



# A response: Forum on *Snapshots from Home*

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## Abstract

The commentary reflects on the contributions to the forum in light of the overall objectives of *Snapshots from Home: Mind, Action and Strategy in an Uncertain World*.

## Keywords

Asian philosophy, global IR, quantum social theory, *Snapshots from Home*

I would like to start by thanking the forum contributors, as well as the forum editor, Pinar Bilgin, for taking the time to read *Snapshots from Home* closely and expand on some of its themes. Their insightful reflections reveal aspects of the argument that could have been further developed, and are being or hopefully will be developed by others, whether history (Biersteker), the body (Voelkner), the nature of the subject (Shimizu), the relationship between apparatus and outcome (Eun) or a conception of quantum social change (O'Brien). One might also point to further parallels between quantum theory and existing forms of critical or indigenous thought or other branches of the sciences, such as microbiology. It is humbling to accept the limits of what any one book can do. Each of these topics are worthy of investigation in themselves.

Building on what the contributors have written, I would like briefly highlight the main objectives of the book. *Snapshots from Home* starts with a parallel between quantum physics and Asian philosophies. While reference to a 'parallel' may create an expectation that the two sides would be treated equally, the intention was to explore what the ancient Asian philosophies might tell us about the nature of mind, action and strategy within a quantum world and universe, in a way that quantum mechanics in itself arguably cannot. The evolution of quantum debates, or engagement with the mathematical calculations so dear to quantum mechanics, are noticeable by their absence. The book is a thought experiment about how we might think differently about ourselves and our global relationships,

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including to nature, by taking distance from Newtonian assumptions of atomism, determinism and mechanism, replacing them with quantum impermanence, complementarity and entanglement.


The book is positioned at the intersection between debates around quantum social theory and global IR, each of which, as the introduction notes, have a longer lineage within IR. The point was less to criticise either, as Biersteker suggests in regard to Global IR, than to point to obstacles they often face. The obstacles arise from claims, on the one hand, that quantum social theory can be little more than analogy or metaphor, for instance, because quantum effects are said to wash out at the macroscopic level, or, on the other hand, that science is unitary and universal, and thus at odds with the specificity of culture, which obscures the origins of dominant approaches to science in Western culture or its relationship to historical practices of empire. The Asian philosophies provide an opening to engage with assumptions of impermanence, complementarity and entanglement as they relate to macroscopic-level thought and practice. Also, as the Dalai Lama (2005: 74) notes, Buddhism provides a seamless understanding of a non-essentialist reality. The hope was to raise questions about the either/or binaries surrounding the obstacles, and open a space to understand the world in terms of either/and, a term which, like the more frequently used term both/and, points to an entanglement, while also emphasising the point that complementarity is a relationship between presence and non-presence, seen and unseen.

The thought experiment revolves around a multi-layered repositioning of the observer towards the world. In the classical model, the observer looks out at world said to exist independently of its observation; with the repositioning, we become part of the world and what is seen will be dependent on our position and that of the apparatus of observation. The apparatus is not a technological device in a scientific laboratory, but rather a function of the conceptual tools and assumptions that shape every-day seeing and practice in the world, which tend to be so familiar that they are taken for granted. The Covid pandemic, starting in 2020, was itself a disruption to normal ways of seeing. It provided a backdrop for adopting a different set of conceptual tools and asking what was at stake in observing the world from a different angle.

The repositioning in this case focussed in on the cracks exposed by the Covid pandemic, relating, among others to inequality and climate change, and the significance for understanding mind, action and strategy. Once mind is freed from the confines of the individual brain, the Cartesian mind-body split and the essence of the separate egoistic self, the relational nature of becoming and its significance for understanding suffering in the world, or for navigating uncertainty, comes into view. From this positioning within the world, the observer must be attentive to a larger environment of continuous change, where a more complete view, including both seen and unseen aspects, is necessary for navigating and maximising the potentials of a context. Action arising from linear means-ends thinking is replaced by actionless action, which is grounded in and attentive to a relational context that must be navigated rather than controlled. Navigation involves a strategic positioning, in which the self is a participant observer, both shaped by and shaping the further unfolding of a context and by extension the world. If the actor is part of the world rather than separate from it, there is an incentive to minimise damage and to navigate the universe without doing harm, as explored through the thought of Gandhi and Sun Tzu, two of the world's greatest strategists.

The problem, as Eun rightly notes, is that there is no perfect recipe or apparatus that will lead us unproblematically towards a ‘good’ life, and political leaders draw on Buddhist or Daoist frameworks, as well as Christianity or quantum physics, to reproduce patterns of violence in the world. While aspects of any of these ‘forms’ might propel us in new directions, the problem would seem to lie with the weaponisation of ‘truth’ in the damage or exploitation of others, when, within a world of upheaval and flux, none of us can grasp truth in its entirety. A central objective of the book is to grapple with a question of how to step out of habits that are overly familiar and have set us on a path to global destruction, which includes turning towards unseen aspects that we prefer to avoid. To what extent is it possible to reposition the apparatus, to see the world and nature, and ourselves within it, from a different angle and with a more complete view? As highlighted by O’Brien, the costs of not doing so are huge in light of imminent climate emergency. The paradox is revealed in the continuous need to engage in wars of ‘self’ defence, while standing on the precipice of changes to a global habitat that could destroy us all (Fierke and Mackay, 2023). *Snapshots from Home* was a reference to both the circumstances from which the book was written and the potential to imagine a more global home at a time when the house is burning down.

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### Author biography

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