is capable of carrying out a skilled activity while one’s mind is elsewhere—for instance, driving while not noticing the passage of landmarks.

Autotelicity is also marked by two significant negative features that set it off as a diminishment of the φ-self, namely, an absence of felt effort and an absence of self-consciousness. In typical phenomenal experience, one has a clear sense of one’s being participant in intersubjective activity with the understanding that one’s thoughts and actions, as well as the thoughts and actions of others in response, have some normative valence for oneself. In other words, a core feature of the φ-self is self-consciousness. In autotelic experience, this core feature of the φ-self vanishes. Also gone in autotelicity is a sense of effort—a sense that one is expending energy, that one is trying. Movements flow without a sense that one is actively executing them.

Although the language used to describe autotelicity can sometimes come off as mystical, the experience itself is shown to be quite common across populations and across a wide variety of activities. There is no question but that it is a part of normal human experience. In fact, the achievements made in autotelic experience, like the hypnosis example above, regularly exceed non-autotelic levels of achievement. Because of its normalcy and because of its high level of achievement (in contrast to that of sleepwalking), we cannot easily dismiss autotelic experience as occurring outside the realm of human action.

It is helpful to look at actual descriptions of autotelic experience from normal subjects in order to get a clear sense of the phenomenal characteristics. The following quotations are from rock-climbers and are representative of autotelicity generally:

You don’t feel like you’re doing something as a conscious being; you’re adapting to the rock and becoming part of it.  
You’re so involved in what you’re doing [that] you aren’t thinking about yourself as separate from the immediate activity.  
Somehow the right thing is done without you ever thinking about it or doing anything at all …. It just happens. And yet you’re more concentrated.  
The right decisions are made, but not rationally. Your mind is shut down and your body just goes.

Taken together, these descriptions give us a kind of behavior that involves skill, that is conscious, and that is performed at a high level, and yet it lacks any sense of volition or effort, and even lacks a clear subjective sense of an individuated self. In other words, the normal sense of a phenomenal self as the seat of action has blinked out. As a result, we must ascribe such behavior to the c-self. We have, then, found a third example of c-self behavior, and this example, unlike the examples of sleepwalking and hypnotism is difficult to gainsay as being something other than action. Surely, examples of rock-climbing, classical piano performance, basketball playing, jazz singing, stage acting, dancing, etc. that may occur as autotelic experience count as action. To
be sure, the three-part biconditional relationship of action has been severed, placing
the normally understood ontological status of such action in doubt, but would one
deny ascription on this basis? If a tennis player wins a match experienced autotelically,
would we want to deny her the winning trophy?

Autotelicity provides us with a case in which (1) we can have action without agency
and (2) under the definitions used above we can identify a kind of human action that
can also be called natural.

Conclusion

Discussions of action and agency often entail an appeal to ethics—we need to be able
to attribute action to an individual in order to ascribe responsibility. As I pointed out
in section 1, this was a central part of Aristotle’s project. Contemporary philosophers
make a similar move—using potential for responsibility ascription as a gauge of
genuine action. In fact, it is often difficult to separate the ethical desideratum from
the ontological. Would we be satisfied if a general account of action did not entail
some sense of responsibility or if a general account of responsibility had nothing to
say about agency? Not likely.

Because the notion of action is part of a language game that includes an important
place for related ethical concepts such as responsibility, it makes sense that they be
defined and understood in terms of each other. I started out this chapter with an
appeal to aesthetic appreciation as a basis for understanding the human/nature dis-
tinction. Bringing aesthetics into the ontological question of action and agency was
not a category mistake. Just as the linguistic categories of action and agency are con-
nected in a socially constructed semantic web with those of credit and blame, so they
are also connected with categories of aesthetic worth—though this connection has
rarely been explored in the philosophical literature. When we see human behavior
performed at an extremely high level, such as in artistic performance, say in dance or
jazz trumpet playing, it is part of our language use that even if the trumpeter after a
virtuoso performance disclaims credit, saying something like “the trumpet was playing
itself,” we will still proclaim the greatness of the performance and of the trumpeter
who performed it.

In the case of autotelic experience, the entailment among action, volition, and the
φ-self breaks down. In the face of a severely diminished φ-self, we must attribute an
instance of behavior to the c-self, to the level of a naturally functioning self-organized
system. Under the dominant onto-ethical theories of action, the activities of a self-
organized system, a c-self, do not rise to the level of action. Autotelic experience acts
as a counterexample to these dominant theories, giving us human action that cannot
be attributed to a φ-self and so must belong to a c-self, to the level of a naturally
functioning self-organized system. And so, as the behavior is human and qualifies as
action, and as it stands on the side of nature in contradistinction to the phenomenal, it is a clear example of natural human action.

From the evidence above, we must draw two conclusions: that the dominant ways of distinguishing the natural and the human as two distinct and mutually exclusive categories in theories of action and aesthetics is mistaken, and that the line separating the natural from the artificial lies not at the boundary of the human but rather at the boundary of the phenomenal self.

We can now return to Velleman’s question that precipitated this inquiry:

When a human being “finds flow” in the exercise of a skill, does he instantiate agency, as Frankfurt conceives it, or does he instantiate wantonness instead? Or is this case, rather, a challenge to the categories of agent and wanton altogether?

And we can return to the conclusion that ends his article:

Actors in flow have thus achieved a higher wantonness. They act wantonly in the sense that they have dispensed with self-regulation. But they have dispensed with self-regulation only because it has been so effective as to render itself unnecessary. And their capacity for self-regulation remains in reserve in case it is needed. Hence, their wantonness is also a consummate example of agency.

In Velleman’s attempt to preserve Frankfurt’s paradigm of action under guidance, he suggests that action involves an agent guiding movements even if only passively. It is the conscious guidance that allows for both agency and action. We see, however, that in autotelicity, or flow, guidance is not tantamount to agency and occurs at the level of the c-self, not at the level of the agent in any normal sense of phenomenal agency. There is agency only if you believe that action necessarily entails it. What Velleman misses is that in autotelicity there is no immediate sense of the phenomenal self, and so, although there is action, there is no agent as such. In this way, Velleman is correct that flow (along with Zhuangzi’s ideas informing his discussion) is indeed a challenge to the prevailing categories of action and agency.

In closing, let us entertain possible objections.

*The Artistic Elephant Objection* To suggest that we cannot draw a bright line around the human being in defining the natural and the artificial implies that there are other creatures that can act with artifice, which sounds absurd.

Yes, intuitively, this sounds absurd. But recall for a moment the recent push to bestow personhood on non-human animals. Peter Singer, at the forefront of the movement, employs criteria such as autonomy, rationality, and, interestingly, self-consciousness in distinguishing personhood. I suggested above that self-consciousness is the hallmark of the phenomenal self, which is the driving force behind artifice. If these avant-garde ethicists are correct, then we can ascribe artifice to animals. You may be envisioning the ridiculous image of a daubing elephant wearing a French beret as an
exemplar of animal artifice, but there are other examples of animals executing creations in their environments that bear the hallmarks of artifice, perhaps even of creativity. The first example that comes to mind is the bowerbird of Indonesia and Australia, some species of which build not only large complex bowers to attract mates but even surrounding gardens.\textsuperscript{48} Certain species of cichlid fish do something similar in the sand.\textsuperscript{49}

The philosopher Xunzi (third century BCE), who has long discussions on nature and artifice, posited that cultural forms constitute artifice, and although he precluded animals at the time as creators of artifice, there is now abundant evidence of non-human animal culture.

Thus, the objection stands; this theory does imply artifice in animals, but it turns out to not lead to a reductio.\textsuperscript{50}

\textit{The Autopilot Objection} Autotelicity is simply an example of what is commonly called being on autopilot—automatic, highly habituated activity that unfolds of its own accord. There is nothing creative or special about it, and it doesn’t deserve to be placed on a pedestal, even if it results in high achievement.

There are two things going on in this objection: an objective claim and a subjective claim. The objective claim is that autotelicity and automaticity are the same. This claim is false. Autotelicity involves automaticity, but it also involves a high level of concentration in an activity that is absent in pure automaticity. As I pointed in the example of driving in subsection 3.3, when one is “on autopilot” one’s attention is somewhere else other than on the activity at hand. In autotelicity, one is completely absorbed in the details of the activity while paradoxically being unselfconscious of the overt control of one’s actions.

And yet this objection cannot be dismissed quite so easily. Joshua Ackerman and John Bargh claim that the essential components of autotelic experience lie within the boundaries of automaticity as they define it and that attention to one’s actions in flow is essentially that of a spectator, with no conscious control over one’s actions.\textsuperscript{51} If this is true—that the behavior of basic knitting that can be done while one’s attention is directed elsewhere is no different from knitting a complex design that requires full attention but which is experienced effortlessly—then all instances of autotelicity would, indeed, be cases of working “on autopilot.” This claim has certain advantages (e.g., theoretical parsimony), and Ackerman and Bargh offer plausible evidence. However, if the agent’s attention is a spectator’s in the same way that another person’s is, then when either of them turn their attention away, the same thing should happen. And yet it is obvious that the two cases would have very different results. If a spectator stops paying attention to a knitter who is the midst of a complex knitting task that requires high concentration, the knitting would continue. But if the knitter turned her attention away, the task would falter and the knitting end. The same goes for all
instances of autotelic experience. Attention in autotelic experience is constitutive of the experience, not superfluous.

The second part of this objection, the subjective claim, is that high achievement under autotelic experience merits no special consideration. This is partially true in that action that occurs autotelically is not necessarily exceptional in relation to similar such actions. A poor golfer can have a great game that is experienced autotelically, perhaps achieving a personal best, and yet still come in behind an average score of an average golfer. But isn’t there something normatively distinct about the first golfer’s experience—a cause for celebration? In fact, Csikszentmihalyi’s research shows flow experiences to be the highlights of people’s lives generally.  

The Inebriation Objection If behavior in autotelic experience counts as natural action, then so does behavior under the influence of alcohol, where the c-self is guiding movement under a diminished φ-self—this seems counterintuitive.

Zhuangzi tells the story of a drunk carriage passenger who falls off a fast-moving conveyance and because of his inebriated state suffers no injury. The message of the story is that if inebriation can protect oneself, then imagine what being in accord with nature can do. The parallel between inebriation and autotelic experience is apt exactly because of the diminishment of the φ-self. My view is that to the extent that inebriation inhibits self-consciousness without impairing motor activity or attention, it can, indeed, deserve an ascription of naturalness. One problem is the meaning of “natural,” itself, and the question of what kind of normative valence it carries. This will be considered further in the next objection.

The Natural Murderer Objection One can imagine a serial killer who, in the process of torturing, killing, and disposing of a victim, performs all tasks in rapt autotelicity. Does your theory allow for natural murder?

The theory of autotelic experience certainly allows for autotelic murder. Although autotelic experience, as was noted above, is often understood as adding value to life, outside of individual phenomenal experience it is ethically neutral. It can be put to good ends and ill. But what of the term “natural?” I have to admit that I want this theory to allow for a great jazz piano performance, experienced autotelically, to be better because it is more natural. I have not come forward and made that claim, however, nor am I currently prepared to do so. I will concede, however, that a “natural” murderer is probably a “better” murderer, by whatever reasonable standards of murdering one might want to put forward—efficient, resists detection, etc.

For many decades now, philosophy teachers have cautioned students away from the naturalistic fallacy, which is often taken to be a warning that whatever is natural is not necessarily good by dint of being natural. I think that warning applies here, as well, at least in terms of ethics. Aesthetically, however, I think the case is still open.
However macabre it might be, it is worth considering whether a natural murderer, under the definition of “natural” given above, is more aesthetically accomplished than a less natural one. Aesthetic appreciation is traditionally understood as necessarily providing pleasure, but there is a circle of philosophers who have recently been exploring the aesthetics of disgust, and their considerations may be relevant to this question.\textsuperscript{54} I leave the question open.

The Determinist Objection Strict determinism is the law of the universe, and all forms of self-organization fall within it, despite specious claims of the violation of the second law of thermodynamics to the contrary. Hence, there is no point in making a fine distinction by saying that human behavior is a form of self-organization. It is still determined, and so the compatibilist’s goal that you set out at the beginning has not been met.

This chapter does not present an argument for compatibilism. The reference to compatibilism was a reference to the standard way of doing philosophy of action. This chapter is intended to offer a different approach.

It is worth noting in this context that the Chinese tradition is absent an overt concept of metaphysical freedom. I think the basic reason for this absence is the concomitant absence of any claim to strict determinism or fatalism. Human behavior in the Chinese tradition has always been understood to fall under the same general patterns as nature’s own regularity, and that has been sufficient for the Chinese.

I am not convinced that strict determinism really is the law of the universe, and when I have posed the question to physicists in casual conversation, I have received a polarized set of answers: “Of course it is” and “Of course it isn’t.” I won’t advert to quantum indeterminism or books like the \textit{Tao of Physics} or common notions of randomness and stochasticity. It is enough that the matter is not nearly so settled as some philosophers of action seem to take it to be. For this reason, I think that compatibilists have jumped the gun—reconciling free will with determinism before either of them have received sufficient empirical support.\textsuperscript{55}

But suppose determinism is true and that self-organization is vulnerable to it. It isn’t clear to me that my basic thesis would suffer under a deterministic regime, as I am not positing an overtly non-deterministic theory. The purpose in laying out the notion of self-organization was not to place it in contradistinction to determinism as such but to offer a narrower nomological scope. If determinism is the law of the universe and is natural and that natural law applies to humans, then all human behavior must be determined. That move does not address the issues raised above. One horn of the paradox of natural human action is that human action must be in some way natural. To note that it is also deterministic along with all of natural motion does not move the issue forward. The problem, as I am construing it, is how to distinguish natural human action from natural motion on one side and from artifice (non-natural...
action) on the other. Placing human behavior in the context of self-organization, because it helps explain natural motion while allowing for non-self-organized motion,\textsuperscript{56} sets the stage for the possibility of just such a distinction. Absent the explanatory power of self-organization, it is difficult to build a theory of non-agentive behavior that allows for genuine action. Many theories of subconscious behavior, unconscious behavior, and automatic behavior inevitably devalue it and almost by definition remove it from consideration, not of contributing to genuine human action, but of standing on its own as genuine human action. By beginning with self-organization, one avoids this pitfall.

I have rehearsed the basic problem of action. Traditionally in the West, the problem is how to reconcile the internal feeling of freedom with the external appearance of determinism. But is that the only way to construe philosophical issues around human action? The Chinese have viewed natural action as an ideal mode of human conduct and so have built theories around optimization of action. This chapter has attempted to bring a Chinese view of action optimization that is ethical\textsuperscript{57}/aesthetic on the surface but which has metaphysical undercurrents\textsuperscript{58} into conversation with a Western view of reconciliation between action and motion that is metaphysical on the surface but which has powerful ethical undercurrents. As I show, the embedded axiological concerns of both views allow for a bridge to unify them in a theory of human action with minimal ontological commitments.

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Notes

3. Velleman, ibid., 171.
4. Harry G. Frankfurt, The Importance of What We Care About, 163.

7. In an empirically grounded and persuasive article, Michael Brownstein argues that prominent philosophers who have engaged the subject of flow (Railton, Annas, Velleman) plainly get the phenomenology wrong, incorrectly imputing a clear knowledge of “what” and “why” to subjects in flow. See Brownstein, “Rationalizing Flow.”


10. Holmes Rolston III, “Aesthetic Experience in Forests,” 160. It is interesting to note that Kant uses very similar language to these three philosophers when defining “art”: “A product of fine art must be recognized to be art and not nature” (Critique of Judgment, §45, 306.30). Nature can work through a genius and be visible in art, but art, for Kant, still bears a Platonic defect, as it is an imitation. Even Kant’s description of a genius is reminiscent of Plato in the sense that Kant’s genius is like someone possessed, who is at a loss to explain the artist’s own work of art. So for Kant, it still seems that there cannot be a true union of the natural and the human.

11. Aristotle (tr. Roger Crisp), Nicomachean Ethics, 1109b, 37.

12. Ibid., 1110a, 37.

13. Ibid., 1110a, 37–38.


15. Aristotle (tr. Christopher Rowe and Sarah Broadie), Nicomachean Ethics, 312.

16. In “The Rehabilitation of Spontaneity,” I consider a passage in Aristotle’s Physics that offers a contradictory account and suggests a distinct but unexplored way of looking at the human/nature distinction.

17. This is not to say that this is Aristotle’s theory in its entirety, just two representative elements that are relevant here.

18. Although Aristotle’s human/nature distinction remains the dominant view of human agency throughout the Western tradition, other philosophers have occasionally attempted to unify the human and the natural. For an examination of some of these views, see Bruya, “The Rehabilitation of Spontaneity.”

19. I use the word “monadic” to mean single and indivisible.

20. The idea of a multi-modal individual has, of course, been around for some time (from Plato’s tripartite soul to current cognitive science), but the background notion of monadic agency with respect to the concept of action is remarkably resilient, and is evident in theories that appeal to levels of reflection, rather than to competing modes, to resolve such problems as akratic action. Here, I explore the big-picture theory of action from a multi-modal perspective, ignoring detailed neuroscientific models. For a perspective that discusses the kind of action discussed here but from a detailed scientific perspective, see Bruya, Effortless Attention.
21. There are thousands upon thousands of articles in the scientific literature that contain “self-organization” in the title or list it as a keyword. For instance, on May 17, 2013, Thomson Reuters’ Web of Science database listed 14,618 such articles.

22. E. Solvay, “On the Organisation and the Possibility of Self-Organisation of the Chemical Reaction. The idea of self-organization, itself, goes back much further, of course. Kant has a treatment of it in the Third Critique that is consistent with the description here. He says of natural self-organization that, “the parts of the thing combine of themselves into the unity of a whole by being reciprocally cause and effect of their form” [§65, 373.10], in contrast to the making of a watch, in which “the producing cause of the watch and its form is not contained in the nature of this material but lies outside the watch” [§65, 374.15]. Even further back, the Stoics viewed the universe as a self-regulating organism, albeit one that had motion with law-like regularity—except for the human hegemonikon, which alone was capable of violating the laws of nature.

23. I don’t mean to suggest that the concept of self-organization (and of order, for that matter) is without ambiguity. The purpose of this chapter is to explore and explain instrumentally useful concepts with regard to the human/nature distinction and the action/motion distinction, not to discover the truth of what action is, in fact, once and for all. For a perceptive discussion of self-organizing systems and order—one that disproves the very existence of self-organizing systems—see H. von Foerster, “On Self-Organizing Systems and Their Environments.”

24. Energy and catalysts are not here construed as directing forces.

25. Thomas Metzinger makes a similar but much more nuanced distinction in Being No One. He describes three theoretical entities—a phenomenal self-model, a phenomenal model of intentionality relation, and a transparent global model of the world—that combine to give us a “minimal concept of subjective consciousness,” or a sense of self as subject (411). He refers to the underlying system as characterized by self-organization, which, under the right conditions, manifests a self as subject: “if an organism operates under a phenomenally transparent self-model, then I possesses a phenomenal self” (563).


27. American Academy of Sleep Medicine, The International Classification of Sleep Disorders, Revised, 146–147.

28. For a complete description, see Claudio Bassetti, “Sleepwalking (Somnambulism).”


30. Bassetti et al., 485.


32. I refer here and elsewhere in the chapter to a judgment of the competence or aesthetic quality of movement in support of its being categorized as an action. This is an intuitive move. If one cannot fall back on the canonical criteria for determining action, and if one wishes to
allow a sufficiently broad scope to capture what intuitively counts as action, then one must rely on plausible criteria. I am suggesting that high competence is, if not a sufficient criterion, then at least a potential marker for action—an indication that what is occurring may be something more than bare involuntary movement.

33. Raz and Campbell report (ibid.) that the Stroop facilitation effect vanishes under suggestion for highly suggestive individuals (HSIs) (which is true by the technical definition, comparing it to the neutral trials), but there was still some facilitation. According to Raz and Campbell’s results, the difference in reaction time (RT) between the congruent and incongruent trials for HSIs is statistically significant. Furthermore, in this and another study (Amir Raz, Jin Fan, and Michael I. Posner, “Hypnotic Suggestion Reduces Conflict in the Human Brain,”), the RT for HSIs in congruent trials dropped under suggestion, dramatically so in “Hypnotic Suggestion.” These two sets of results indicate that there is still a significant amount of reading going on.

34. What is the difference between this kind of sub-phenomenal reading and something like balancing while riding a bicycle, which also occurs beneath awareness? The difference is one of access. While riding a bicycle, one can bring one’s vestibular system at least partially into awareness—to the extent that one can sincerely acknowledge, “Yes, I am balancing,” and be aware of some parts of the body—hips, arms—involved in the process. For Raz and Campbell’s subjects, the entire process of reading was beyond the reach of awareness.


36. See, for example, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Beyond Boredom and Anxiety and Brian Bruya, ed., Effortless Attention.

37. “Negative” in the sense of being absent, not in a normative sense.

38. For a more precise definition of “self-consciousness,” see Bruya, “What Is Self-Consciousness?”

39. In addition to Csikszentmihalyi’s “Beyond Boredom and Anxiety,” see also Flow and Finding Flow.

40. Csikszentmihalyi, Beyond Boredom and Anxiety, 86.

41. Ibid.

42. Ibid., 87.

43. Ibid.

44. It is interesting to ask whether autotelicity would satisfy Metzinger’s criteria for a subjectless self. “To my knowledge,” he writes, “there is only one other phenomenal state class [other than Cotard’s syndrome] in which speakers sometimes consistently refer to themselves without using the pronoun ‘I,’ namely, during prolonged mystical or spiritual experiences” (Being No One, 459). He calls this phenomenon, as mentioned in the Introduction to this volume, “system consciousness” (566). For a more detailed description, see p. 460 of Being No One.
45. See, for example, Harry Frankfurt, “Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility.” The basic sides of the argument for and against ascriptivism can be found in H. L. A. Hart, “The Ascription of Responsibility and Rights” and in George Pitcher, “Hart on Action and Responsibility.” Andrew Sneddon explores the question in depth in *Actions and Responsibility*, concluding, as did Hart, that action is irreducibly social.

46. I consider some of these rare instances in “The Rehabilitation of Spontaneity.”

47. Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*. His understanding of self-consciousness appears to be one of simple self-awareness—a lower bar than in my understanding of self-consciousness.


50. The anthropologist Robert Aunger defines the term “artifice” in a way that makes room for non-human animals: “the enduring forms or structures created by animals through niche constructive behaviour primarily to be used in a way that increases their biological fitness” (“What’s Special about Human Technology?” 117, n. 1).

51. Joshua M. Ackerman and John A. Bargh, “Two to Tango.”

52. These studies are documented in *Flow* and *Finding Flow*.


54. See, for example, Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Savoring Disgust*.

55. An informative but difficult book on the topic of the scientific status of determinism is *A Primer on Determinism* by John Earman. A more readable version of the theory, for the non-scientist, is Mark Wilson’s review “Critical Notice: John Earman’s *A Primer on Determinism*.”

56. “Non-self-organized motion” refers to the normal way of understanding human agency, employing my terminology.


58. I have not discussed the metaphysical undercurrents. This is a reference to the Chinese *qi* 氣 cosmology. One explanation can be found in Philip J. Ivanhoe’s chapter in this volume.

**Works Cited**


