

Indeterminacy and Moral Action in Laozi

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Abstract There is an apparent tension in Laozi 老子 between his denial of the adequacy of positive theoretical formulations and his concomitant endorsement of certain kinds of practical action over others. Laozi writes, for example, “Where they all know the good as good, there is evil, Therefore Being and non-being produce each other” (*Laozi* 2.3–5), which suggests that good and evil produce each other the way being and non-being produce each other; in which case to do good will lead to evil and to do evil will lead to good. The result threatens to become moral paralysis. I argue that this destabilization of moral concepts does not amount to a moral relativism, but leaves us with a consistent moral point of view in its own way.

Keywords Daoism · Ethics · Relativism · Laozi

1 Introduction

Interpretive difficulties are inevitable in any major philosopher since no one becomes a major philosopher by stating the obvious. The difficulties are considerably magnified in philosophers who not only insist on the obscurity of their subject, but even on the impossibility of finding words adequate to it,

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as when Laozi 老子 writes, “He who knows does not speak. He who speaks does not know” (*Laozi* 56.1–2).¹ The *Dao De Jing* 道德經 is the most translated and commented text in any philosophical tradition, and the interpretations encompass every conceivable viewpoint. W. K. C. Guthrie’s comment about Heraclitus applies with even greater justice to Laozi: “It is discouraging, certainly, to note how many different impressions of this world-view have been put forward in the past and continue to be put forward; but one can only give one’s own” (Guthrie 1971: 427).²

Even apart from interpretive controversies, there is no possibility of presenting anything like a comprehensive account of the multivalent riches of Laozi’s book, especially in a brief essay. The point of focus that I have chosen is the apparent tension between Laozi’s denial of the adequacy of positive theoretical formulations (indeterminacy) and his concomitant endorsement of certain kinds of practical action over others (determination). If the governing principle reverts to nothingness, how can it be a guiding principle for us? How can what is formless serve as a guide to action? Again, Laozi’s words, “Where they all know the good as good, there is evil, Therefore Being and non-being produce each other,”³ suggest that good and evil produce each other the way being and non-being produce each other; in which case to do good will lead to evil and to do evil will lead to good. The result threatens to become moral

¹ Hereafter, citations from Laozi will be indicated by chapter and verse number alone. Except as noted, translations from Laozi are from Wing-Tsit CHAN 1963b, replacing Wade-Giles transliterations with pinyin. Parenthetical insertions are Chan’s and are not always included; bracketed insertions are my own. For convenience I shall refer to the author of the *Dao De Jing* as Laozi despite uncertainties about the authorship and integrity of the text, especially after the discovery of the Guodian 郭店 version in 1993. See for example Csikszentmihalyi and Ivanhoe 1999: 2–11; Henricks 2000: 2–11. Not everyone agrees that Laozi’s paradoxes are expressions of ineffability. See for example Csikszentmihalyi 1999. I am largely in sympathy with LaFargue’s proposal that the meaning of the aphorisms is not vague, and they must be interpreted the way we interpret proverbs like “‘A watched pot never boils.’ Taken literally, it is clearly false. But we do not take it literally.... We ought to try first to devise an account of competence able to draw definite meanings from the words of the text, and only conclude that it is vague if this attempt fails.... Aphorisms are corrective, compensatory wisdom, designed to wake people up to a possibility they are overlooking” (LaFargue 1994: 135, 149, 153). If people need to be awakened to something, however, and not simply informed about it, does this not mean that a certain element of ineffability is inevitable—the event (awakening) cannot be reduced to concepts (information)? LaFargue prefers to avoid talk of ineffability in favor of a phenomenological-pragmatic-semiotic conception of goodness as independent of (objective) truth: “Well-foundedness in worldviews is a basically a [*sic*] moral rather than a metaphysical issue” (LaFargue 1994., 269), and “all worldviews are essentially semiotic systems of *mutually defining elements* (LaFargue 1994., 289, emphasis in original).

² Isabelle Robinet points out that among the traditional commentators “one does not find the same degree of divergence as with the modern exegetes ... [who] are influenced by modern preoccupations, be they linguistic or historical” (Robinet 1999: 131). The collection edited by Csikszentmihalyi and Ivanhoe gives a good sense of the wide diversity of interpretations, both through the differences among the individual contributors, and through the differences documented by the contributors in the literature they cite (Csikszentmihalyi and Ivanhoe 1999). To give one straightforward example, the first two lines of Chapter 2 are 天下皆知美之為美，斯惡矣 (*tianxia jie zhi mei zhi wei mei, si e yi*). Tateno MASAMI translates: “Everyone in the world knows the beauty of what is beautiful only because there are things that are ugly” (Masami 1999: 176), while Bryan Van Norden translates the same lines as: “When all under heaven know beauty as beauty, already there is ugliness,” and comments: “In other words, I will not feel unattractive unless I compare myself to someone whom my community labels ‘beautiful’” (Van Norden 1999: 191). Thus for Masami the lines indicate that ugliness and beauty are natural properties, while for Van Norden the same lines indicate that the distinction is only conventional.

³ 2.3–5, substituting “is” for Chan’s interpretive insertion (“arises the recognition of”) and removing the colon after “Therefore.”

paralysis. I approach these issues in four sections: (1) Conceptual Indeterminacy; (2) Cosmology; (3) Good, Evil, and the Absence of Distinctions; and (4) Profound Identification.

2 Conceptual Indeterminacy

However much Laozi deprecated the power of words to express the Dao 道, he was not thereby deterred from speaking and writing. This tension between inexpressibility and expression is already hinted at in the opening line of the book: “The Dao that can be told of is not the eternal Dao” (1.1). The tension resides in Laozi’s use of the character Dao not only for the principle that can *not* be told of, but also for the telling itself: “The Dao that we can Dao is not the eternal Dao.”⁴ A less literal but more structurally parallel translation might be, “The state that can be stated is not the eternal state”; or adapted to Heraclitus’ terminology, “The *logos* of which there can be a *logos* is not the eternal *logos*” (cf. Heraclitus fragments 1, 2, 50, 72, 108, 115). Laozi’s use of “Dao” to mean both what cannot be stated and the act of stating itself, suggests that the source of all meaning, which makes meaning possible, cannot itself be encompassed by meaning. Nevertheless we must try to speak of it.

The uneasy symmetry between meaning and what is meant (where what is meant is also what makes meaning possible) is repeated from the other direction in the second line: “The name that can be named is not the eternal name” (1.2). Instead of designating meaning by what is meant (Dao), here what is meant is designated by meaning. If “Dao” can be a verb for naming, “naming” can be a noun (name) for Dao. The echoing of these counterparts continues in the next pair of lines:

The Nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth; (1.3)

The Named is the mother of all things. (1.4)

If we think of the Dao at the most abstract level, as the source of the *metaphysical* principles Heaven and Earth, it is nameless (1.3); but if we think of it more concretely, as the source of the *physical* world, we can name it in relation to our physical experience: it is the mother of all things (1.4). Lines 5 and 6 explain why both are necessary:

Therefore let there always be non-being so we may see their subtlety, (1.5a)

And let there always be being so we may see their outcome. (1.6a)

An alternate reading is (cf. Chan 1963a: 139n11):

Therefore let there always be non-desire so we may see their subtlety, (1.5b)

And let there always be desire so we may see their outcome. (1.6b)

On the first of these two readings (1.5a), to give something a name is to make it a fixed being, to deprive it of its subtlety and uniqueness; so we must regard

⁴ Peter Boodberg’s attempt at an etymologically literal translation, whatever its virtues, does not make the text less recalcitrant: “Lodehead lodehead-brooking: no forewonted lodehead” (Boodberg 1957: 618).

it instead as non-being (and nameless). On the other hand (1.6a), *not* to give it a name, *not* to identify it as a being with namable characteristics prevents us from achieving any understanding of it and what follows from it, its outcome, so we must also regard it as being (and named). On the second reading (1.5b), to see the world apart from desire is to see it in its metaphysical subtlety, apart from reference to the utilitarian world; while to see it with desire (1.6b) is to see it in relation to that world. As a consequence of this unstable but inescapable interdependence (on either reading), each one taken by itself, as well as the two together, remain opaque:

The two are the same, But after they are produced, they have different names
(1.7, 1.8),⁵

They both may be called deep and profound. (1.9)

How they can be the same but have contradictory names (and concepts) is the “deep and profound” mystery that destabilizes our attempts to bring being into representation. Their identity and difference are two sides of the same principle, its inward side and outward side. However, even its inwardness is not adequate to its nature—both are produced (1.8) from something more ultimate which can be thought of in these two antithetical ways, but is itself conceivable only through their opposition and not in itself. Where they are deep and profound, it is “Deeper and more profound, The door of all subtleties!” (1.10, 1.11). It is the source of all the disjunctions that describe the world.⁶

3 Cosmology

Laozi’s closest attempt to articulate the self-differentiation of that original source into the multiplicity of the world is in Chapter 42, which begins:

Dao produced the One. (42.1)

The One produced the two. (42.2)

The two produced the three. (42.3)

And the three produced the ten thousand things. (42.4)

The ten thousand things carry the yin 陰 and embrace the yang 陽, and through the blending of the material force (*qi* 氣) they achieve harmony. (42.5)

What is the difference between Dao and the One, and how does the One produce the two? Both questions are resolved if we take the One to refer to what Chapter 1 calls the “same” that has two names after it has been produced (1.7–8). The Dao here is the “deeper and more profound” principle of 1.10, and the One is the subsequent double-sided and double-named principle that is produced by it.

⁵ A different punctuation gives “The two are produced by the same source, But they have different names” (see Chan 1963a: 139n12). The following interpretation can be defended on either translation.

⁶ There is a certain correspondence between this and Kant’s discussion of “The Transcendental Ideal” (*Critique of Pure Reason* A571–583/B599–611), however different the emphasis.

It is only to be expected that in a book which emphasizes the inadequacy of words, and whose starting point is the inadequacy of the word “Dao” in particular, in other contexts “Dao” seems to function closer to the way “the One” functions here in Chapter 42. Compare the last three lines of Chapter 25 with the lines we just looked at in Chapter 42 (paraphrasing the lines of Ch. 42 and reversing the order of the lines in Ch. 25 to facilitate comparison):

	A (Ch. 42)	B (Ch. 25)
1	The One follows from the Dao. (42.1)	Dao models itself after <i>ziran</i> 自然. ⁷ (25.19)
2	The two follows from the One. (42.2)	Heaven models itself after Dao. (25.18)
3	The three follows from the two. (42.3)	Earth models itself after Heaven. (25.17)

In 1B it is *ziran* that corresponds to Dao in 1A, while Dao in 1B and 2B corresponds to the One in 1A and 2A. Thus in different contexts Dao can mean either the indefinable source itself (42.1) or only the aspect of that source, which is conceptualizable by us (25.19). *Ziran* in 25.19 corresponds not only to the Dao in Chapter 42, but also to the “deeper and more profound” source of the double-named principle in Chapter 1. As we would expect in view of Laozi’s attitude toward names, the terminology is not consistent, but the relations are the same.⁸ Because the One produced by the Dao is double-sided (1.7), it naturally gives rise to the Two, which 42.5 identifies as yin and yang. In 1.5–6 yin was prefigured in the nameless non-being, and yang in the named being. The third, *qi*, is the interrelation of yin and yang, all of which anticipates ZHOU Dunyi’s 周敦頤 famous diagram some 1,500 years later.

Opinion is divided on whether this sequence is to be understood as involving temporal or only ontological priority (e.g., Fu 1973: 372–379). On the former view the universe as a whole is generated (and destroyed) in time, so that there was a time when the Dao existed but yin and yang did not, and a subsequent time when yin and yang existed together with the Dao, but *qi* did not yet exist. This view lends itself especially to religious and mythological conceptions of creation.⁹ On the alternative view the sequence represents ontological priority rather than temporal priority: underlying the myriad things of the universe is material force (*qi*), which presupposes the distinction between yin and yang, which in turn are a manifestation of the dialectical nature of the Dao. On this view Laozi would agree with ZHU Xi’s 朱熹 comment: “One

⁷ That is, spontaneity, naturalness, what is so of itself.

⁸ LIU Xiaogan 劉笑敢 tries to dissolve the apparent paradox of Chapter 25 by taking “Dao models itself after naturalness” to mean not that naturalness is not identical with the Way, but that “the lofty position of honor occupied by the Way comes to it naturally” (Liu 1999: 219). Nevertheless, the symmetry of the last four lines encourages the paradoxical reading of Dao and *ziran* as not identical: “Man models himself after Earth, Earth models itself after Heaven. Heaven models itself after Dao. And Dao models itself after *ziran*.” Since man is not identical with earth, earth with heaven, or heaven with Dao, we would expect that neither is Dao identical here with *ziran*. Thus too WANG Bi 王弼 (WANG Bi 1979: 78).

⁹ Thus N. J. Girardot writes: “The Tao is called the ‘mother’ (*mu* [母]) of the world, which is reflective of numerous mythologies where creation involves a cosmic ancestral giant, animal, or Great Mother that spawns a male and a female offspring who in turn incestuously engender the human world. Another frequent mythological form of this idea of the Tao’s motherhood, and one that appears close to the intention of the Taoist texts, is the idea of a primal ancestral bird, snake, or fish that lays a cosmic egg that subsequently splits open, giving rise the dual principle of the cosmos” (Girardot 1983: 51).

can't speak of principle and material force in terms of first and later. But when we look into it, it seems as if principle exists first and material force later" (Zhu 1990: 92). As FUNG Yu-lan 馮友蘭 writes with reference to Chapter 40 ("Reversion is the action of Tao. Weakness is the function of Tao. All things in the world come from being. And being comes from non-being"):

This saying of Lao Tzu does not mean that there was a time when there was only Non-being, and that then there came a time when Being came into being from Non-being. It simply means that if we analyze the existence of things, we see there must first be Being before there can be any things.... What is said here belongs to ontology, not to cosmology. It has nothing to do with time and actuality. For in time and actuality, there is no Being; there are only beings. (Fung 1948: 96)¹⁰

There will never be a consensus on this matter because of the ambiguity of the textual evidence, depending on which chapters are taken as paradigmatic. The ontological interpretation is supported especially by Chapter 21:¹¹

The all-embracing quality of the great virtue (*de* 德) follows alone from the Dao. (21.1)
 The thing that is called Dao is eluding and vague. (21.2)
 Vague and eluding, there is in it the form. (21.3)
 Eluding and vague, in it are things. (21.4)
 Deep and obscure, in it is the life-force (*jing* 精). (21.5)¹²
 The life-force is very real; in it are evidences. (21.6)
 From the time of old until now, its name (manifestations) ever remains. (21.7)
 By which we may see the beginnings of all things. (21.8)
 How do I know that the beginnings of all things are so? (21.9)
 Through this (Dao). (21.10)

The Dao in its self-differentiation—its “all-embracing quality” rather than its formless simplicity—is its power or virtue (*de*) (21.1). Within its differentiation is form as opposed to the formlessness of the Dao itself (21.3). Form makes possible the further differentiation into individual things (21.4), and the existence of individual things makes life possible (21.5). Living beings have within themselves evidences of their origin (21.6), which enables our minds to return to the Dao itself (21.8–10). There is no suggestion here that the extension of the Dao through *de* is a temporal sequence. On the contrary

¹⁰ See also Chan 1963b: 7–8; and LaFargue 1994: 255–256. On the other hand WANG Bi takes it to be a temporal process; see his comment on 1.4 (WANG Bi 1979: 1).

¹¹ For a different view see Girardot 1983: 65. An excellent survey of these issues may be found in Robinet 1999.

¹² Chan translates *jing* as “essence” but mentions “life-force” as another of its meanings (Chan 1963b: 150n60). Other translations include “seminal concentrations of *qi*” (Ames and Hall 2003), “vital energy” (LaFargue 1994), “life seed” (Chen 1989), “Life Force” (Wing 1984), and “force” (Waley 1958).

each level appears within its predecessor like Chinese boxes, in a nonchronological hierarchy, a hierarchy that remains constant through all time, which “ever remains” (21.7).¹³

Here again we should not lose sight of the opening chapter’s caution about rigid categories. We cannot be content with a description of Laozi’s “great chain of being” unambiguously in terms of ontological or logical presupposition (or, for that matter, temporal priority) as if each level were clearly distinct from one another like nested boxes. On the contrary, there is an ineluctable fluidity and ambiguity of boundaries. Spontaneity, Dao, the One, yin/yang, and *qi* are not discrete powers or entities, but “deep” and “deeper” penetrations into the nature of reality. They are not beings or principles set over against the world; they are the being *of* the world, progressively understood: to understand the ten thousand things we must understand that they are manifestations of *qi*; that *qi* is a manifestation of yin/yang; that yin/yang are manifestations of being/non-being (1.5–6); which are ultimately different names for the same manifestation of Dao (1.7–11).¹⁴ However naturally one may seem to follow from another at each step, conceptualization breaks down when we combine the steps in the conclusion that the being of the ten thousand things is neither namable nor non-namable, neither being nor non-being, and not only subtle but “the door of all subtleties.” The difficulty of Laozi’s writing lies in its refusal to minimize the conceptual difficulties of its message, and throughout the first forty-five chapters we are given formulations and metaphors of the inseparability of emptiness and fullness; whether as being and non-being, or knowledge and nescience.¹⁵

Centuries later in India Nagarjuna (c. 150–250 CE), the founder of Madhyamika Buddhism, tackled the same problem more directly and less poetically than Laozi. In considering the question of whether the elements of existence (*dharmas*) are to be conceived as being or non-being—in Buddhist terms, empty or non-empty—he wrote: “Empty should not be asserted. Nonempty should not be asserted. Neither both nor neither should be asserted. They are only used nominally” (Nagarjuna 1995: 61). Madhyamika (“Middle Path”) refers to his way of dealing with the paradoxes of namable/non-namable and being/non-being by steering a middle course between both supposedly exhaustive alternatives, a deliberate contravention of the principle of

¹³ Ames and Hall write: “The Chinese tradition does not have the separation between time and entities that would allow for either time without entities, or entities without time” (Ames and Hall 2003: 15). It follows that there was never a moment when Dao was and things in general were not yet.

¹⁴ For Fu: “They are not categories but perspectives” (Fu 1973: 373); “The ontologically non-differentiated and the ontologically differentiated are but two aspects of the same Tao” (Fu 1973: 378).

¹⁵ “Being and non-being produce each other” (2.5). The sage “causes his people to be without knowledge” (3.9). “Dao is empty ... [but] never exhausted” (4.1–2). “While vacuous, it is never exhausted” (5.6). “Concentrate your *qi* and achieve the highest degree of weakness” (10.2). “It is on its non-being that the utility of the carriage [and utensil and room] depends” (11.2, 4, 6). “How much difference is there between yes and no?... Mine is indeed the mind of an ignorant man” (20.2 modified, 20.13). “To be empty is to be full” (22.3). “A well-tied knot needs no rope and yet none can untie it” (27.4). The sage “returns to the state of the Ultimate of Non-being” (28.10). “In order to weaken it is necessary first to strengthen” (36.3–4). “Dao invariably takes no action, and yet there is nothing left undone” (37.1). “Enumerate all the parts of a chariot as you may, and you still have no chariot” (39.26). “Being comes from non-being” (40.4). “Great form has no shape” (41.20). “What is most full seems to be empty” (45.3).

excluded middle. Nagarjuna's meaning is more fully elaborated by the Chinese Madhyamika Buddhist Jizang 吉藏 (549–623 CE):

When it is said that dharmas possess being, it is ordinary people who say so. This is worldly truth, the truth of ordinary people. Saints and sages, however, truly know that dharmas are empty in nature. This is absolute truth, the truth of sages.... Next comes the second stage, which explains that both being and non-being belong to worldly truth, whereas non-duality (neither being nor non-being) belongs to absolute truth. It shows that being and non-being are two extremes.... Next comes the third stage in which both duality and non-duality are worldly truth, whereas neither-duality-nor-non-duality is the highest truth. (Chan 1963a: 360; parenthetical expansion Chan's)

We could similarly project a fourth stage in which the distinction between both-and and neither-nor is worldly truth, while the rejection of that distinction is the highest truth; followed by a fifth in which differentiating between the former distinction and its rejection is worldly truth, while the non-differentiation between them is the highest truth; and so on. Like Laozi's assertion that in the case of the named and the nameless, and being and non-being, "the two are the same," this deconstructive dialectic challenges our conceptualization in order to show the non-differentiation that is the inner nature of differentiated world. This non-differentiation partly resembles the Aristotelian concept of prime matter, devoid of all form and therefore without actual existence even though it underlies all existence—but only partly, because Aristotle's juxtaposition of form to matter, as a distinct principle, prevents the reduction of being to non-being.¹⁶ A closer analogue to the Daoist and Madhyamika reductions is Anaximander's concept of the Indefinite (*apeiron*) that is the basis of all finite beings. As Laozi puts it, "Infinite and boundless, ... it reverts to nothingness.... It is the Vague and Elusive" (14.7, 8, 11).

4 Good, Evil, and the Absence of Distinctions

If the governing principle reverts to nothingness, how can it be a guiding principle for us—how can holding on "to the Dao of old [enable us] to master the things of the present" (14.14)? How can what is formless serve as a guide to action? The same instability that attaches ontologically to being/non-being attaches morally to good/evil. Chapter 2 begins: "When the people of the world all know ... the good as good, There is evil. Therefore being and non-being produce each other" (see n. 3 above). If the implication is that good and evil produce each other the way being and non-being produce each other, then to do good will lead to evil, and to do evil will lead to good. How can such a teaching enable us "to master the things of the present," rather than paralyzing our will and leaving us as indecisive as Buridan's ass?

Chapter 20 asks, "How much difference is there between good and evil? What people dread, do not fail to dread. But alas, how confused, and the end is not yet" (20.3–5).¹⁷ To make a fixed distinction between good and evil, and to dread things as

¹⁶ For Laozi, by contrast, form is within the formlessness of the Dao rather than something extrinsic to it: "The thing that is called Dao is eluding and vague. Vague and eluding, there is in it the form" (21.2–3).

¹⁷ Removing Chan's quotation marks around the terms "good" and "evil."

evil the way people usually do, is confused because “the end is not yet.” The meaning of these last words is illustrated in the famous story of The Lost Horse:

[One day a farmer’s] horse ran away. His neighbor commiserated only to be told, “Who knows what is good or bad?”... The next day the horse returned, bringing with it a drove of wild horses it had befriended in its wanderings. The neighbor came over again, this time to congratulate the farmer on his windfall. He was met with the same observation: “Who knows what is good or bad?”... The next day the farmer’s son tried to mount one of the wild horses and fell off breaking his leg. Back came the neighbor, this time with more commiserations, only to encounter for the third time the same response, “Who knows what is good or bad?”... The following day soldiers came by commandeering for the army and because of his injury the son was not drafted. (*Huainanzi* 淮南子 18.6a)¹⁸

As long as “the end is not yet”—and it is always not yet—we cannot confidently designate something as good or evil.

A related point is suggested by Chapter 32: “Dao is eternal and has no name.... As soon as there are names, know that it is time to stop. It is by knowing when to stop that one can be free from danger” (32.1, 7–8). Chan, correctly I think, takes “names” to refer to “differentiation of things,” but why is it time to stop? Where would the next step have taken us? Presumably in the direction more explicitly identified by Zhuangzi 莊子:¹⁹

The understanding of the men of ancient times went a long way. How far did it go? (1) To the point where some of them believed that things have never existed—so far, to the end, where nothing can be added. (2) Those at the next stage thought that things exist but recognized no boundaries among them. (3) Those at the next stage thought there were boundaries but recognized no right and wrong. (4) Because right and wrong appeared, the Way was injured. (Watson 1968: 41; numbers added)²⁰

In Chapter 40 Laozi says, “All things in the world come from being. And being comes from non-being” (40.3–4). These two statements correspond to the first two stages in the Zhuangzi passage: “being comes from non-being” corresponds to Zhuangzi’s unsurpassable knowledge that (1) “things have never existed”; and “all things in the world come from being” corresponds to Zhuangzi’s next stage, (2) “things exist” (but

¹⁸ This retelling is condensed from Smith 1964: 188–189.

¹⁹ For LaFargue: “Since the *Tao Te Ching* is such a brief work, however, some of the special terms are used too seldom in it to give us good contextual evidence as to what connotations they had for Laoists. This deficiency of the *Tao Te Ching* can be partly made up for by first examining some passages in the *Chuang Tzu*, which uses many of the same special terms used in *Tao Te Ching* and often gives us better contextual clues as to what the terms might have meant to those involved in self-cultivation” (LaFargue 1994: 201). In the present case LaFargue cites the *Nei Ye* 內業: “Life then thought, thought then knowledge, knowledge then stop” (LaFargue 1994: 479).

²⁰ Since the comparison is with Chan’s translation of Laozi, here is the same passage from Zhuangzi in Chan’s translation: “The knowledge of the ancients was perfect. In what way was it perfect? There were those who believed that nothing existed. Such knowledge is indeed perfect and ultimate and cannot be improved. The next were those who believed there were things but there was no distinction between them. Still the next were those who believed there was distinction but there was neither right nor wrong. When the distinction between right and wrong became prominent, Dao was thereby reduced” (Chan 1963a: 185).

with no boundaries among them). If, as Chan, suggests, Laozi's "names" mean differentiation of things, that is, boundaries among them, then "as soon as there are names" (32.7) corresponds to Zhuangzi's description, (3) "those at the next stage thought there were boundaries" (but recognized no right and wrong). It is reasonable to expect that the next stage in Laozi would correspond to the next stage in Zhuangzi. In that case when Laozi says, "It is time to stop. It is by knowing when to stop that one can be free from danger" (32.8), the next step, the step from which he deters us, corresponds to Zhuangzi's final stage, (4) "Because right and wrong appeared, the Way was injured." In other words, for Laozi "it is time to stop" when we have differentiated individual things but have not yet distinguished them as good or evil.²¹ The parallel I am imputing to Laozi and Zhuangzi can be summarized schematically:

Laozi		Zhuangzi
Being comes from non-being.	1	The highest knowledge is of the non-being of things.
All things in the world...	2	There were things.
There are names [distinction]	3	Next were those who believed there was distinction.
It is time to stop.	4	There was neither right nor wrong.

If these passages were all that Laozi had to say on the subject, it would indeed seem that our basis for action—the distinction between some courses as good and others as evil—has been undermined, and the Dao not only fails to give us a way to master the present situation, but denies the very possibility of such mastery. In other chapters, however, far from dissolving the distinction between good and evil, Laozi speaks of good and evil as unambiguously distinct.²² Moreover, although Chapter 5 supports the refusal to distinguish between good and evil when it says, "Heaven and Earth are not humane. They regard all things as straw dogs," according to Chapter 81 the opposite is true: "The Way of Heaven is to benefit others" (81.10). We thus find an indeterminacy in the moral sphere comparable to that in the ontological sphere: not only that good and evil cannot ultimately be distinguished, but that they both can and cannot be distinguished. Laozi explicitly connects the cognitive and practical indetermi-

²¹ There is a long tradition of reading the Bible allegorically. Chapter 2 of Genesis admits of a reading parallel to these texts from Laozi and Zhuangzi: "Out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to Adam to see what he would call them; and whatever Adam called every living creature, that was its name" (New King James Version 2: 19). "And the Lord God commanded Adam, saying, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for on the day that you eat of it you shall die'" (2: 16–17). So puzzling is this passage that it is usually incompletely recalled as saying that we are forbidden to eat of the tree of knowledge, not the tree of the knowledge "of good and evil." The mistake is understandable because it is easier to think of religion as being anti-intellectual than being antimoral. However, in view of what we have seen in the Daoists, Genesis may be making a subtle and important point about the danger of distinguishing things as good or evil (stage 4 in Zhuangzi), while yet permitting "naming," that is, recognizing the boundaries between things (stage 3).

²² "The good man is the teacher of the bad" (27.9, cf. 27.1–3, 6–7, 10). "The good ruler when at home honors the left" (31.4). "I treat those who are good with goodness, And I also treat those who are not good with goodness. Thus goodness is attained" (49.3–6). "To patch up great hatred is surely to leave some hatred behind. How can this be regarded as good? ... 'The Way of Heaven has no favorites. It is always with the good man'" (79.1–2, 7–8). "A good man does not argue. He who argues is not a good man" (81.3–4).

nacy: “My doctrines are very easy to understand and very easy to practice, But none in the world can understand or practice them” (70.1–2).

As the preceding quotation shows, since our actions are motivated by the pursuit of what we perceive to be good and the avoidance of what we perceive to be bad or evil, the ambiguous relation between good and evil in Laozi carries with it a similar ambiguity in the conception of action (“practice”). If there is no clear distinction between good and evil, there is no clear basis on which to take action. Consequently we are told several times that the sage takes no action, as in Chapter 48:

The pursuit of learning is to increase day after day. (48.1)

The pursuit of Dao is to decrease day after day. (48.2)

It is to decrease and further decrease until one reaches the point of taking no action. (48.3)

No action is undertaken, and yet nothing is left undone. (48.4)

An empire is often brought to order by having no activity. (48.5)

If one undertakes activity, he is not qualified to govern the empire. (48.6)²³

Even in the case of the Dao itself, “Dao invariably takes no action” (37.1). Not surprisingly Laozi also says the opposite, that in some sense the Dao does take action: “The Great Dao ... accomplishes its task” (34.1, 4); “Dao produces them” (51.1, cf. 51.8, 12). Not only does the Dao take action, but despite the statements to the contrary that we saw above, the sage too must take definite action in the world: “Withdraw as soon as your work is done” (9.9); “One who is good achieves his purpose and stops” (30.5).²⁴ The paradox is sharpened when both pieces of contradictory advice are juxtaposed: “Act without action [*wei wuwei* 為無為]” (63.1). Similarly, since action springs from desire, we are also told that “the sage desires to have no desire [*yu bu yu* 欲不欲]” (64.16).

Thus, action and non-action, like good and evil, and being and non-being, both can and cannot be distinguished. Some chapters give clues to the possibility of a resolution of the paradox. Chapter 2 says, for example:

[The sage] produces them, but does not take possession of them. (2.14)

He acts, but does not rely on his own ability. (2.15)

He accomplishes his task, but does not claim credit for it. (2.16)²⁵

The first and third conditions seem clear—we should not act for profit (“not take possession”) or glory (“not claim credit”)—but how are we to understand the second condition, that we must not rely on our own ability? If relying on our own ability means taking deliberate action, then we might be said not to rely on our own ability when we act impulsively or in the throes of passion, but this cannot be what is recommended.

²³ Cf.: “The sage ... accomplishes without any action” (47.6); “The sage says: I take no action” (57.15); “The sage takes no action” (64.12, cf. 64.19).

²⁴ Chan has “A good (general)...”

²⁵ The same ideas are presented in Chapters 10 (10.6, 8–9) and 77 (77.11–12). Chapter 51 makes a similar point about the Dao itself (51.12–13). For further discussion of *wu wei* 無為 see Liu 1999 and Ivanhoe 1999: 247–250.

The paradox of acting without action (*wei wuwei*) underlies an ambiguity in Chapter 13:

- Be apprehensive when receiving favor or disgrace. (13.1)
 Regard great trouble as seriously as you regard your body. (13.2)
 What is meant by being apprehensive when receiving favor or disgrace? (13.3)
 Favor is considered inferior. (13.4)
 Be apprehensive when you receive them and also be apprehensive when you lose them. (13.5)
 This is what is meant by being apprehensive when receiving favor or disgrace. (13.6)
 What does it mean to regard great trouble as seriously as you regard the body? (13.7)
 If I have no body, (13.8)
 What trouble could I have? (13.9)
 Therefore he who values the world as his body may be entrusted with the empire. (13.10)
 He who loves the world as his body may be entrusted with the empire. (13.11)

The claim in lines 2–9 that our body is the source of all our troubles is not hard to understand: our body is the seat of desires, and the pursuit of desires leads to fear and frustration far more often than to even transitory contentment, so the key to happiness is to reduce our desires by overcoming our attachment to things of the body.²⁶ It is by the body that we distinguish ourselves from others, so the way to stop ourselves from regarding our body seriously is to see ourselves as inseparable from others rather than in competition with them: “The Way of the sage is to act but not to compete” (81.11; cf. 3.1, 8.12, 22.13, 24.1–6, 30.5–11, 66.11, 68.5, 73.6, 77.12).

However, if lines 13.2–9 tell us not to take our body seriously, how can lines 13.10–11 conclude that someone who values and loves the world as his body may be entrusted with the empire? If we ought not value or love our body at all, a ruler who values and loves the world as his body would neither value nor love the empire. People entrusted with the empire can hardly take the view that if ruling is giving them trouble, like their body, they should stop caring about the empire. The difficulty disappears if lines 13.10–11 represent a shift of perspective from the individual body to the body of the whole, so that “values ... [and] loves the world as his body” does not mean “values and loves the world *as much* as he values and loves his body”—that is, as little as possible—but rather “values and loves the world *as being* his body.” The goal is to recognize our inseparability from other things, and theirs from still others *ad infinitum*, until we see ourselves not as self-dependent individuals but as

²⁶ Freedom from desire is a recurring theme in Laozi: “Have few desires” (19.12); the Dao is “always without desires” (34.6); “Being free of desires, it is tranquil” (37.6); “Shut the doors (of ... desire)” (52.9, 56.4); “The sage says: ... I have no desires” (57.14, 18); “The sage desires to have no desire” (64.16).

interdependent moments of the whole.²⁷ Thus Laozi says, “The sage, in the government of his empire, has no subjective viewpoint. His mind forms a harmonious whole with that of his people” (49.9–10). “Become one with the dusty world,” he urges. “This is called profound identification” (56.8–9).²⁸ To become one with the world is to regard the world as our body, and therefore to value and love this inclusive body for precisely the reasons that we should not take seriously our individual body:²⁹ desire and competition have been left behind. When Laozi says, “The sage desires to have no desire” (64.16), the unwished-for desires are those of our individual body, those which give us pleasure independently of and even at the expense of others; and the desire to be rid of them is the desire of our inclusive body, our identification with the world as a whole, the self as what is common to all rather than what is distinctive to each. “Being all-embracing, he is impartial” (16.13).

Laozi specifies that it is a dusty world (56.8), a world not according to our personal tastes. To us dust is something to be removed, something unwanted, of no value. However, the world is full of creatures that thrive on dust. To become one with the world is to leave behind the subjective distinctions between good and evil that we talked about at the beginning of this section. In this way Chapter 56 can be read as a commentary on Chapter 13, and it is true in another way as well. Lines 3–6 of Chapter 13 said paradoxically that not only disgrace, but even favor is inferior. Now we are told that if someone achieves this “profound identification” with the world, “It is impossible either

²⁷ Corresponding views appear in other traditions. A particularly eloquent example in the Confucian tradition appears in WANG Yangming’s 王陽明 commentary on “The Great Learning”: “[Each person forms] one body with Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things. Therefore when he sees a child about to fall into a well, he cannot help a feeling of alarm and commiseration. This shows that his humanity forms one body with the child. It may be objected that [this is not one body with Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things because] the child belongs to the same species. Again, when he observes the pitiful cries and frightened appearance of birds and animals about to be slaughtered, he cannot help feeling an ‘inability to bear’ their suffering. This shows that his humanity forms one body with birds and animals. It may be objected that birds and animals are sentient beings as he is. But when he sees plants broken and destroyed, he cannot help a feeling of pity. This shows that his humanity forms one body with plants. It may be said that plants are living things as he is. Yet, even when he sees tiles and stones shattered and crushed, he cannot help a feeling of regret. This shows that his humanity forms one body with tiles and stones. This means that even the mind of the small man necessarily has the humanity that forms one body with all” (WANG Yang-ming 1963: 659–660). The most famous Western example is a passage from Meditation XVII of Devotions upon Emergent Occasions, by the 17th century Anglican priest John Donne: “No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as any manner of thy friends or of thine own were; any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee” (Donne 1952: 441, spelling modernized).

²⁸ The translation of *tong qi chen* 同其塵 (also at 4.7) as “Become one with the dusty world” is Chan’s. Others have: “All dust smoothed” (Waley 1958), “Make identical the dust” (Chen 1989), “Identify with the ways of the world” (Wing 1984), “Make the dust merge together” (LaFargue 1994), “Bring things together on the same track” (Ames and Hall 2003), “Become one with your dust” (Alquiros 2002), “Settles the dust” (Henricks 2000).

²⁹ Cf. WANG Bi’s comment on the contrast between the Way of Heaven and the Way of Man in Chapter 77: “Only by not clinging to one’s own body and not keeping Nature for oneself can one be identified with the virtue of Heaven and Earth” (WANG Bi 1979: 203).

to benefit him or to harm him, It is impossible either to honor him or to disgrace him” (56.11–12). Favor and honor, like disgrace, place us in a competitive position, an inferior position vis-à-vis profound identification.

However, the inferiority of honor and disgrace that Laozi insisted upon in Chapter 13 he seems to deny in Chapter 20, where he constantly compares himself with others (emphasis added):

- I alone* am inert, showing no sign (of desires). (20.8)
 Like an infant that has not yet smiled. (20.9)
 Lost,³⁰ indeed I seem to be without a home. (20.10)
 The multitude all possess more than enough, (20.11)
I alone seem to have lost all. (20.12)
 Mine is indeed the mind of an ignorant man, (20.13)
 Indiscriminate and dull! (20.14)
 Common folks are indeed brilliant; (20.15)
I alone seem to be in the dark. (20.16)
 Common folks see differences and are clear-cut; (20.17)
I alone make no distinctions. (20.18)
 I seem drifting as the sea; (20.19)
 Like the wind blowing about, seemingly without destination. (20.20)
 The multitude all have a purpose; (20.21)
I alone seem to be stubborn and rustic. (20.22)
I alone differ from others, (20.23)
 And value drawing sustenance from Mother (Dao). (20.24)

The speaker, who has achieved experience of the Dao (20.24), seems in some places to lament his inferiority to all others: he alone seems to have lost all, he alone seems to be in the dark, and he alone seems to be stubborn and rustic (20.12, 16, 22). In other places he sounds boastful, despite all the warnings against boasting (cf. 22.11–12, 24.5–6, 30.7–9, 77.12): he alone has overcome desire, he alone makes no distinctions, and he alone values the Dao (20.8, 18, 23–24). Oddest of all are the words, “I alone make no distinctions” (20.18). If he makes no distinctions how can he distinguish himself from everyone else as the only one of whom this is true? “I alone” cannot, then, mean “the individual that I am as distinguished from every other individual.” Apart from the difficulties just mentioned, why would Laozi suppose that he alone, and no one else, has ever valued the Dao? In fact he elsewhere acknowledges, “What others have taught, I teach also” (42.9). The apparent incoherence of these lines forces us to the same perspective switch that we needed to resolve the apparent contradiction in Chapter 13 between not valuing and valuing our body. “I alone” makes sense only if it refers to someone who regards the world as being his body. To identify with the whole is to be alone: there is nothing outside of the whole. “I alone differ from others” the way the unique whole differs from its parts. Someone who thus draws sustenance from the Dao (20.24) is “inert, showing no sign (of desires),” and makes no distinctions. He “seems” to have lost all, to be in the dark, and to be stubborn and rustic, but he only seems so to others. The lines quoted above (20.8–24) were preceded by the words, “The multitude are merry, as though

³⁰ “Lost” is Chen’s translation (Chen 1989: 103). Chan has “wearied.”

feasting on a day of sacrifice, Or like ascending a tower at springtime” (20.5–6). This contrast between the rewards of the multitude, and those of oneself alone, is elucidated in Chapter 35: “When there are music and dainties, Passing strangers will stay. But the words uttered by Dao, How insipid and flavorless! We look at Dao; it is imperceptible. We listen to it; it is inaudible” (35.5–10).³¹

5 Profound Identification

The process by which this identification with the Dao is reached is evoked in Chapter 15:

Of old those who were the best rulers were subtly mysterious and profoundly penetrating; (15.1)
 Too deep to comprehend. (15.2)
 And because they cannot be comprehended, (15.3)
 I can only describe them arbitrarily. (15.4)
 Cautious, like crossing a frozen stream in the winter, (15.5)
 Being at a loss, like one fearing danger on all sides, (15.6)
 Reserved, like one visiting, (15.7)
 Supple and pliant, like ice about to melt, (15.8)
 Genuine, like a piece of uncarved wood, (15.9)
 Open and broad, like a valley, (15.10)
 Merged and undifferentiated, like muddy water. (15.11)
 Who can make muddy water gradually clear through tranquility? (15.12)
 Who can make the still gradually come to life through activity? (15.13)
 He who embraces this Dao does not want to fill himself to overflowing. (15.14)
 It is precisely because there is no overflowing that he is beyond wearing out and renewal. (15.15)

Cautious, like crossing a frozen stream in the winter. At the beginning we can make progress only by being cautiously watchful; only if we pay careful attention will things show themselves as they are.³² Because the Dao is hidden in plain sight, invisible and inaudible (Ch. 14, 35), we must be alert to its “evidences” in the world (Ch. 21). We must look for the nameless within the namable, and non-being within being (Ch. 1). We must be alert to the presence of opposites within each other (Ch. 2, 22), and to their transformations into each other (Ch. 36, 40). We must be alert to the danger of forcing ourselves onto the situation rather than being simply receptive to it—we must be courageous in not daring rather than in daring (73.1–2), and seek the mean rather than risking extremes (Ch. 5, 9, 15, 77)—for “What is brittle is easy to crack” (64.3). We must proceed as if we were on brittle ice, solid ice that is inseparable from its opposite, the fluid water beneath the surface.

Being at a loss, like one fearing danger on all sides. Once we have embarked on this path caution gives way to fear. We have left behind what is tangible, visible, audible, and conceivable, and have turned toward emptiness. We seem to have lost all (20.12). For

³¹ Substituting “flavorless” for Chan’s “tasteless” which is ambiguous.

³² The need to know things through themselves is illustrated by: “How do I know that the beginnings of all things are so? Through this” (21.9–10); and “How do I know this to be the case in the world? Through this” (54.14–15).

that reason there is, in addition to our fear of the unknown, the fear of the known—fear of the temptation to return to familiar gratifications: “I should, in walking on a broad way [*dao*], fear getting off the road. Broad ways [*dao*] are extremely even [unvarying and uneventful], but people are fond of by-paths” because the terrain of the Dao seems barren compared with the splendor of the courts (53.1–8; cf. 35.5–10, quoted above).

Reserved, like one visiting. Now the emotional content of fear has been overcome. Anxious dread has been replaced by calm respect. However, we are still separated from the Dao. We are visitors rather than at home in it.

Supple and pliant, like ice about to melt. Our separateness begins to dissolve. Where we originally entered into it as though crossing a frozen stream in the winter, cautious over melting ice, now we ourselves are like ice about to melt. We are becoming assimilated to the territory we have entered.

Genuine, like a piece of uncarved wood. At this point we have reached our goal, although in a preliminary way. The uncarved wood (*pu* 樸) is an image of undifferentiated being: “When the uncarved wood is broken up, it is turned into concrete things” (28.16). It corresponds to what is “undifferentiated and yet complete, Which existed before heaven and earth.... I do not know its name; I call it Dao.... Dao models itself after *ziran* [spontaneity]” (25.1–2, 6). The present line (15.9) is only a preliminary consummation because the Dao is understood here as being, not yet as non-being or *ziran*.

Open and broad, like a valley. Beneath the frozen stream is the valley. The stream is something positive like the uncarved wood of line 9, and the named and Being of Chapter 1, but beneath it is the unnamed and non-being, like the negative space of a valley.

Merged and undifferentiated, like muddy water. The opposition between being and non-being was mediated by something more profound than either and common to both (1.7–11). Here, in the same way, after the being of the stream and the non-being of the valley, is the most encompassing image of all, the muddy water in which the water of the stream and the earth of the valley are merged and undifferentiated.

The next two lines bring us to the essence of *wuwei*. If the muddy water refers to the “deeper and more profound” Dao in which being and non-being are originally merged (1.5–10), then line 15.12, “Who can make muddy water gradually clear through tranquility?”, is the moment of reversal.³³ Where the previous lines progressively merged distinctions, it is now time to return to the clarifying activity of distinctions in which the earth and water that were merged in mud are once again distinguished from each other. If the previous movement of progressive deconstruction corresponded to the words, “let there always be non-being so we may see their subtlety” (1.5), the reversal and return to the clarity of distinctions corresponds to the words that followed, “let there always be being so we may see their outcome” (1.6). Those who remained in the state in which all distinctions are merged would never be able to decide on a course of action, since yes and no, good and evil, are arbitrary distinctions (20.2–3). They will be able to take action only when they return from this “profound identification” (56.9). The first step is to once again find some way to distinguish good from bad, water from dirt, tranquility from turmoil. As we noted earlier, in other contexts Laozi has no hesitation in distinguishing good from bad (Cf. 27.1–

³³ “Reversal is the action of Dao” (40.1, replacing Chan’s “reversion”). Harold Roth argues that in Zhuangzi there are two modes of mystical experience. In the first mode “the adept achieves complete union with the Dao.” In the second “the adept returns to the world and retains, amidst the flow of daily life, a profound sense of the unity previously experienced.” He continues, “While evidence for its presence is not as strong in the Laozi as in the Zhuangzi, it is, as we shall see, most certainly there” (Roth 1999: 66).

10, 31.1–7, 49.2–4, 79.2 and 8, 81.3–4). The return to the world of action and distinctions is completed in the next line: “Who can make the still gradually come to life through activity?” What is involved in this gradual return from absorption in the Dao to life and activity? How does the sage now overcome the dilemma that “He who takes an action fails.... The sage takes no action and therefore does not fail” (64.10, 12)? In other words, how are we to understand activity without taking action, *wuwei*? The concept is generally agreed to mean something like natural rather than forced or arbitrary action,³⁴ and while there is some basis for the claim that “there are no concepts or even areas of thought in traditional Western philosophy that correspond to the ideals of naturalness and *wuwei*” (Liu 1999: 213), there are themes in non-Daoist traditions that can help to bring the concept of *wuwei* into greater relief.

For Aristotle virtuous people are defined by their character rather than their actions. If their character leads them to take pleasure in performing good actions, and to find it painful to perform bad actions, they are virtuous. Since we naturally pursue pleasure and avoid pain, virtuous people will automatically desire what is good and be repelled by what is bad. Others may pursue the good and avoid the bad not because they have no desire to do otherwise but because, by the power of their self-control (*enkrateia*), their rational understanding of what is good is able to prevent them from following their desires that are contrary to the good. The first type, then, does the good naturally and easily while the second can do so only through effort.³⁵ Even if we are not among the few who are born with a virtuous character, we can achieve it by acquiring virtuous habits as a result of performing virtuous actions (Aristotle 1984: 2.1).

There is something comparable in Confucius: “At fifteen I set my heart on learning; at thirty I took my stand; at forty I came to be free from doubts; at fifty I understood the Decree of Heaven; at sixty my ear was attuned; at seventy I followed my heart’s desire without overstepping the line” (*Analects* 2.4). The difference in Confucius before and after the age of seventy gives us something comparable to *wuwei*. To follow our heart’s desires—in other words, to do what we spontaneously feel like doing and have it always correspond to what is right, as opposed to having to control our heart’s desires lest we transgress what is right—is the Confucian version of *wuwei*. Like Aristotle, Confucius’

³⁴ “*Wuwei* ... really involves the absence of any course of action that interferes with the particular focus (*de*) of those things contained within one’s field of influence” (Ames and Hall 2003: 39, cf. 32, 67). “The variations on *wuwei* are modes of selfless experience, experience that is extremely efficacious precisely because it is selfless. It comes from the Way and not the individual self” (Roth 1999: 80). “*Wuwei* ... is well illustrated here by the field. The field appears to do nothing; all of this happens ‘by nature’ (*ziran*—‘it is so on its own’)” (Henricks 2000: 165). “*Wu-wei* [means] ... taking no action, living in nonaction: loving tranquillity, engaging in no activity, and having no desires—which leads to natural transformation, correctness, prosperity, and simplicity”; “*Wuwei* [unlike *ziran*, naturalness], ... while still preserving the emphasis on naturalness nevertheless imposes restrictions upon certain types of spontaneous actions—for instance those motivated by desire for and pursuit of fame or profit” (Liu 1999: 219, 1999: 214). “*Chuang Tzu* 5 (13/2–10) speaks of *wu wei* as an inner state: ‘*hsü* [虛]/Empty, *ching* [靜]/Still, limpid, silent, not-doing [*wu wei*]’” (LaFargue 1994: 215–216). “The Taoist allows events to unfold according to their inner rhythms; he acts by non-action (*wu-wei*), which is acting with, not against, the inner rhythms of things” (Chen 1989: 41, cf. 169). “The important idea of *wu-wei* represents the individual Taoist’s identification with, and emulation of, the cosmic life of spontaneity and naturalness (*tzu-jan*) of the Tao” (Girardot 1983: 56). “Taking no action [*wu-wei*] does not mean to be ‘dry wood and dead ashes,’ to use the metaphors of Chuang Tzu. Rather, it means taking no artificial action, noninterference, or letting things take their own course” (Chan 1963b: 8).

³⁵ For example, Aristotle 1984: 1.8. In one place Aristotle compares our acquired character to our inborn nature (7.3.1147a22). For those whose character is virtuous, doing what is good comes “naturally.”

way of achieving it is a combination of rationally learning what is good and firmly controlling our desires to do otherwise until we train them to coincide with the good.³⁶

Laozi, on the other hand, does not regard learning as the path to *wuwei*. Most of his references to learning are negative not only because for him learning means listening to others rather than seeing for oneself, but also because learning means a progressive accumulation of information, the pursuit of “more”; whereas Chapter 15 insisted that the path to wisdom is the progressive reduction of distinctions, the pursuit of “less.” Thus: “The pursuit of learning is to increase day after day. The pursuit of Dao is to decrease day after day. It is to decrease and further decrease until one reaches the point of taking no action” (48.1–3). Again, “A wise man has no extensive knowledge; He who has extensive knowledge is not a wise man” (81.5–6; cf. 18.1–4, 19.1–2, 20.1, 64.13, Ch. 65). This leads to a different conception of the mind of a good person (also see 57.14–18, 63.9–10, 72.6–7):

He accomplishes his task, but does not claim credit for it. (2.16, 10.8, 77.12–13)

The sage places himself in the background, but finds himself in the foreground.

He puts himself away, and yet he always remains. Is it not because he has no personal interests? (7.4–7)

He does not show himself; therefore he is luminous. He does not justify himself; therefore he becomes prominent. He does not boast of himself; therefore he is given credit. He does not brag; therefore he can endure for long. It is precisely because he does not compete that the world cannot compete with him. (22.9–13; cf. 66.10–11)

The best (rulers) are those whose existence is (merely) known by the people. The next best are those who are loved and praised. (17.1–2)

Nothing like this kind of self-effacement is to be found in Confucius or Aristotle. For them the pursuit of “more” in the context of learning and personal recognition is praiseworthy; the good know their own value and expect to be treated with commensurate respect. Something like Laozi’s self-effacement does appear in Kant, for whom the categorical imperative is the more reliable the less it corresponds to our desires, but there is no comparable effacement of conceptualization.³⁷

From these comparisons we can see that *wuwei* has two distinct components: (1) It must be spontaneous as if it happened of itself, rather than being the result of effortful self-examination and self-control—like the actions of people who can unhesitatingly trust their intuitions if they are virtuous in Aristotle’s sense or are like the septuagenarian Confucius; (2) We must abstract from the consciousness of our individuality, and from the consciousness of our separateness from others and from the whole. Kant shares with Laozi this second principle but not the first; Aristotle and

³⁶ For a comprehensive comparison of Confucius and Aristotle on these matters, see Yu 2007: 96–139.

³⁷ Moreover, for Kant it is not a question of purifying our desires by learning, self-control, and habituation—as in Confucius and Aristotle—but rather of regarding our desires as simply irrelevant if not inimical to moral questions. The moral person should simply attend to impersonal duty, should “desire to have no desires.” However, there is nothing like the effortless spontaneity of *wuwei*. On the contrary, every moral action is a result of the most deliberate effort of rational calculation. The difference between Laozi and Kant is the difference between “superior virtue” and “superior humanity”: “The man of superior virtue takes no action, but has no ulterior motive to do so.... The man of superior humanity takes action, but has no ulterior motive for doing so” (38.5, 7).

Confucius share the first but not the second. For Confucius love is always love with distinctions; Aristotle's god, the goal of contemplation, is anything but holistic; and for Kant the proper motive of action is not empathy but duty as discerned by conceptual reason. None of them would be interested in becoming one with the dusty world.

In the way he combines the two principles of spontaneity and "profound identification," Laozi is able to find a basis for moral action within the indeterminacy of being and of conventional morality.

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