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# Effortless Action: The Chinese Spiritual Ideal of Wu-wei

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Students of Chinese philosophy have usually seen their subjects as a succession of people who lived, acted, taught and died, rather than a weaving of strands, any one of which may be a subtle dialectic of question and answer.

—David Nivison (1997:91)

Western scholars have in recent years grown justifiably reluctant to make sweeping generalizations about the character of Chinese thought. Not only is most of the history of Chinese thought complicated by the presence of such “alien” traditions as Buddhism, but the pre-Buddhist tradition itself has shown itself to be more multifaceted than once was thought. For example, the reconstruction of previously lost works such as the later Mohist canons has made less convincing the often-heard claim that “the Chinese” were not interested in problems of logic or language, while the renewed interest in the thought of Xunzi has shown the classical Confucian tradition to be much more complicated than the Song-derived account of Mencius as the sole orthodox successor to Confucius would have it.

Nonetheless, our increasingly sophisticated conception of early Chinese thought allows us to continue to maintain *some* generalizations, paramount among which is the claim that Chinese thinkers were interested primarily in *practical* rather than *theoretical* questions. While there was a certain amount of debate between various schools concerning such theoretical questions as, for instance, what the good life for humans might be, the *primary focus* of early Chinese thinkers remained the problem of how to *become* good. The sort of knowledge that was therefore valued was not abstract knowledge *that* the good was to be defined in a certain way

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but concrete knowledge concerning *how* to act in a way that was good,<sup>1</sup> and the various schools customarily defended their positions not by theoretical argument but by pointing to exemplars who personified their values or by focusing on the practical implications of their own and others' theories.<sup>2</sup> The religious exemplars that we find in early Chinese texts are thus admired more for the sort of practical skill knowledge they display in their actions than the sort of arguments that they could marshal in defense of their particular way of life.

In "Pensée occidentale et pensée chinoise: le regard et l'acte," Jean-François Billeter has formulated this distinction between theoretical and practical forms of knowledge in terms of a contrast between ocular and action-based metaphors for true knowledge. "The 'ocular metaphor' is conspicuous in Chinese texts through its absence," he observes, "and the epistemological problematics that developed from this metaphor in the West are therefore also unknown" (1984:34). This observation is perhaps overstated—ocular images are, in fact, found throughout the early Chinese corpus<sup>3</sup>—but its basic thrust is still quite valid. For what I will be referring to as the "mainstream"<sup>4</sup> early Chinese thinkers, true understanding is not an abstract gaze that—as for Plato or even the neo-Confucians—sees *through* concrete reality in order to acquire a theoretical grasp of some sort of underlying (and ultimately more *real*) order. Rather, true "clarity" is an illumination of the actual landscape before one's eyes that serves to guide one through it and is always intimately and inextricably tied to action. Thus, in place of the representational model of knowledge exemplified by the "gaze" of a subject acquiring theoretical knowledge of an eternal order behind the phenomenal world, the Chinese instead emphasize a sort of knowledge appropriate to a subject already engaged in the world through the medium of "the act."

This is the import of Hall and Ames's contention that "thinking" (*si*) in the *Analects* is "not to be understood as a process of abstract reasoning, but is fundamentally *performative* in that it is an activity whose immediate

<sup>1</sup> The distinction between knowing *how* and knowing *that* is one developed by Gilbert Ryle.

<sup>2</sup> An implication of this is that with regard to ethical standards these thinkers appeal not to a set of maxims or abstract principles but rather to something resembling Aristotle's "good person" criterion.

<sup>3</sup> Ignorance, for instance, is often analogized to not being able to distinguish black from white and compared to blindness, while (in contrast) the dominant metaphor in the Daoist texts for the sort of understanding that accompanies wu-wei activity is *ming* ("illumination," "clarity," "brightness").

<sup>4</sup> I join Donald Munro in referring to the early Confucian-Daoist worldview as "mainstream" (163-176) because—although it was challenged or outright rejected in the pre-Qin period by thinkers such as Mozi or Han Feizi—its absorption into the Han syncretist worldview won for it an enduring influence on the subsequent development of religious thought in China. This mainstream Chinese worldview went on to have a profound effect on the adaptation of alien modes of thought—from Buddhism to Marxism—to the Chinese intellectual milieu.

consequence is the achievement of a practical result" (44).<sup>5</sup> This distinctive character of the Chinese model of knowledge has been noted by many other scholars. For instance, Herbert Fingarette urges us to overcome our western "mentalist" bias in approaching the teachings of Confucius and to redirect our focus from the "'interior' of the man . . . to the act of the man" (1972:54); Wu Kuang-ming speaks of Zhuangzi's ideal as a form of "body-thinking" (1992, 1997); and P. J. Thiel has described the Chinese model of knowledge as a sort of "experience of Being": "It is very noteworthy that we [in the West] lack a specific expression for this type of knowledge. . . . This type of experience of Being [*Seins-Erfahrung*] is not irrational, but is rather a deeper, entities-bound [*Wesensgebundene*] type of knowledge—one that is experienced with the entire spiritual personhood" (1969:85 n. 148). Several scholars have suggested that this form of practical, engaged knowledge be viewed as a kind of "skill-knowledge" (Fingarette 1972: esp. 49-56; Hansen 1975: esp. 64-65; Hansen 1983a; Hansen 1983b; Eno 1990: esp. 8-10; Eno 1996; Ivanhoe 1993; and Raphals). That is, they propose that the early Chinese conception of knowledge should be seen in terms of mastery of a set of practices that restructure both one's perceptions and values. As we shall see, while the skill model is not entirely apt in the Chinese context, it serves as a helpful illustration of how the early Chinese model of knowledge differs significantly from that most dominant in recent western thought.<sup>6</sup>

More important for the development of mainstream Chinese thought, however, is the fact that this alternate model of knowledge inevitably brings with it an alternate ideal of perfection—an ideal of perfectly skilled action rather than of perfected theoretical knowledge. For the pre-Qin Confucians and Daoists, the culmination of knowledge is represented by an ability to move through the world and human society in a manner that is completely spontaneous and yet still fully in harmony with the normative order of the natural and human worlds—the *Dao* or "Way." This state of perfection is what I will be referring to as "wu-wei."

The reader might note that appropriating the term "wu-wei" to refer to a pre-Qin ideal shared by Confucians and Daoists alike is, strictly speaking, anachronistic. As a term of art, *wu-wei* does not appear at all in one of the texts we will be discussing (the *Mencius*) and is found only once in another (the *Analects*)—in a chapter that is arguably of quite late provenance (15.5). I could very well have chosen a word of my own contrivance

<sup>5</sup> The reader is also referred to the discussion of theory versus praxis in the western tradition and its relationship to Confucian thought in Hall and Ames: 30-43.

<sup>6</sup> The theme of skill- or practice-knowledge has also been explored by western thinkers such as Michael Polanyi and Alasdair MacIntyre, who employ their ideas of "tacit knowledge" or practice mastery as foils to critique western representational theories of knowledge.

to denote the subject of this article or perhaps adopted Billeter's "ideal of perfected action" or "the perfect act." My reason for preferring "wu-wei" is that it is, in fact, the technical term the Chinese themselves eventually chose to denote the ideal of perfected action. It is important in discussing early Chinese thought that we avoid confusing the existence of a concept with the presence of a specific word.<sup>7</sup> Although the term *wu-wei* itself does not come into widespread use until fairly late in the Warring States period, the ideal that it describes—acting effortlessly and spontaneously in perfect harmony with a normative standard and thereby acquiring an almost magical efficaciousness in moving through the world and attracting people to oneself—can be identified as a central theme in Chinese religious thought in texts as early as the *Book of Odes* (*Shijing*) and the *Book of History* (*Shujing*), and later Chinese commentators subsequently adopted *wu-wei* as a term to describe this ideal. This personal spiritual goal is also intimately linked to the ideal of ordering of the world through the power of one's "virtue" (*de*)<sup>8</sup> rather than through legal or military coercion, which is in turn one of the most archaic religious themes in China.<sup>9</sup>

This concept has played an extremely important role in the development of Chinese culture but has rarely been the focus of systematic study in either China or the West.<sup>10</sup> The one notable exception to this generalization is Roger Ames's *The Art of Rulership*, which is a careful study of the development of *wu-wei* as a principle of government in Confucianism, Daoism, Legalism, and the syncretist *Huai Nanzi*. Ames's treatment of *wu-wei* reflects the dominant approach toward the subject: while the personal spiritual dimensions of *wu-wei* have not gone unnoticed, *wu-wei* as an ideal of government or technique of social control has been the primary focus.<sup>11</sup> This focus can be attributed to the fact that "wu-wei" as a

7 It is precisely this sort of confusion that has led some scholars to the rather absurd conclusion that the early Chinese had no conception of "truth" because they lacked a single, specific term for it. For a cogent criticism of this sort of linguistic determinism, the reader is referred to Graham 1989:389-428.

8 In its earliest usages (as with the Latin *virtus*), *de* referred to the powers or qualities inherent to and characteristic of a given thing; by the time of the *Odes* it is portrayed as a charismatic power to attract and retain followers accruing to one who accords with the moral standards handed down by Heaven. "Virtue" or "charismatic virtue" are thus etymologically accurate renderings for *de*, as long as we are careful to avoid reading moralistic qualities into the term as it is used in the Daoist context, where it retains its more archaic sense of the vitalistic power original to and characteristic of a given creature.

9 See Nivison 1997:17-30, "'Virtue' in Bronze and Bone."

10 The Chinese scholar Li Shenglong, who has devoted a series of articles to the subject, notes of *wu-wei* that "the scholarly world . . . has yet to systematically address either its content or course of development" (1986:7).

11 There are, of course, exceptions to this trend. In the West Donald Munro has noted the role that *wu-wei* plays as a common "ideal state" for both Confucians and Daoists—a state of mental tran-

term of art is applied most commonly and prominently to the political ideal, and its relationship to the personal ideal of effortless or perfected action has been correspondingly obscured. To a certain extent, this can be attributed to the fact that in the later Legalist and (arguably) syncretist writings where *wu-wei* plays such a prominent role, it is used *exclusively* in the sense of a principle of government (its function as a spiritual ideal having been lost),<sup>12</sup> and this sense of *wu-wei* has subsequently been read back into earlier texts. In contrast to the received approach to the subject, I would argue that it is the *personal* spiritual ideal of *wu-wei* that is most basic to the group of mainstream Chinese thinkers we will be discussing and that *wu-wei* as a governmental ideal is, in fact, parasitic upon this more fundamental conception.

I have two main purposes in this article. To begin with, I hope to counter a common perception of *wu-wei* as an exclusively Daoist ideal by demonstrating that it served as the central ideal for *all* of the early mainstream Chinese thinkers, has quite venerable pre-Confucian roots, and eventually became one of the central themes of East Asian religious thought in general—particularly in Chan (Zen) Buddhism and neo-Confucianism. Secondly, I wish to argue that this ideal is a fundamentally *religious* one:<sup>13</sup> that is, it can only be properly understood when situated within a specific metaphysical context that was also shared by Confucians and Daoists alike. This point is intended to serve as a much-needed corrective to interpretations of Confucian or Daoist thinkers that would portray them as somehow post- (or simply anti-) foundationalist and also to protect *wu-wei* from any potential relativistic implications. These two

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quality resulting from a “union” with Heaven (151, 155ff.)—and Alan Fox has written on *wu-wei* as a spiritual ideal in the thought of Laozi and Zhuangzi. The reader is referred also to Allinson, Ivanhoe (1993), and Yearley (1996). The recognition of the personal and spiritual dimensions of *wu-wei* has been more common in China and Japan (e.g., Kanaya Osamu; Fukunaga Mitsuji 1966; Mori Mikisaburo 1967; Murakami Kajitsu; Lin Congshun; Pang Pu; Liu Xiaogan 1998) and Asian scholars writing in the West (Feng Yulan; Wu Kuang-ming 1981, 1982).

<sup>12</sup> As will be argued below, the mainstream conception of *wu-wei* is a fundamentally *religious* ideal. Once stripped from its metaphysical context by thinkers such as Han Feizi—who rejects the early mainstream worldview—it is reduced from a spiritual ideal to a mere administrative technique.

<sup>13</sup> The reader does not need to be reminded what a notoriously difficult task it has been for scholars to define what they mean by “religion”—the implicit, *de facto* definition governing present scholarship seeming to be “I know it when I see it.” I nonetheless feel that it is appropriate for me to explain briefly what I mean by referring to *wu-wei* as a “religious” concept. I see at least two features of a system of thought to be crucial in marking it as “religious”: 1) the postulation of an all-embracing and *normative* order to the cosmos that goes beyond any given particular individual or individual object (that is, a metaphysical scheme of some sort); and 2) a program for either bringing the individual and/or society as a whole *back* into their proper place in this order (a soteriological project) or for preserving a realized, but constantly threatened, state of harmony with this order. I would thus characterize any concept or practice belonging to such a system of thought as “religious.” For a related characterization of religion, see Robert Neville’s “Foreword” in Taylor: ix-x.

claims lead to a third and perhaps more far-reaching thesis that, due to space restrictions, can only be briefly developed here. This third thesis is that the ideal of *wu-wei* has built into it a productive tension (the “paradox of *wu-wei*”) that serves as a prime motivating force in the development of mainstream Chinese thought. This tension arises from the fact that the state of effortless, perfected action represented by *wu-wei* is portrayed as a state that needs to be achieved: we are currently *not* practicing *wu-wei*, and the thinkers we will be discussing propose various soteriological paths designed to bring us from our current state of effort-full action into this ideal state of effortless action. The question that inevitably arises is, how is it possible to *try* not to try? That is, how can a program of spiritual striving result in a state that lies beyond striving? It would seem that the very act of striving would inevitably “contaminate” the end-state. My argument is that the most illuminating way to view the development of pre-Qin Confucian and Daoist thought is to see it as a series of responses to this paradox residing at the core of its central spiritual ideal.

While the existence of this tension in the concept of *wu-wei* has not gone entirely unnoticed,<sup>14</sup> to my knowledge only two scholars, David Nivison and Jean-François Billeter, have perceived its *productive* quality. In a series of essays Nivison (1997) explores the tension that he refers to as the “paradox of virtue (*de*)” in early Confucian thought. Structurally equivalent to the paradox of *wu-wei*, the paradox of virtue revolves around the fact that virtue can only be acquired by someone who is not consciously trying to acquire it. That is, performing a virtuous act while at the same time being self-conscious of its virtuousness makes it, paradoxically, not fully virtuous. Confucius himself did not directly address this problem, but Nivison attempts to demonstrate that one of the motivating forces in the development of the Mencian and Xunzian secondary theories about human nature is a desire to resolve this paradox.<sup>15</sup> While Nivison fails to explore the influence of this tension beyond the early Confucian context, Jean-François Billeter has hinted at its more comprehensive implications. He notes that, while what he terms *l'idée de l'act parfait* (along with the alternate model of knowledge upon which it is based) allowed early Chinese thinkers to avoid the various epistemological dilemmas involved

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<sup>14</sup> Donald Munro has discussed the “apparent contradiction” involved in Daoist *wu-wei* (143-144), and Joel Kuppermann (1968) has struggled with the paradox in his discussion of the “problem of naturalness” in the thought of Confucius. In addition, Wu Kuang-ming and Mori Mikisaburo have both noted, at least in passing, that this tension is endemic to both Confucian and Daoist thought (Mori 1967:16-17; Wu Kuang-ming 1989).

<sup>15</sup> Nivison (1997:31-44), “The Paradox of Virtue.” See also, “Can Virtue Be Self-Taught?” (45-58), “Motivation and Moral Action in Mencius” (91-120), and “Philosophical Voluntarism in Fourth-Century China” (121-132).

in, for instance, the Cartesian ideal of an isolated subject somehow obtaining perfect knowledge of an external realm, it inevitably brought with it its own set of conflicts that exerted a unique influence upon Chinese thought:

The ideal of perfected action seems to us a sort of central insight that, in China, exercises a stronger pull upon the mind than any other, and toward which speculative thought is constantly drawn. . . . In Chinese texts, this idea is most commonly present only in an implicit form, because it is expressed in and lies beneath all of the various forms to which we must refer. The passage from the *Zhuangzi* that has served as our point of departure [the story of Cook Ding cutting up the ox] seems to us to possess a paradigmatic value, although this value remains as yet to be firmly established. In any case, our idea will continue to rest upon a relatively arbitrary edifice in so far as it has yet to prove its hermeneutic value in contact with multiple texts. Before it can be accorded some degree of importance, it must be put to the test in a different fashion: by rendering more intelligible not just a single isolated passage, but rather an entire philosophical problematic as well as its historical development; and by revealing more clearly the coherence and the power—as well as the tensions, contradictions and the aporias—of Chinese philosophy, or, better, Chinese *philosophies*. In short, it must perform a service with regard to the Chinese context comparable to that which it seems one can expect [in the West] from the notion of the “ocular metaphor.” (Billeter 1984:50)

Before I became aware of Billeter’s work I began a project (Slingerland forthcoming) that takes up precisely this task, demonstrating that the ideal of perfectly harmonious action not only serves as a powerful lens through which we can view early mainstream Chinese texts but also possesses implications for East Asian religious thought in general as well as western religious thought and ethics. Although space limitations here will not allow us to explore this third theme in detail, I will attempt to briefly sketch it out in the conclusion.

### WU-WEI AS A COMMON IDEAL

“Wu-wei” literally means “in the absence of/without doing” and is often translated as “doing nothing” or “non-action.” It is important to realize, however, that wu-wei properly refers not to what is actually *happening* (or not happening) in the realm of observable action but rather to the *state of mind* of the actor. That is, it refers not to what is or is not being done but to the phenomenological state of the doer. As Pang Pu notes in his discussion of wu-wei, the term denotes “not a basic form of action, but the mental state of the actor—the spiritual state that obtains at the

very moment of action" (14).<sup>16</sup> It describes a state of personal harmony in which actions flow freely and instantly from one's spontaneous inclinations—without the need for extended deliberation or inner struggle—and yet nonetheless perfectly accord with the dictates of the situation at hand, display an almost supernatural efficacy, and (in the Confucian context at least) harmonize with the demands of conventional morality. As Jean-François Billeter describes it, *wu-wei*—*l'idéal de l'activité parfaite*—represents a state of "perfect knowledge of the reality of the situation, perfect efficaciousness and the realization of a perfect economy of energy" (1984:50).

It represents not a transitory state but rather a character that has been so thoroughly transformed as to conform perfectly with rightness. For a person in *wu-wei*, proper conduct follows as instantly and spontaneously as the nose responds to a bad smell and with the same sense of unconscious ease and joy with which the body gives in to the seductive rhythm of a song. The state of *wu-wei* harmony is even reflected in the agent's physical bearing and thus is perceptible to others. *Wu-wei* actions are not, however, automatic, unconscious, or purely physiological. Although extended phenomenological accounts of *wu-wei* are only to be found in the *Zhuangzi*, it is clear that this state of harmony contains complex cognitive as well as somatic elements, involving as it does the integration of the body, the emotions, and the mind. The individual still makes choices—and may even at times pause to weigh various options or consider the situation ahead—but even such deliberations are performed with a sort of effortless ease. Unlike instinctual or merely habitual forms of actions, *wu-wei* calls for a high degree of concentration on the part of the agent and allows for a considerable amount of flexibility of response.<sup>17</sup> Although it does not involve abstract reflection or calculation, it is not to be viewed as "mindless" behavior but should rather be seen as springing from the *embodied* mind.

### Pre-Confucian Roots

The theme of personal perfection being reflected in both harmonious, efficacious action and in one's physical appearance can be found in texts as early as the *Book of Odes* (*Shijing*).<sup>18</sup> The aristocratic lord or gentleman

<sup>16</sup> Well-written and carefully argued, this article is to my knowledge the best short introduction to the subject of *wu-wei* as a spiritual ideal in pre-Qin China.

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of the difference between virtuous dispositions (i.e., *wu-wei* morality) and mere habit, see Yearley 1990:108-110.

<sup>18</sup> *Wu-wei* as a compound term appears twice in the received Mao version of the *Odes*—in Odes 70 and 145—but never in our full technical sense. As the *Book of Odes* is the only text that scholars agree represents mostly pre-Confucian material, it will be used as our source for "pre-Confucian"



(*junzi*) is throughout the *Odes* described as embodying the martial and social virtues that become his station with an effortless ease—an ease that manifests itself in his efficacious skill as much as his personal bearing. An admiring female poet in Ode 214 describes the object of her affections in such terms:

Magnificent are the flowers, gorgeous their yellow;  
I have seen this young one,  
And how glorious he is!  
How glorious he is!  
This is why he enjoys good fortune . . .  
He rides to the left, to the left,  
My lord does it properly (*yi*);  
He rides to the right, the right,  
My lord has the knack.  
And because he has the knack,  
It shows in his deportment.<sup>19</sup>

A similar picture of consummate mastery and effortless accordance with what is “proper” or what “fits” the situation (*yi*) is rendered the description of a noble archer in Ode 106:

Oh! How illustrious he is!  
His beautiful eyes so clear.  
Perfect in propriety,  
He can shoot all day at the target,  
And never miss the mark.  
Truly a proper kinsman of mine!  
Oh! How handsome he is!  
His clear brow well-rounded,  
When he dances, he is in perfect step,  
When he shoots, he always pierces the target.  
His four arrows all find their mark;  
In this way he guards against disorder.<sup>20</sup>

The idea of being able to shoot all day while “never missing the mark (*zheng*)” has definite moral overtones—*zheng* signifying “proper” or morally “upright” as well as the center of a target—and it is in this metaphorical sense that this Ode has been read by later commentators. Nonetheless, the *wu-wei* “lord” or gentleman in the *Odes* primarily represents a martial, aristocratic ideal—the handsome and physically powerful warrior.

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thought. The themes we will touch upon can, however, also be found in arguably pre-Confucian portions of such texts as the *Book of History* or *Zuo Zhuan*.

<sup>19</sup> After Karlgren. Unless otherwise noted, translations from the Chinese are my own.

<sup>20</sup> After Waley; cf. the descriptions of the gentleman in Odes 143, 173, 174, and 189.

A more explicitly moral ideal of *wu-wei* is displayed by another exemplary type in the *Odes*: the virtuous sage-ruler of old. In Ode 241, for instance, we find the Lord on High (*shangdi*) praising King Wen:

I cherish your bright virtue (*de*);  
 Despite your great reknown, you do not flaunt it,  
 Despite your enduring prominence, it remains unchanged.  
 Unselfconsciously, innocently,  
 You accord harmoniously with my principles.

Although possessed of a powerful charismatic virtue (*de*), King Wen does not dwell upon it or parade it in front of others, nor allow it to become corrupted by arrogance or pride. He enjoys his virtue naturally and unselfconsciously and so is able to accord with the principles handed down by the Lord on High in a completely spontaneous manner. Such effortless realization of morality is displayed also by King Xuan as he is described in Ode 304:

King Xuan martially established order.  
 When he received a small state, it prospered,  
 When he received a large state, it prospered.  
 Realizing in his person the standards of conduct, never transgressing them,  
 Wherever his gaze fell, order was manifested.

### Confucian *Wu-wei*

We can hear echoes of the ancient aristocratic ideal of the skilled archer or charioteer in the long account of Confucius's perfected ritual action that makes up Book 10 of the *Analects*. Like the charioteer in Ode 214, Confucius's physical mastery of ritual as described in this book is fluid and smooth: "When summoned by his lord to receive guests, his countenance would become severe and he would quicken his steps. When he bowed to those in attendance beside him—stretching out his hands to the left or to the right, as their position required—his robes remained perfectly arrayed, both front and back. When it was time [in the ceremony] to hasten forward, he moved as though he were gliding upon wings" (10.3). Like the archer in Ode 106, Confucius also "never misses the mark": every nuance of his expression, body language, and speech is portrayed as perfectly and effortlessly harmonizing the demands of the situation with the standards of ritual propriety. "At court, when speaking with officers of lower rank he was pleasant and affable; when speaking with officers of upper rank, he was formal and proper. When his lord was present, his manner was simultaneously reverent and relaxed" (10.2).

There are no specific clauses in the rites to cover the myriad situations that might confront a gentleman. What is required to meet these con-

tingencies is a keen sensitivity to what is ritually correct in any given situation combined with a set of dispositions flexible enough to instantly adapt to changing conditions. Like the noble archer, this final state of consummate ritual mastery does not involve constant effort or struggle on Confucius's part but rather arises spontaneously from his trained dispositions. The spontaneity and naturalness of Confucius's ritual mastery—completely perfected at age seventy—is summed up in *Analects* 2.4: “He could follow his heart's desires without transgressing the bounds [of propriety].” That is, without the need for deliberation or internal struggle, Confucius could achieve perfect accordance with traditional standards simply by following his own spontaneous inclinations. *Analects* 2.4 brings to mind not only the skillful warriors of Odes 106 and 214 but also the unselfconscious virtue of King Wen in Ode 241 and the effortless accordance with traditional standards evinced by King Xuan in Ode 304. What we are seeing here is the evolution of the ideal of the “gentleman” into something with a rather different moral valence than the aristocratic warrior so prominent in the *Odes*. Confucius's consummate skill is focused upon specifically *ethical* rather than martial arts, and in this sense the new ideal that he represents might be seen as a combination of the two types of wu-wei exemplars we see in the *Odes*: the noble warrior and the virtuous ruler favored by Heaven. Like the noble warrior, his actions accord perfectly with the demands of a shifting situation; like the sagely ruler, he is able spontaneously to embody moral virtue in a natural and completely unselfconscious manner. The result is a new breed of aristocrat, skilled in virtue rather than war: the Confucian gentleman.

This ideal of perfect, spontaneous wu-wei embodiment of virtue—rooted in the classics and elaborated in a somewhat new form by Confucius—is inherited by both Mencius and Xunzi. Mencius, for instance, describes the state in which “movement and facial expression everywhere accord perfectly with ritual propriety” as the “ultimate flourishing of virtue (*de*)” (7:B:33). As with Confucius at age seventy, this perfect mastery is not forced or maintained through effort but—in the same way that the body cannot help but move in time to the rhythm of a seductive beat—arises spontaneously and inevitably out of the joy that the perfected person feels for the moral life. “When such joy arises, how can it be stopped? And when it cannot be stopped, then you begin unconsciously to tap your feet and move your hands in time with it” (4:A:27). As in the case of the noble archer of Ode 106, this harmonious mastery and embodiment of virtue reveals itself in one's demeanor and physical appearance. The Confucian virtues, rooted in the gentleman's mind, so permeate his character that they “reveal themselves in his demeanor: clearly manifesting themselves in his face, filling his back and infusing his four limbs. Without the

need for words, every movement of his body thus reveals their presence” (7:A:21).

One might not expect to find the ideal of *wu-wei* perfection in the thought of Xunzi, whose emphasis upon *wei* (“conscious effort”) would seem deliberately aimed against such an idea. Yet we *do* find him advocating *wu-wei* and even explicitly connecting it with Ode 106 cited above:

[The gentleman] is able to adapt the standard of rightness (*yii*)<sup>21</sup> in response to changing conditions because he knows how to accord with any situation, whether curved or straight. In the *Odes* we read,

He rides to the left, to the left,  
the gentleman does it properly (*yi*);  
He rides to the right, the right,  
the gentleman has the knack.

This expresses the idea that the gentleman is able to employ his knowledge of what is right (*yii*) to bend or straighten in response to changing conditions. (Wang Xianqian: 2.3b; Knoblock I: 175-6)<sup>22</sup>

The situation-responsiveness of Xunzi’s perfected person—for whom what is “fitting” or “proper” (*yi*) in the moment accords with what is morally right (*yii*) in an absolute sense—requires neither premeditation nor conscious effort but flows forth spontaneously. “The discriminations of the sage require no prior thought and no advance planning, yet when expressed they are appropriate, and when formed they are proper to type. In repose or in motion, the sage responds inexhaustibly to every change” (3.11b; I:210). Here too—as in the *Odes* and the *Mencius*—this state of perfection is embodied in an observable fashion, and thus announces its presence without the need for words: “The learning of the gentleman enters through the ear, is stored in the mind, extends through the four limbs, and is given form in both his activity and repose. In all of his actions—the softest word or the slightest movement—the gentleman can be taken as a model and principle” (1.8b; I:140).

Xunzi and Mencius, then, would seem to share the same spiritual ideal: an ideal of perfected action that can be traced back through Confucius to the *Odes*. Where they differ concerns the way in which this ideal is to be *achieved*. Consider the manner in which Xunzi, like Mencius, employs the metaphor of dance to describe the *wu-wei* perfection of the sage: “How can we understand the meaning of dance? I say the eyes by them-

<sup>21</sup> This alternate romanization has been adopted to distinguish *yii* “rightness” from its homonym *yi* “fitting” or “appropriate.” Xunzi is deliberately playing upon this pun.

<sup>22</sup> For the sake of convenience, passages from the *Zhuangzi* and the *Xunzi*—which possess no commonly agreed upon section divisions—will be keyed to page numbers in both the standard Chinese critical edition and the most commonly used English translation.

selves cannot perceive it and the ears by themselves cannot hear it. Rather, only when the manner in which one gazes down or looks up, bends or straightens, advances or retreats, and slows down or speeds up is so ordered that every movement is proper and regulated, when the strength of muscles and bones has been so thoroughly exhausted in according with the rhythm of the drums, bells, and orchestra that all awkward or discordant motions have been eliminated—only through such an accumulation of effort is the meaning of dance fully realized” (14.4a; III:85). In the dance metaphor as found in the *Mencius*, there is no mention of training: the hands and feet spontaneously begin moving in time to a rhythm that seems to call forth a primal response in the listener. Wu-wei perfection thus represents for Mencius merely the full realization of responses that are natural for human beings. For Xunzi, “not trying” is not so easy: the perfection of form and emotion that finds its expression in dance is a hard-won *achievement* resulting from years of difficult training and submission to cultural forms, which serve to transform one’s initially recalcitrant and ugly nature into something harmonious and beautiful. This is really the substance of the famous disagreement between Mencius and Xunzi on the subject of human nature—Mencius claiming that human nature is “good,” and Xunzi countering that it is “bad.” For Mencius, wu-wei represents the perfection of an innate set of tendencies; the source of normative standards is thus ultimately *inside*, and the role of training, external cultural forms, and traditional authority is consequently de-emphasized. For Xunzi, wu-wei is achieved only through the complete *reformation* of a nature that is initially bereft of moral resources; the source of normative standards is thus to be found *outside* the individual, and intensive training in cultural forms and submission to the authority of the tradition becomes crucial.

### Daoist Wu-wei

The importance of wu-wei in the Daoist context requires perhaps less introduction, since it is in the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi* that wu-wei is first employed as a technical term of art and becomes a central focus of concern. Indeed, wu-wei becomes a polemical weapon in the hands of these early Daoist thinkers, who put their primary emphasis upon the end *state* of effortless action as a means of criticizing what they perceive as the Confucian obsession with the *means* of reaching this state.<sup>23</sup> In the view of

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<sup>23</sup> Of course, the Daoists themselves advocate means of their own for attaining the end of wu-wei and thus involve themselves as much as the Confucians in the “paradox of wu-wei.” Nonetheless, we shall see below that the role of means is consciously de-emphasized in the Daoist texts, and their almost exclusive emphasis upon wu-wei as representing merely the re-establishment of a “natural” state might be seen as an attempt to defuse the paradox.

Laozi and Zhuangzi the Confucian project has nothing to do with wu-wei, since their over-elaborated set of practices so contaminate the practitioner that the end result can be nothing but forced behavior and shallow hypocrisy.

This is the import of Laozi's famous dictum that opens the Mawangdui version (and constitutes Chapter 38 of the received version) of the text: "The highest virtue does not seem virtuous, and so possesses virtue; the lowest virtue never lets go of virtue, and so is without virtue." That is, true charismatic virtue or inner power is not consciously *seen* or *regarded* as virtue or power, while that which is regarded to be virtue is, in fact, merely an empty sham. That this is a jab aimed at the Confucians is made quite clear in the lines that follow:

The person of highest virtue is without action (wu-wei)  
and holds nothing in regard;  
The person of highest benevolence acts, but also holds  
nothing in regard;  
The person of highest righteousness acts and also holds  
certain things in regard;  
The person of highest ritual propriety acts and, when the people do not  
respond, rolls up his sleeves and forces them to respond.  
Hence when the Way was lost there arose virtue;  
When virtue was lost there arose benevolence;  
When benevolence was lost there arose righteousness;  
When righteousness was lost there arose the [Confucian] rites.  
The rites are the wearing thin of loyalty and trustworthiness  
And the beginning of disorder.

Note here the importance of "[holding something] in regard" (*yiwei*), which in the course of decline described above seems even more pernicious than "doing" (*wei*). In Laozi's view it is the rise of Confucian morality and values that ruined the original purity of the ancients and brought about the fall from wu-wei. Once people come to value something (to "hold it in regard"), they are motivated to act in pursuit of that object, and this marks the "beginning of disorder." By setting up the wu-wei embodiment of the virtues of benevolence and righteousness as explicit goals to be consciously *sought*—and by establishing ritual practice and study as the means to this end—Confucius hopelessly confused the true Way and condemned the world to disorder and hypocrisy.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> This is, of course, not entirely fair to the Confucians. As we have seen, the ideal Confucian gentleman is in the moment of action no more self-conscious of his own virtue than the noble archer of the *Odes* is conscious of his consummate skill. Indeed, Confucius himself was worried about the problem of hypocrisy (witness his attacks upon the "village worthy" in *Analec*s 17.13). In the view of Laozi, however, Confucius has already hopelessly compromised the ideal of wu-wei by raising up vir-

Laozian wu-wei thus embraces two different but complementary components. The first, cognitive component involves remaining free of “regarding”—that is, rejecting conventional knowledge and values—and instead cleaving to what the common lot would consider “ignorance,” but which actually represents a higher sort of knowledge. The second, behavioral component<sup>25</sup> consists of refraining from action in the conventional sense, or—perhaps more accurately—acting in a way that is a negation of conventional conceptions of action. “Do that which consists in doing nothing (lit. “wu-wei”), act in a way that is not acting, taste that which has no taste,” Laozi advises in Chapter 63. “Make small the big and few the many; repay injury with kindness.” Laozi’s purpose is thus—by means of a sort of *via negativa*—to reverse the process of decline begun by Confucius through stripping away the accreted layers of cultivation and learning that have obscured the Way, thereby allowing human beings once again to realize wu-wei perfection:

One who engages in study [i.e., a Confucian] does more  
and more every day;  
One who has heard the Way does less and less every day.  
One does less and less until one does nothing at all (wu-wei),  
and when one does nothing at all (wu-wei) one will also  
hold nothing in regard (*wuyiwei*). (Chapter 48)

Paradoxically, it is precisely through refraining from consciously endorsing values and through “doing nothing” that one can in the end actually attain one’s ends:

By not going out the door, one can come to know the whole world;  
By not gazing out of the window, one can come to know  
the Way of Heaven.  
The further one goes,  
The less one knows.  
Therefore the sage knows without going abroad,  
Attains clarity without having to look,  
And is successful without acting. (Chapter 47)

In the end, Laozi’s ideal thus resembles the form of wu-wei action we see in early Confucian thinkers: spontaneous action that flows forth from the individual with no sense of effort and yet accords perfectly with the

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tuos exemplars for people to emulate, setting up standards of virtue for people to strive after, and presenting wu-wei perfection as the end goal of a life-long process of conscious effort. In this way Laozi’s critique of Confucian self-cultivation roughly resembles the later critiques of “gradual” approaches to enlightenment in the Chan (Zen) Buddhist tradition.

<sup>25</sup> I am indebted to Alan Fox (1995) for the labels “cognitive” and “behavioral” to describe this distinction in Daoist wu-wei.

dictates of the situation and yields wonderful results. He is quite radical, though, in seeing this ideal spiritual state as attainable only through a complete rejection and negation of all conventional values and conceptions of action. Laozi thus uses *wu-wei* in something close to its literal sense of “non-action” or “non-doing” and wields it in concert with other negative slogans such as “no-activity” (*wushi*), “no-desires” (*wuyu*), and “no-regarding” (*wuyiwei*) in order to dramatize his opposition to the ways of the contemporary, fallen world.

Whereas *wu-wei* as a term of art appears throughout the short text of the *Laozi*, it appears only three times in the seven so-called “Inner Chapters” of the *Zhuangzi*, although it appears with great frequency and plays a prominent role in the “Outer” and “Miscellaneous” Chapters.<sup>26</sup> At least two conclusions can be drawn from this fact. To begin with, *wu-wei* was probably just coming into use as a technical term of art around the time that the Inner Chapters were composed, but by the time that the Outer and Miscellaneous Chapters were put together it had become a very established and popular term of art. Secondly, our borrowing of *wu-wei* as a term to describe everything from Cook Ding’s skill in cutting up an ox to the state of being free from conventional distinctions is not at all idiosyncratic but rather represents a venerable practice begun by the writers of the Outer and Miscellaneous Chapters of the *Zhuangzi*.<sup>27</sup>

Like Laozi, Zhuangzi perceived the pernicious influence that conventional values and standards exert upon the human spirit: enslaving it to the pursuit of artificial goals, wearying it with the petty logical quibbling of the mind (*xin*), and cutting it off from any sort of genuine fulfillment. Similarly, Zhuangzian *wu-wei* resembles Laozi’s ideal in that it springs from a sort of cognitive shift: a releasing of the mind from human conventions so that it is free to perceive the Heavenly nature of things. In a famous metaphor in Chapter 4 Zhuangzi refers to this cognitive transformation as the “fasting of the mind.” Yan Hui, Confucius’s favorite disciple<sup>28</sup>—excited by the learning he has acquired under Confucius’s tutelage and eager to put it into practice—announces that he is off to seek an audience

<sup>26</sup> This discussion of “Zhuangzi’s” thought will be based upon the first seven Inner Chapters, cautiously supplemented with material from the six Outer Chapters (Chapters 17–22) that both Angus Graham (1986, 1989) and Liu Xiaogan (1994) agree represent “School of Zhuangzi” materials.

<sup>27</sup> In these later chapters we find *wu-wei* being used as technical term embracing many Inner Chapters themes: being “tenuous” (*xu*) or “still” (*jing*) (457, 810; 142, 259); following what “cannot be otherwise” (*budeyi*) or being moved by the “spirit” (*shen*) (369, 810; 116, 259); being free of worries, conventional distinctions or partiality (359, 462, 406, 519, 834–835, 909ff.; 113, 143, 127, 162, 266–267, 290ff.); embracing simplicity or one’s original nature (369, 438; 116, 136); and responding to things like a mirror (538–539; 167–168).

<sup>28</sup> The tongue-in-cheek use of Confucius and his disciples as mouth-pieces for his own ideas is typical of Zhuangzi’s sense of humor.



with a despotic ruler in order to persuade him to reform himself. Confucius is very dubious about his chances for success, noting that “Bright Heaven” will not deem “fit” (*yi*) one who is under the sway of the mind—that is, in the grip of preconceived notions about right and wrong.<sup>29</sup> The only way to get rid of these notions is to fast the mind, a process in which one stops listening with the senses and the mind and begins to listen with the *qi*,<sup>30</sup> thereby ultimately rendering the mind “tenuous” (*xu*) and receptive to the Way as it is manifested in things. Only if Yan Hui is able to make himself receptive and tenuous in this fashion will he be able to handle the ruler with the sort of effortless ease and perfect responsiveness that characterizes wu-wei: “If he listens, then sing; if not, keep still. Have no gate, no urge to control, but rather dwell in oneness and lodge in what cannot be otherwise (*budeyi*). Then you will be close to getting it!” (Guo Qingfan: 148; Watson 1968:58)

The state of being in which one is able to respond to “what cannot be otherwise”—that is, to what the situation itself demands—is often associated by Zhuangzi with the loss of a sense of self. “Before I had begun to be capable of this, I was certain that I was Hui,” Yan Hui declares after hearing about the fasting of the mind; “But now that I am capable of putting it into action, there has not yet begun to be a Hui.” One might wonder precisely *who* it is that is acting once “Hui” has been cast aside. The answer to this question is to be found in the famous story of Cook Ding, who amazes his audience by cutting up a ceremonial ox with a degree of effortless skill that recalls the noble archer of Ode 106 or the charioteer of Ode 214: “At every touch of his hand, every bending of his shoulder, every step of his feet, every thrust of his knee—swish! swoosh! He guided his blade along with whoosh, and all was in perfect tune—one moment as if moving in time with the dance of the Mulberry Grove, another as if harmonizing with the Jingshou music” (117; 50). When praised for his technical skill, Ding counters that his performance arises from a devotion to the Way rather than adherence to a mere technique. As he explains it, by rejecting perceptual knowledge—that is, the sort of sense impressions and instrumental knowledge abstracted from the senses that are the main con-

<sup>29</sup> In this sense, Zhuangzi goes a step beyond Laozi: whereas Laozi proposed subverting conventional values by negating them or celebrating the “lower” element of any conventional dyad (valuing weakness over strength, darkness over light, ignorance over knowledge), Zhuangzi feels that merely to negate conventional values is to remain under their sway. He thus call for a complete *transcendence* of the dichotomies inherent in conventional values, displayed in an ability to straddle both sides of any conventional dichotomy pair—an ability that is referred to as “walking the two paths” (*liangxing*). Zhuangzi’s exemplars are thus not shadowy rulers who achieve their ends through the mysteries of inaction and desirelessness but are, rather, active members of society who nonetheless seem to have somehow transcended the conventional even while dwelling and acting in the midst of it.

<sup>30</sup> The “vital essence” or energy that animates all living things.

cern of the mind—he has created a space of tenuousness into which his spirit (*shen*) can emerge and take over from the mind the control of his actions. The impulses of the spirit, in turn, put him in touch with the Way and allow him to act with wonderful efficacy: “I follow the Heavenly pattern (*tianli*), thrusting into the big hollows, guiding the knife through the big openings, and adapting my movements to the fixed nature of the ox. In this way, I never touch the smallest ligament or tendon, much less a main joint” (119; 51).

Cook Ding and the post-fast Yan Hui are joined in the *Zhuangzi* by many other exemplars of skillful living engaged in a wide range of activities, including a hunchback cicada catcher, a carver of bellstands, a ferryman, and even a skillful tax collector. The only quality that all of these individuals have in common is that they have freed themselves from the control of the mind and the domination of conventional values and have learned to listen with their *qi* and respond with their spirit. Whereas Confucian *wu-wei* might be said to represent the ultimate perfection of ordinary human activity, Zhuangzian *wu-wei* calls for a transcendence of the human and a surrender of the ordinary self, marked by a fundamental shift in the locus of agency from the “human” mind to the “Heavenly” spirit or *qi*. The result is a perfect realization of one’s original nature. As a “School of Zhuangzi” writer explains in Chapter 18 (“Perfect Happiness”): “I regard *wu-wei* as true happiness, though ordinary people consider it bitter. Thus it is said: perfect happiness knows no happiness, perfect fame knows no fame. What is right or wrong in the world can in the end not be fixed, and yet through *wu-wei* one can determine it. Perfect happiness, a vibrant self—only *wu-wei* allows you to come close to preserving this!” (612; 191).

### LINKING WU-WEI TO THE COSMIC ORDER: HEAVEN (*TIAN*), *DAO*, AND VIRTUE (*DE*)

As such references to wonderful efficacy and seemingly magical transformative power suggest, the various portrayals of *wu-wei* we have discussed above have more in common than merely a set of phenomenological features. In addition to portraying *wu-wei* as being characterized by a feeling of spontaneous ease and graceful effortlessness, the mainstream Chinese thinkers link this personal state of mind to an observable, almost supernatural efficacy in the world. It is this efficacy that allows the sage-king Shun to order the world merely by taking the proper ritual position (*Analects* 15.5), the Laozian sage to achieve personal immunity from harm and to lead the entire world back to simplicity, and Cook Ding to cut up oxen for nineteen years without ever dulling his blade. As A. C. Gra-

ham has pointed out, whereas spontaneity in the West is typically associated with subjectivity, the opposite may be said of the sort of spontaneity evinced in wu-wei: it represents the highest degree of objectivity, for it is only in wu-wei that one's embodied mind conforms to the something larger than the individual—the will of Heaven or the order represented by the Way (1983:9-13). This is why the state of wu-wei should be seen as a *spiritual* ideal, for it is only by harmonizing with the objective, normative order of the cosmos that the individual is able to realize it.

From the aristocratic charioteer in the *Odes* to Zhuangzi's skillful exemplars and Xunzi's perfected sages, wu-wei is conceived of as a state of "fitting" (*yi*) with the order of the cosmos. In the *Odes* this order is identified with Heaven, and the state of being in constant accord or "fit" with this order is described as one of the gifts Heaven is capable of granting. Such a link between "fitting" (*yi*) and the grace of Heaven is to be found in Ode 166:

Heaven protects and settles you,  
It causes your grain to flourish  
So that there is nothing that is not proper/fitting (*yi*).  
You receive from Heaven the hundred emoluments;  
It sends down to you enduring good fortune.  
Only the days are not sufficient (to hold so much blessing).<sup>31</sup>

In this Ode this fortunate ruler is also said to have accumulated by means of "auspicious and pure" offerings and flawless ritual behavior a powerful virtue (*de*). This concept of virtue provides another (albeit indirect) link between Heaven and wu-wei, for virtue is portrayed throughout the *Odes* as a sort of charismatic power that accrues to those who are ritually correct—that is, who accord with Heaven's order. Attaining a state of wu-wei harmony with Heaven's order, they are thus rewarded with a power that not only brings them personal benefit but that also allows them to realize more effectively Heaven's will in the world. This is because Heaven has created people in such a way that they respond instinctively to virtue; by rewarding the ritually correct ruler with this power, Heaven thus assures the efficacy of his rule. The idea of virtue as a power granted by Heaven to one who accords with its will—and thus serves as the keeper of the Heavenly mandate—is found not only throughout the *Odes*<sup>32</sup> and *History* but is also one of the earliest identifiable religious themes in China, being traceable to the most ancient written records in China, the Shang oracle bones and Zhou bronze inscriptions.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. *Odes* 209, 240, and 299 and 304.

<sup>32</sup> See, for instance, *Odes* 157, 161, 191, 209, 220, 223, 242, 249, 256, 260, and 299.

Understanding this archaic conception of Heaven and its relationship to virtue is important, because this early worldview permeates and structures the conception of *wu-wei* as it is formulated in the pre-Qin texts we have discussed above. In all of these texts *wu-wei* is portrayed as a state of perfect harmony with the order of Heaven (often referred to as the Way of Heaven or, more simply, the Way) that results in the accruing of a numinous power (*de*), which in turn allows its possessor to influence others and move through the world with great efficacy. *Wu-wei* can therefore not be understood without locating it in a worldview where it is intimately tied to the concepts of Heaven, the Way, and virtue. Indeed, the direct link between *wu-wei* and Heaven or the Way—*wu-wei* being described as the manner in which Heaven or the Way functions—is a common theme in pre-Qin writings. In Ode 254 Heaven's way of leading and ordering the people is compared to the influence of gentle music or respect inspired by subtle symbols of authority:

Heaven's guiding the people is  
Like an ocarina, like a flute,  
Like a *zhang* jade, like a *gui* jade,<sup>33</sup>  
As if taking hold of them, leading them by the hand;  
As if leading them by the hand, and nothing more.  
Heaven guides the people with great ease.

Heaven has no need to resort to violence or force in ordering the world but can bring it into harmony in an effortless fashion, as one would lead a small child by the hand. We find an analogous theme in *Analects* 17.19, where Confucius laments the fact that he must *try* so hard to bring the world back to the Way and longs to share with Heaven the ability to guide the processes of the universe without having to teach, admonish, or issue orders.<sup>34</sup> Heaven remains silent in the fullness of its *wu-wei*, and yet from this *wu-wei* “the four seasons find their course and the myriad things acquire life.” Similarly, *wu-wei* is described throughout the *Laozi* as the “Way of Heaven” or the manner in which the Way functions,<sup>35</sup> and this

<sup>33</sup> Both symbols of authority.

<sup>34</sup> What Confucius says is, “I wish I did not have to speak/instruct (*yan*),” and Heaven is also described as accomplishing all that it does “without speaking.” Since the time of the *Odes* (see, for example, Ode 198, where the gift of clever speech is attributed to flatterers and shameless hypocrites), *yan* (talking, speech, teachings, words) has served as a general symbol for all that is *not wu-wei*. One who is *wu-wei* and genuinely possesses virtue accomplishes his ends quietly and has no need to resort to speech. On the other hand, one who speaks a great deal is often suspected of hypocrisy or mendacity. This accounts for Confucius's suspicion of those who are too “glib” and his hatred of flatterers, Mencius's rather defensive protestations that he is not at all fond of debate but is forced into it by circumstances (3:B:9), and the abiding suspicion of *yan* that is most commonly identified with Laozi and Zhuangzi but that, in fact, runs throughout mainstream Chinese thought.

<sup>35</sup> See especially Chs. 9, 30, 37, 40, 48, 51, 73, and 77.

theme reappears in the *Zhuangzi*, where we read that “The Way is wu-wei and without physical form” (246; 81).<sup>36</sup>

All five of the thinkers discussed above thus share a worldview—one that has its roots in archaic Chinese religion—in which Heaven, the Way, wu-wei, and virtue are intimately linked with one another. Part of the problem with past treatments of something like the ideal of perfected skill mastery by scholars such as Robert Eno or Chad Hansen is that the place of skill-perfection within this worldview has been misrepresented. Most crucially, while these scholars acknowledge the relationship between skill-perfection and *tian* or *Dao*, they strip these latter terms of their metaphysical significance and reduce them to the status of conventional constructs. Eno, for instance, writes of the early Confucians that they “created a Heaven essentially void of consistent features and so were free to reflect the growing image of their new philosophy and their unique lifestyle” (1990:2). Such a conception of *tian* or *Dao* as a “lifestyle choice” is insidiously anachronistic, reflecting more the views of modern western, post-foundationalist thinkers than anything that would have been intelligible to an early Chinese person.

This essential link between wu-wei and the mainstream Chinese worldview suggests that we should be cautious in choosing models for discussing the concept. For instance, it is clear that the idea of skill-mastery is a powerful and illuminating way to undersand wu-wei and is, indeed, a model that early Chinese thinkers themselves often employ. However, this model is also potentially misleading if not situated in its proper cultural and religious context. The skill-knowledge valued by these thinkers is not to be understood on the analogy of skill in a limited practice—such as piano playing or carpentry—for we can imagine someone being a skilled pianist, for instance, and yet still an atrocious human being in other aspects of her life. What wu-wei represents is a perfection of a unique and ultimate skill: the skill of becoming a fully realized human being and embodying the Way in the full range of one’s actions. This is why Confucius is rather contemptuous of any practice more limited than the “master-craft”<sup>37</sup> of becoming fully human (*ren*) and why Cook Ding’s magnificent performance in cutting up an ox in the *Zhuangzi* is understood by Lord Wen Hui in a metaphorical sense (“Excellent!” he exclaims at the conclusion of this story, “I have heard the words of Cook Ding and learned the secret of caring for life”). As the formulation of this ideal in the early Chinese context involved relating the individual to a larger

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<sup>36</sup> Cf. Guo: 612; Watson 1968:191 and Guo: 735; Watson 1968:236-237.

<sup>37</sup> Borrowing the term from Aristotle; for a discussion of the “master craft” of living well see *Nicomachean Ethics* I.2.

normative cosmic order—as well as working out an at least implicit picture of human nature as it relates to this order—wu-wei should be seen first and foremost as a *religious* concept. For the early Chinese (Daoist or Confucian), the Way represented a normative, metaphysical order that had once been realized in the world during a past Golden Age but from which their contemporary world had strayed. In this past age when the Way had been realized in the world everyone and everything had functioned in an wu-wei fashion, because wu-wei represents the manner in which Heaven or the Way acts. The fact that wu-wei was portrayed as something that needed to be cultivated was thus for these thinkers a reflection of the fallen state of their contemporary world, and the achievement of wu-wei therefore represented a *soteriological* goal: a reestablishment of the original state of harmony between the human and Heavenly which had been lost.

For these thinkers, “proof” that their specific way of reestablishing contact with the Way was correct was provided by the phenomenon of virtue. That is to say, the manifestation of charismatic virtue by the exemplars of their tradition served in each thinker’s view as perceptible evidence that their soteriological path would lead to success. Therefore, wu-wei avoids the possible relativistic implications of the skill model by being explicitly linked to both a normative, metaphysical order and a charismatic power that was thought to be clearly apparent to believers and non-believers alike. “If there was a ruler who achieved order through wu-wei, was it not Shun?” we read in *Analects* 15.5; “He did nothing but make himself reverent and face South [the proper ritual position for a ruler], that is all.” For the author of this passage, the fact that Shun had achieved a state of wu-wei and thus unified and ordered the entire world solely through the power of his virtue was a historical fact that proved the viability and superiority of the Confucian way. Wu-wei as a spiritual ideal is thus coupled with a strong sense of realism.

Alasdair MacIntyre has noted that a model of skill-mastery in any form provides one with access to a type of realism that differs significantly from—and lacks some of the weaknesses of—the sort of realism found in Cartesian representational theories of knowledge:

It is a central feature of all crafts, of furniture making and fishing and farming, as much as of philosophy, that they require the minds of those who engage in the craft to come to terms with and to make themselves adequate to the existence and properties of some set of objects conceived to exist independently of those minds. The embodied mind, in and through its activities, has to become receptive to forms (*eide*) of what is other than itself and in being constituted by those formal objects becomes, in the appropriate way, them. It is therefore not judgements which

primarily correspond or conform to those realities about which they are uttered; it is the embodied mind which conforms adequately or inadequately to the objects, the *res*, the subject matter, and which evidences this adequacy or inadequacy in a number of ways, one of which is the truth or falsity of its judgements. It is in becoming adequate to its objects that the embodied mind actualizes its potentialities and becomes what its object and its own activity conjointly have been able to make it. (1990:68)

The realism that governs the skill of cabinet-making, for instance, is thus reflected in the fact that cabinets can be made well or poorly, and the difference between these two types of cabinets is observable in the material realm. A cabinet that cannot fulfill its intended use because its doors do not close properly or because it falls apart after a short period of use can be said to have been made by a *bad* cabinet-maker. When we realize that the object of the “skill-knowledge” being cultivated by both Confucians and Daoists in early China was the *Way*—a normative order existing independently of the minds of the practitioners—and that one’s embodied mind becoming “adequate” to this object was thought to be evinced by an apparent ease of action (*wu-wei*) and the possession of a sort of numinous power with observable effects (*de*), it becomes apparent why the ideal of *wu-wei* did not lead to relativistic consequences for the Chinese.<sup>38</sup> Although they disagreed with one another, each of these thinkers felt quite confident that his way was the *only* Way to be *wu-wei*.

## THE PARADOX OF WU-WEI

In order to provide at least a general sense of how the ideal of *wu-wei* and the tension it contains (the “paradox of *wu-wei*”) can serve as a powerful lens through which to view the development of early Chinese thought, it might be helpful before we conclude this discussion to roughly summarize the early Chinese responses to the paradox of *wu-wei* as well as the sorts of problems these responses encountered. The “solutions” to the paradox can be classified along two axes: internalist-externalist and sudden-gradual. Because the paradox generally played itself out along the internalist-externalist axis in pre-Qin China<sup>39</sup> and because there is a fair

<sup>38</sup> In this respect it is interesting to contrast *wu-wei* with something like the concept of “flow”—which phenomenologically resembles *wu-wei*—developed by the University of Chicago psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Because “flow” is *not* situated in any kind of metaphysical context, Csikszentmihalyi is forced to struggle with certain relativistic implications of his ideal that simply do not arise for the early Chinese.

<sup>39</sup> In later Chan (Zen) Buddhist debates internalism had become the unquestioned orthodoxy and the tension played itself out exclusively along the sudden-gradual axis, whereas the neo-Confucian debate between the Cheng-Zhu and Lu-Wang schools was between, respectively, externalist/gradualists and internalist/subitists.

degree of overlap between the two axes (internalists generally also being subitists and externalists gradualists),<sup>40</sup> the internalist-externalist axis will be our focus.

Each response merely chooses a horn of the dilemma upon which to impale itself. The internalists answer the question of how one can try not to try to be good by gravitating toward the “not trying” horn: at some level, they claim, we already *are* good, and we merely need to allow this virtuous potential to realize itself. Zhuangzi, Laozi, and Mencius fall into this camp. The externalists, exemplified by Xunzi (and most likely including Confucius as well), maintain on the contrary that it is essential that we *try* not to try. That is, they claim that we do *not* possess the resources to attain wu-wei on our own and that wu-wei is a state acquired only after a long and intensive regime of training in traditional, external forms. Toward this end they formulate a rigorous training regime designed to lead us gradually from our original state of ignorance to the pinnacle of spiritual perfection. Unfortunately—as I illustrate in detail in my book (Slingerland forthcoming)—neither of these responses to the paradox proves entirely satisfactory or even internally consistent, and both are plagued by superficial and structural difficulties.

For instance, the Confucian internalist Mencius is confronted with the superficial problem that by placing the locus of moral authority within the individual he has apparently undermined the need for traditional Confucian ritual practices and the classics. They are often portrayed as merely helpful aids to moral self-cultivation, dispensable in a pinch and ultimately subordinate to the individual’s own inner moral guide—the heart/mind.<sup>41</sup> This becomes the focus of the Xunzian critique of Mencian thought but is less of a problem for the Daoist thinkers, who are in any case already doctrinally committed to undermining traditional Confucian institutions.

The deeper, structural problem faced by any internalist—Confucian or Daoist—is the question: if we are already fundamentally good, why do we not *act* like it? The fact that we are not, in our current fallen state, actually manifesting our “innate” goodness calls into question the internalist position and makes the externalist solution seem more reasonable. The result is that all early Chinese internalists feel the need to fall back occasionally into an externalist stance. We can thus find in the *Mencius* several quite Xunzian-sounding statements about the indispensable role of the

<sup>40</sup> The overlap is *not* perfect, as is indicated by the fact that Mencius is actually a gradual internalist.

<sup>41</sup> Consider the discretion displayed by the Mencian gentleman in adapting or even violating the dictates of the rites if they fail to accord with what is “right” for the situation (3:B:10, 4:A:17, 4:A:26, 5:A:2), following his intuition in reinterpreting or even rejecting portions of the classics (5:A:4, 7:B:3), or the case of the sons who spontaneously and independently invent a crude burial rite by following their natural inclinations (3:A:5).



rites and classics in shaping human inclinations and the folly of relying exclusively upon the individual's natural resources<sup>42</sup>—comments that co-exist rather uneasily with the main thrust of his argument. Similarly, Laozi and Zhuangzi temper their faith in our spontaneous, natural tendencies with hints of concrete practices and specific disciplines that are necessary if one is to actually realize wu-wei.<sup>43</sup>

The externalist position, however, is plagued by its own superficial as well as structural problems. Xunzi, for instance, is faced with the more superficial difficulty of trying to explain how, if human beings are completely bereft of innate moral resources, morality itself was invented, since as a Confucian he is doctrinally committed to the position that the sage-kings who created the rites and wrote the classics were themselves human beings just like us. That this problem is superficial is indicated by the fact that Christian externalists in the West are able to circumvent it by locating the source of morality in an extramundane realm. The deeper problem faced by externalists concerned with moral self-cultivation—Confucian as well as Christian—is the deeper question of how the novice is to be *moved* from the pre-cultivated state to the state of moral perfection.

That this is perceived as a problem in the development of wu-wei morality (virtue) illustrates another important way in which the wu-wei/skill analogy is not perfect. In the case of a skill such as piano playing there is no problem in conceiving how forced training can eventually result in an internalized, settled disposition, because there is no assumption or demand that the novice enter the training regime with any prior inclination toward the practice. That is, no one would fault a beginning pianist because she did not at first *feel* the emotion that Beethoven was trying to convey, for it is thought that an appreciation of such goods internal to a practice are only gradually acquired after the fundamental mechanical aspects of the practice have been thoroughly mastered. It is therefore taken for granted in the acquisition of a skill such as piano playing that the novice will need simply to grind away at acquiring these new and alien skill sets—submitting against her initial inclinations to mind-numbing, repetitive drills—before there can be any hope of a truly skillful disposition to develop. More to the point, internal motivation is in the final analysis *irrelevant* with regard to a technical skill (what Aristotle would call a “craft”): although we might romantically suppose that the performer of a profoundly moving and beautifully executed piano sonata is experiencing

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, 3:A:4, 6:A:20, and especially 4:A:1 and 4:A:2.

<sup>43</sup> In this respect it is quite revealing that, regardless of whether or not such cryptic phrases as “block the openings and shut the doors” (*Laozi* Ch. 52) or instructions to “fast the mind” (*Zhuangzi* Ch. 4) originally referred to concrete, physical practices, they were certainly understood in this sense by later Daoist practitioners and were subsequently developed into elaborate systems of yogic, meditative, alchemical, and sexual regimes.

the same deep emotions that the piece inspires in us, we could hardly fault her if we subsequently discovered that she had, in fact, been merely thinking about the timing of the notes and (incidentally) what she was to have for lunch that afternoon. The performance stands on its own merits, regardless of the internal state of performer.

Things are quite different with regard to the development of *moral* skill, however. While it seems quite clear to us that forcing ourselves to repeat over and over the same chords and simple compositions—however boring or oppressive we might find it—will eventually help us to develop a degree of genuine skill in piano playing, it is somewhat less apparent that forcing ourselves to help little old ladies across the road while inwardly cursing the bother involved will make us more compassionate or that compelling ourselves begrudgingly to give money to the poor will make us more generous. This is because moral or virtuous acts are inextricably tied up with the *internal* state of the actor. If it turns out that I gave money to the poor in order to make myself look good or merely to win a tax break for myself, this fatally tarnishes the act itself—a “generous” action performed in the absence of genuinely generous motivations is merely a semblance of generosity. Reflecting upon this phenomenon, Aristotle quite carefully explains the disanalogy between “craft-knowledge” (merely technical skill) and virtue: “In any case, what is true of crafts is not true of virtues. For the products of a craft determine by their own character whether they have been produced well; and so it suffices that they are in the right state when they have been produced. But for actions expressing virtue to be done temperately or justly [and hence well] it does not suffice that they are themselves in the right state. Rather, the agent must also be in the right state when he does them” (*Nichomachean Ethics* 1105a27-31; Irwin: 39-40).

The crucial importance accorded to internal states when it comes to moral virtue leads to the conclusion that, as Aristotle puts it, “if we do what is just or temperate, we must already be just or temperate” (1105a21-22; 39). The problem, of course, is that if one must in some sense *already* be just—or at least have the beginnings of just inclinations—in order to perform a truly just act, it is somewhat difficult to see how it could be possible to train someone to acquire a virtue he or she did not already possess, at least in some incipient form.

Like Mencius, Aristotle thus solves the paradox in an internalist fashion—ethical training merely nurtures the “seeds” of virtue already present in one who has the proper sort of upbringing<sup>44</sup>—because he considers it

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<sup>44</sup> Where Aristotle differs from Mencius is that this potentiality is not inborn in all human beings but is rather the result of proper childhood influences (1179b20-32; 292).

impossible artificially to *create* virtuous dispositions in someone entirely lacking them. It is precisely this difficulty that any externalist teacher of virtue must try to circumvent, the mystery being how the student is to make the transition from merely *acting out* morality to actually *becoming* a moral person. The common danger is that this transition will not be made and that the training regime will thus produce nothing more than a moral hypocrite who merely goes through the motions of morality. It is this potential danger—one felt by the Confucians no less than the Daoists<sup>45</sup>—that explains the perennial appeal of the internalist position. That this was a source of uneasiness for both Confucius and Xunzi is evidenced by the fact that both of these thinkers found a need to bolster their arguments with occasional internalist borrowings. While continuing to emphasize the crucial importance of traditional ritual practice and classical learning, Confucius also suggests more than once that these practices are only useful when supported by the proper “native substance” (*zhi*) and an inherent passion for learning.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, Xunzi at times is forced to smuggle internalist elements into his picture of self-cultivation—having to posit an innate human “distaste” for disorder and chaos, for example, in order to construct a plausible explanation for the origin and adoption of Confucian ritual practice.<sup>47</sup>

In short, it seems that the early Chinese tradition was never able to formulate a fully consistent or entirely satisfying solution—whether internalist or externalist—to the tensions created by its central spiritual ideal, and this conceptual instability was subsequently transmitted to later East Asian schools of thought that inherited *wu-wei* as an ideal. It resurfaces in Chan Buddhism in the form of the sudden-gradual controversy,<sup>48</sup> in Japanese Zen Buddhism in the form of the debate between the Rinzai and Soto schools, and yet again in both Chinese and Japanese neo-Confucianism in the form of the conflict between the Cheng-Zhu and Lu-Wang factions.<sup>49</sup> The tenaciousness of this tension is illustrated by its resistance to being resolved by doctrinal fiat. The victory of the Southern (sudden) school of Chan Buddhism, for instance, was designed to settle the problem in an internalist/subitist fashion: all human beings originally possess pure, undefiled Buddha-nature; practice and other external aids to en-

<sup>45</sup> Consider, for instance, the concerns voiced by both Confucius and Mencius (*Analecets* 17.13, *Mencius* 7:B:37) about the so-called “village worthy,” who observes perfectly all of the external forms of virtue but is completely lacking in the proper internal dispositions. Confucius refers to the village worthy as the “thief of virtue”—a mere counterfeit of the true Confucian gentleman.

<sup>46</sup> See *Analecets* 3.4, 3.8, 5.22, 6.18, 7.8, 15.16, 15.18, and 16.9.

<sup>47</sup> See *Xunzi* 2.6a/1177, 11.4a/11243, 2.19a/1192, and 1.13b/1151.

<sup>48</sup> The reader is referred to Peter Gregory for an anthology of essays on this topic.

<sup>49</sup> See Rodney Taylor’s “The Sudden/Gradual Paradigm and Neo-Confucian Mind Cultivation” (1990:77-92).

lightenment (scripture, etc.) are thus essentially superfluous. Yet the problem refuses to be so easily conjured away and simply re-emerges both in Buddhism and neo-Confucianism (which also adopts the Buddhist “solution” of an originally pure nature) in the subsequent splits between the more internalist, “sudden-sudden” Rinzai and Lu-Wang schools and the more externalist, “gradual-sudden” Soto and Cheng-Zhu schools. The continued, stubborn re-emergence of this split—ultimately related to a failure to produce an entirely consistent or satisfying internalist or externalist position—suggests that the paradox of *wu-wei* is a *genuine* paradox and that any “solution” to the problem it presents will therefore necessarily be plagued by the sort of superficial and structural difficulties described above.

Indeed, as the above discussion of Aristotle suggests, the implications of this problematic extend beyond its contribution to our understanding of Chinese or East Asian thought. The tensions produced by the paradox of *wu-wei* are to be found not only in Aristotle’s claim that “to become just we must first do just actions” but also in Plato’s belief that to be taught one must recognize the thing taught as something to be learned—the so-called “Meno problem.”<sup>50</sup> We can also make out the contours of an internalist-externalist split in the early western tradition that seems to follow the battle-lines drawn in China. Christian externalists such as Augustine oppose the Greeks’ pagan faith in the human intellect or the natural dispositions of a well-born Athenian, but—as Alasdair MacIntyre has noted—involve themselves in their own paradox:

In medieval Augustinian culture the relationship between the key texts of that culture and their reader was twofold. The reader was assigned the task of interpreting the text, but also had to discover, in and through his or her reading of those texts, that they in turn interpret the reader. What the reader, as thus interpreted by the texts, has to learn about him or herself is that it is only the self as transformed through and by the reading of the texts which will be capable of reading the texts aright. So the reader, *like any learner within a craft-tradition*, encounters apparent paradox at the outset, a Christian version of the paradox of Plato’s *Meno*: it seems that only by learning what the texts have to teach can he or she come to read those texts aright, but also that only by reading them aright can he or she learn what the texts have to teach. (1990:82: italics added)

It is, I think, no accident that this Augustinian paradox resembles the one faced by Xunzi of how beings entirely bereft of any innate moral sense can begin the task of self-cultivation—that is, even *recognize* it as something

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<sup>50</sup> *Meno*, 80d ff. The “Meno problem” and its relevance to the early Confucian “paradox of virtue” is discussed by Nivison 1997:36, 85, and 237-238.

worth pursuing. Augustine's proposed "solution" to the paradox—faith in one's teacher and an obedient trust of tradition—are also quite Xunzian but arguably also fail in the end to resolve the initial tension in an entirely satisfactorily or consistent manner.

It seems that something resembling the paradox of *wu-wei* will plague the thought of any thinker who can be characterized as a virtue ethicist—that is, anyone who sees ethical life in terms of the perfection of normative dispositions.<sup>51</sup> We might thus be justified in seeing the "subtle dialectic of question and answer" circling about the paradox of *wu-wei* as having significance not only for early Chinese thinkers but also for any thinker concerned with the problem of self-cultivation—that is, with the problem of not merely winning from the individual rational assent to a system of principles but actually *transforming* her into a new type of person. Seen in this way, our discussion of the Chinese ideal of effortless action takes on a significance that goes beyond the merely sinological, for it can serve as a window through which we can gain new insight into the ideals and problematics of our own early tradition.

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<sup>51</sup> In this context it is revealing that the significance of Aristotle's paradox and Plato's Meno problem have been "rediscovered" by MacIntyre in the course of his retrieval of our own lost virtue ethical tradition.

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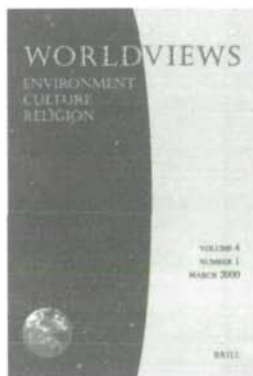
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VOLUME 4, (2000)  
(3 ISSUES PER YEAR)  
ISSN 1363-5247  
INSTITUTIONS EUR 68.- /  
US\$ 84.- / DGL 149.85  
INDIVIDUALS EUR 31.- /  
US\$ 38.- / DGL 68.32

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