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CHAPTER THREE

*WÚ-WÉI,* THE BACKGROUND, AND INTENTIONALITY

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1. *Introduction*

Among John Searle's many contributions to the philosophy of mind is his attempt to articulate the role of non-intentional capacities—know-how, skills, abilities to engage in practices—in constituting intentionality. Searle's attention to such capacities—which remains relatively rare among major philosophers of mind—makes his work particularly well-suited for constructive engagement with Chinese thought. For such capacities stand at the heart of mainstream Chinese conceptions of knowledge and action. Classical Chinese thinkers consistently explained knowledge in terms of practical know-how, and they conceived of action primarily in terms of ability, habit, and skill, rather than pieces of practical reasoning and the individual acts that issue from them.

Searle refers to the various capacities, abilities, and know-how that enable intentional states to function as "the Background", the capitalization indicating that the word is a technical term.[1] He calls his account of the role of non-intentional capacities in intentionality the "thesis of the Background". We can summarize the thesis as the claim that all intentional phenomena—such as meaning, understanding, belief, desire, experience, and action—function only within a set of non-intentional capacities that play an indispensable role in determining their intentional content, and thus their status as intentional phenomena.[2] In and of itself, for instance, an utterance is merely a pattern of sound waves, meaning

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nothing in particular. Utterances have meaning only in some context of use. But any such context will involve a range of non-intentional, causal capacities of the speaker and audience, from brute perceptual capacities to the know-how or abilities that enable us to participate in complex social practices. These capacities are aspects of the Background that enable particular utterances to have the meaning they do.

One concept in Chinese thought naturally called to mind by reflecting on the role of non-intentional capacities in facilitating various sorts of activities is the Daoist concept of *wú-wéi* ("non-action" or "non-doing"), which refers, among other things, to a sort of non-intentional response to the particular situation. In this essay, I will try to show how Searle's thesis of the Background can help us clarify what is plausible in

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[1] John R. Searle (1992), *The Rediscovery of the Mind,* Cambridge: MIT Press, p. 175.

[2] Searle's most careful, precise statement of the thesis is: "All conscious intentionality—all thought, perception, understanding, etc.—determines conditions of satisfaction only relative to a set of capacities that are not and could not be part of that very conscious state. The actual content by itself is insufficient to determine the conditions of satisfaction" (Searle, 1992, p. 189). For an earlier version, see Searle (1983), *Intentionality,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 143. Searle's most informative accounts of the Background are at (1992, pp. 175–96) and Searle (1995), *The Construction of Social Reality,* New York: The Free Press, pp. 129–47.

the notion of *wú-wéi,* while at the same time shedding light on the kind of immediate, automatic activity that might originally have inspired this concept. Just as important, however, his work yields a convincing explanation of why the ideal of *wú-wéi* as expressed in early Daoist texts is untenable.[3] Searle's theory of intentionality helps us to clarify how automatic, *wú-wéi*-like responses are an indispensable part of action, but also shows why it is a mistake to think such responses could func-

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tion autonomously, outside of the context provided by intentionality and agency.

Sections 2 and 3 of the paper rehearse aspects of Searle's thesis of the Background and his theory of intentional action, wrapping up with a summary of elements of his theory particularly relevant to understanding and evaluating the notion of *wú-wéi.* (Readers familiar with Searle's work are invited to jump straight to the summary at the end of section 3.) Section 4 presents an interpretation of the ideal of *wú-wéi* as found in ancient Daoist texts, and section 5 an account of possible motivations for this ideal. Section 6 takes us out of the context of ancient thought, presenting what I think might be a tenable, revised conception of *wú-wéi,* which I call a "*wú-wéi*-like" state. This is the major constructive (and speculative) part of the paper. Section 7 concludes by turning back from this attempt at constructive engagement to critique the conception of *wú-wéi* found in the original texts.

## 2. *Searle on the Background*

The thesis of the Background is part of Searle's general theory of intentionality, the characteristic of mental states of being "about" or "directed at" something outside themselves and thus having content.[4] For Searle, intentional states comprise a *content* and *psychological mode.* Roughly, the content indicates what the state is about, and the mode indicates the type of state it is. The same content—that I drink coffee, for instance—can be part of different types of states. I can *believe, desire, hope,* or *intend* that I drink coffee, among other possible coffee-related states. Some intentional states,

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[3] Interestingly, the aspects of Searle's account of intentionality that provide this explanation are to some extent just those he has applied in rebutting criticism from Hubert Dreyfus, whose Merleau-Ponty-inspired theory of "motor intentionality" is in some respects akin to a version of *wú-wéi.* I do not have space here to explore the Searle-Dreyfus debate, but instead refer the reader to the series of articles in which it has been carried out. These include, on Dreyfus's side, Jerome Wakefield and Hubert Dreyfus (1990), "Intentionality and the Phenomenology of Action", in E. LePore and R. Van Gulick, eds., *John Searle and His Critics,* Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 259–70; Hubert Dreyfus (1993), "Heidegger's Critique of the Husserl/Searle Account of Intentionality", *Social Research* 60.1: pp. 17–38; Dreyfus (2000), "Reply to John Searle", in M. Wrathall and J. Malpas, eds., *Heidegger, Coping, and Cognitive Science,* Cambridge, Ma.: MIT, pp. 323–37; Dreyfus (2001), "Phenomenological Description Versus Rational Reconstruction", Revue Internationale de Philosophie 217: pp. 181–96; Dreyfus (no date), "The Primacy of Phenomenology over Logical Analysis", available through Dreyfus's course web pages at the web site of the Department of Philosophy, University of California at Berkeley. Searle's responses have included his (1990), "Response: The Background of Intentionality and Action", in E. LePore and R. Van Gulick, eds., *John Searle and His Critic,* Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 289–99; Searle (2000), "The Limits of Phenomenology", in M. Wrathall and J. Malpas, eds., *Heidegger, Coping, and Cognitive Science,* Cambridge, Ma.: MIT, pp. 71–92; Searle (2001), "Neither Phenomenological Description nor Rational Reconstruction: Reply to Dreyfus", *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 217, pp. 277–97; and Searle (2005), "The Phenomenological Illusion", M. Reicher and J. C. Marek, eds., *Experience and Analysis,* 317–36, Wien: Kirchberg am Wechsel.

[4] For a quick summary of Searle's theory of intentionality, see Searle (2001), *Rationality in Action,* Cambridge, Ma.: MIT Press, pp. 34ff.

such as beliefs, desires, and intentions, have contents that are propositional in form, as the content of the four states just mentioned is.[5] Other intentional states may have contents consisting of representations only of things, rather than entire propositions, as when I merely imagine a cup of coffee without actually desiring to drink one. States with propositional contents normally have what Searle calls *conditions of satisfaction,* which are the conditions under

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which the content of the state coincides with how things are in the world. For instance, a belief is satisfied when true; an intention, when carried out. The conditions of satisfaction of propositional intentional states are also associated with *directions of fit.* Beliefs have what Searle calls a "mind-to-world" direction of fit. Their function is to represent how things are in the world, and a belief is satisfied—it successfully fulfills its function—if and only if its content fits the way the world is. Desires and intentions have a "world-to-mind" direction of fit. They do not represent how things are in the world, but how we want them to be (desires) or how we will try to make them (intentions).[6]

Searle was led to the thesis of the Background as a way to explain the holistic and non-self-interpreting nature of intentional content (1983, pp. 19ff.). Intentional states have conditions of satisfaction—or content—partly by virtue of being embedded in a Network of other potential intentional states with interrelated contents. Moreover, they have determinate conditions of satisfaction only by functioning against a Background of non-intentional capacities.[7] These capacities—in effect, aspects of the causal dispositions of the agent, considered as a neurophysiological system—are what enable intentional contents to function in the various ways they do in intentional phenomena such as language and action.

To understand the meaning of even the simplest sentences, for instance, we must employ a range of Background capacities. For without them, Searle suggests, "there is a radical underdetermination of what is said by the literal meaning of the sentence" (1995, p. 131). Consider the sentence "She gave him her key and he opened the door." Consistent with the literal meaning of the sentence, we could take this to mean that the key was a signal for the man to bash the door down with his head or that the key was a large, heavy tool that he used to batter a hole in the door. What rules out such fantastic but still literal interpretations is "a certain sort of knowledge about how the world

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works…[and] a certain set of abilities for coping with the world, and those abilities are not and could not be included as part of the literal meaning of the sentence" (1995, p. 131). This know-how and these abilities play an essential role in fixing the conditions of satisfaction for the sentence and enabling us to understand and use it. In

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[5] As Searle points out (2001, p. 36), this is not to suggest that the states are directed at propositions. They are directed objects or states-of-affairs, but their content takes a propositional form.

[6] A third direction of fit is what Searle calls the "null direction", which is characteristic of emotions and other intentional states whose function is neither to represent how the world is nor how we want it to be. In having such states we simply assume that their content matches the world.

[7] Searle originally took the Network—the holistic web of intentional states necessary for any single intentional state to function—to be distinct from the Background. Later, in response to difficulties concerning the notion of an unconscious mental state, he revised his view to treat the Network as one aspect of the Background. See Searle (1992, pp. 186ff.).

a similar way, other Background capacities are a necessary condition for having and carrying out intentions. Merely to have the intention to make myself a cup of coffee, I must have the physical capacity to walk to the kitchen, hold a cup, spoon out the coffee, and so forth, none of which is or could be part of the content of my intention (2001, p. 58). All of the non-intentional capacities that enable me to understand language and formulate and carry out intentions—to cite just two sorts of intentional phenomena—are part of the Background.

### 3. *Intentional Action and the Background*

Intentional action for Searle is a species of intentional causation, a notion that for him refers to any causal relation between an intentional state and its conditions of satisfaction.[8] In successful action, a certain kind of intentional state—an intention— causes its own conditions of satisfaction to be realized. More precisely, successful action is a case of causally self-referential, mind-to-world intentional causation. It is a form of *mind-to-world* causation because an intention can be satisfied only by causing facts about the world to fit its content. It is a form of *self-referential* causation because a condition of satisfaction of an intention is that, by causing itself to be carried out, the intention directly cause its own satisfaction conditions to be realized.[9] (If the world were to come to fit the propositional content of the intention by some other cause, this fit would not be the result of the agent's action and so would not count as satisfying the intention.)

In premeditated action, the agent typically deliberates by considering various intentional states—paradigmatically beliefs and desires—and then reaches a decision, which marks the formation of a *prior intention.*

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(Prior intentions may also be formed without deliberation.) The prior intention is a representation of the whole action, which comprises an intention-in-action and the relevant bodily movements. The conditions of satisfaction of the prior intention are that carrying out that intention cause the action. When the time comes to act, the prior intention causes the intention-in-action, which causes the bodily movement. The conditions of satisfaction of the intention-in-action are that carrying out the intention-in-action cause the appropriate movement and thereby succeed in causing the facts about the world to fit the content of the intention (1983, pp. 98–99; 2001, p. 45).[10]

The intention-in-action may or may not be a conscious state (2001, p. 47; 1983, p. 92). When it is, the agent is aware of it as the experience of acting or of trying to do something, or, perhaps more precisely, as the experience of one's intention being the

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[8] The summary of Searle's views in this section is based on Searle, 2001, pp. 40–50, and Searle, 1983, pp. 83–98.

[9] By contrast, some desires can be satisfied without the desire itself playing any causal role in producing its own conditions of satisfaction, as when my desire that Tiger Woods win the Masters is satisfied by his winning.

[10] The content of most intentions will not refer merely to bodily movements, but to events or states of affairs that the agent aims to accomplish by performing the movements. Hence typically "conditions of satisfaction of our intentions go beyond the bodily movements" (Searle, 1983, p. 99). In cases where an agent has an intention-in-action but fails to achieve the conditions of satisfaction—e.g., intending to make a basketball shot, I throw the ball but miss—the agent has tried but failed (Searle, 2001, p. 45). Having an intention-in-action corresponds to "trying".

cause of one's own purposeful movement.[11]

Not all action is premeditated. We often act spontaneously, as when we just suddenly switch on the car radio while driving. In such cases, action is caused directly by an intention-in-action, without a prior intention. Subsidiary actions performed in the course of carrying out some complex action are also often performed without any prior intentions. For instance, suppose I form and carry out a prior intention to travel to my office. This involves taking a shuttle bus half way, walking to

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a different bus stop, then taking a minibus the rest of the way. Being familiar with the route, I never form prior intentions concerning the action of disembarking from one bus and walking to the next. I just do so automatically, without thinking about it. Yet clearly my walking between the bus stops is intentional. Searle would say that in this case I have an intention-in-action, though no prior intention (2001, p. 45; 1983, p. 84).[12] Indeed, Searle holds that any time we are acting at all, we have an intention-in-action; this is what makes our bodily movement an action, rather than merely an involuntary or reflex movement (1983, p. 107). This claim may seem mysterious, given that much of the time we may not be consciously thinking about our intention-in-action. But it is just a way of capturing the ontological point that whenever we act, we are *doing* something, and not merely being pushed along by our environment. So long as we are doing anything at all, our neurophysiological system is in some sense directed at fulfilling certain conditions of satisfaction, and thus we have an intention-in-action. Moreover, even when we are not consciously aware of our intention-in-action, we always have the capacity to produce a statement expressing it, as when we are interrupted and asked what we are doing.

To complete complex, temporally extended patterns of action, such as my trip to the office or writing a book, we must maintain an intention-in-action over time. Provided we do, both the prior intention, if there is one, and the intention-in-action remain causally effective throughout the action, even though in some cases the entire complex action could take years to complete. In such cases, we will at times have no conscious experience of our intentions, since intentions-in-action need not be

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[11] Searle characterizes the experience of acting as "a presentation of its conditions of satisfaction" (Searle, 1983, p. 88). That is, since one of the conditions of satisfaction of an intention-in-action is that the execution of that very intention bring about the action, the experience of one's intention causing one's movement is a conscious presentation to the agent of the conditions of satisfaction of the intention. (By analogy, veridical visual experience is a presentation of its conditions of satisfaction— the state of affairs that causes the experience.) Concerning this point, see Searle's discussion of Wilder Penfield's experiments in which involuntary bodily movements were caused in patients (Searle, 2001, p. 64; 1983, p. 89). Presumably what the subjects in the experiments were missing, which made their movements involuntary, was the experience of causing one's own movement. Searle suggests (2001, p. 47), borrowing a phrase from William James, that the experience of intention-in-action is the feeling of "effort". I tend to resist this suggestion, however, because it seems to me that we can also consciously experience action as effortless, though still under our control.

[12] Borrowing a useful concept introduced by Arthur Danto, we can say that for me traveling to the office is a *basic action*. (See, e.g., Arthur C. Danto (1965), "Basic Actions", *American Philosophical Quarterly* 2, pp. 141-48.) Searle discusses basic actions at Searle, 1983, p. 100. Briefly, a basic action is one that an agent can intend to do without having to intend to do any other actions as means of carrying out the first intention. For instance, a skilled typist can intend to type a sentence, without intending separately to type each letter in the sentence. Someone unfamiliar with a keyboard might instead need to intend to type each letter one by one. For the skilled typist, typing a sentence can be a basic action (indeed, typing a whole letter or essay might be). For the beginner, typing a single letter might be a basic action.

conscious. Yet these intentions remain "in force" so long as we continue the pattern of action aimed at carrying them out. In this they are analogous to software programs running in the background

on a computer while most of the machine's processing power is being used for other tasks.

Such patterns of action highlight an important role of the Background in enabling action. We already mentioned one role of the Background in action: To have the intention to do any action *A*—and thus to be able to carry out that intention and do *A*—an agent must understand what *A* is and must have the know-how and physical capacities necessary to perform *A*. The relevant understanding and abilities all depend on Background capacities. In particular, it is worth emphasizing the crucial role of the Background in the actual physical execution of intentions. Searle emphasizes that Background capacities are causal structures, the locus of "a certain category of neurophysiological causation" (1995, p. 129). As such, the Background is what explains *how* intentions can cause action—how the agent's neurophysiological system is able to translate intentional states into movements of the body.[13] But beyond this role, the Background also determines what counts as "an action" and at what level we exert intentional control over our actions. What I have in mind is the role of Background skills and capacities in tying together subsidiary actions to form complex actions and extended patterns of action.

Searle's favorite example of this role of Background capacities concerns learning to ski (1983, p. 150–51; 1992, p. 195). The novice skier follows explicit instructions about what movements to make while skiing. She learns to lean forward, keep her weight on the downhill ski, and so forth. The first-day beginner probably requires a separate intention to follow each of these instructions, and each movement she makes on the slope—each time she shifts her weight to turn while snowplowing, for instance—might count as a separate action, perhaps even with a distinct prior intention. But as the skier acquires skill, the situation changes in two ways. First, repeated practice in following the instructions leads her to develop physical capacities that, as Searle says, "enable the body to take over" (1983, p. 150). The skier no longer follows the instructions, consciously or unconsciously. Instead, she has developed Background capacities that enable her to perform in conformity with the instructions

without intentionally following them.[14] (She is still *acting* intentionally, but no longer *following the instructions* intentionally.) Indeed, eventually her Background capacities enable her to perform more efficaciously than would be possible by following explicit, codified instructions, as she learns to smoothly and automatically adjust to complex, changing conditions while speeding down the hill (1983, p. 151). Second, as the skier becomes an expert, many of the separate intentions she had to make as a novice simply drop out of the picture, and the unit or level of action at which she forms

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[13] Indeed, forming a prior intention probably just is a neurophysiological process of priming certain neural pathways so that the appropriate conditions for commencing the action will trigger bodily movement.

[14] As should be clear, this is one application of Searle's "Background causation" account of the role of rules in the causal explanation of human behavior (1995, pp. 137–47). Searle's approach to rule-following behavior strikes me as one of the richest, potentially most fruitful aspects of his conception of the Background.

intentions changes dramatically. As Searle says, "the beginning skier may require an intention to put weight on the downhill ski, an intermediate skier has the skill that enables him to have the intention 'turn left,' [and] a really expert skier may simply have the intention 'ski this slope'" (1992, p. 195). Searle summarizes this point as "intentionality tends to rise to the level of the Background ability." The more advanced and comprehensive our Background skills and abilities become, the broader and more general the content of our intentions may be.

To sum up, the following aspects of Searle's theory of intentionality and the Background are particularly pertinent to appreciating and evaluating the concept of *wú-wéi*.

1. Intentional action does not require a prior intention (2001, p. 45; 1983, p. 84), nor a conscious intention-in-action (2001, p. 47; 1983, p. 92). We can act immediately and spontaneously, without being conscious of what we are trying to do.

2. But all action contains an intention-in-action as a component (1983, p. 107). This is what distinguishes action from random or involuntary bodily movement: it is directed at conditions of satisfaction, and this directedness is something the agent causes and controls.

3. Through training and practice an agent can develop Background skills and abilities that enable her to act in accordance with rule-governed practices without intentionally following the rules either consciously or unconsciously (1995, pp. 137–47).

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4. "Intentionality rises to the level of the Background abilities."[15] The focus or content of an agent's prior intentions and intentions-in-action is relative to the scope and level of her Background competence. An inexpert agent may experience a complex chain or pattern of activity as a series of distinct actions each requiring a separate intention. A skilled expert may experience it as a single action, carried out with a single, high-level intention. Her Background capacities are so highly developed that all the subsidiary actions needed to carry out the complex action occur automatically, without the need for further thought or intention. In my view, philosophers tend to underestimate the amount of everyday activity that occurs in this way. Very much of our daily activity is performed automatically, as part of complex, higher-level actions or patterns of activity.

5. Intentionality "reaches all the way down to the bottom of the [Background] ability" (1992, p. 195; 1990, p. 293). Though an expert agent need not form a separate intention for each subsidiary action performed as part of a complex, higher-level action, all her voluntary subsidiary actions are still intentional. Their role in carrying out the higher-level intention means that it covers all of them. This feature of intentionality explains how we can carry out complex, temporally extended patterns of action with only a single intention. For instance, an agent might form an intention to improve his fitness by working out daily and thereby develop the habit of automatically going to the gym every evening at a set time without forming any further intentions.

6. The Background "consists of mental phenomena" (1983, p. 154) and manifests

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[15] John Searle (1990), "Response: The Background of Intentionality and Action", in E. LePore and R. Van Gulick, eds., *John Searle and His Critics* (Blackwell, 1990), p. 293. See also Searle, 1992, p. 195.

itself only when there is intentional content (1992, p. 196). The Background itself is not intentional, but it is not independent of intentionality, either. In effect, it is a label for the complex set of capacities needed to produce intentional phenomena, including action. It functions only when intentional phenomena, such as perception and action, are present, and thus if it is functioning, such phenomena are occurring. So even when an agent's actions seem to be generated directly by the Background—as is the case with automatic, habitual actions in which the agent has no conscious

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intentions—they are nevertheless fully intentional. They remain *actions,* caused by the agent's mental capacities, within the agent's control, and for which the agent is responsible. Another way of getting at this point is to say that the Background is a name for certain neurophysiological, causal capacities of the sort of creature that *acts,* rather than merely *moves.*[16] For such creatures, any voluntary movement at all invokes these capacities and thus is an action, which is intentional at some level of description. There is no such thing as action in which "the Background is so to speak present all the way up to the top, and there is no Intentionality" (1990, p. 294).

## 4. Wú-Wéi

*Wú-wéi* is among the most prominent normative ideals presented in the *Lǎo-zǐ Dào-dé-jīng* (also known, in an older romanization, as the *Lao-tzu* or the *Tao Te Ching*), and it plays a role in parts of the *Zhuāng-zǐ* (also *Chuang-tzu*), *Guǎn-zǐ,* and *Huái-nán-zǐ.* The word *wú* means roughly "absence" or "without". Literally, then, *wú-wéi* is the absence of *wéi,* a word that means roughly "to do" or "to act". *Wéi* probably refers to action undertaken intentionally, for some motive of the agent. The Mohist *Canons* explicate *wéi* as "intentional conduct" (*zhì xíng*). *Xíng,* the word rendered here as "conduct", refers to behavior, conduct, practice, or carrying out a plan. This suggests that a core component of *wú-wéi* is the absence of any purposeful pattern of activity directed by *zhì,* a word that refers to intention, purpose, motivation, or determination. Generally, then, we can hypothesize that *wú-wéi* will refer to not undertaking action intentionally, for the agent's own reasons. Doing nothing at all—literal inaction—would be *wú-wéi,* as would non-intentional or non-purposive activity, such as movement due to spontaneous reflexes or to the sympathetic nervous system.

    When we examine the *Dào-dé-jīng* and other early texts, this initial interpretive hypothesis turns out to be a good first step toward explaining the conceptual role of *wú-wéi,* though many details remain to be

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filled in.[17] The features of *wú-wéi* as characterized in the *Dào-dé-jīng* cluster around roughly three general ideas:

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[16] I do not know where to draw the line between creatures that do and do not fit into this category, but I am sure that it includes all primates and most other higher mammals. It certainly includes my two cats.
[17] I will ignore one family of uses of *wú-wéi,* the use in early Chinese "legalist" or Realpolitik texts to refer to the sovereign literally "doing nothing", while entrusting all administrative tasks to subordinates. Several passages in the *Zhuāngzǐ* also express this conception of *wú-wéi.*

(i)      the absence of individual initiative, judgment, motivation, or ambition;

along with

(ii)      the absence or minimization of the influence of cultural artifice, education, values, social norms, commands, or instructions;

and, as a result of the absence of the factors in (i) and (ii),

(iii)      the achievement of certain practical outcomes.

For convenience, we can assign headings to these three sorts of features based on prominent concepts in the text. The first two correspond to psychological states the text valorizes: (i) stillness or calm (*jìng*) and (ii) being plain (*sù*) or unadorned (*pú*, sometimes rendered "the uncarved block"). The third refers to the ideal state of affairs that results from attaining *wú-wéi*: (iii) being "self-so" or "so-of-itself" (*zì-rán*).

(i) The "stillness" group of features links *wú-wéi* to the absence of initiative, judgment, motivation, or ambition. *Wú-wéi* involves a form of stillness or calm (*jìng*), which follows from and is reflected in the absence or reduction of desire (*yù*), intention (*zhì*), thought (*sī*), choosing or decision (*qǔ*), grasping or commitment (*zhí*), and projects or affairs (*shì*).[18]

(ii) The "plainness" group contrasts *wú-wéi* with study or learning (*xué*), knowing or cleverness (*zhī, zhì*), and cultural adornment (*wén*). This group also links *wú-wéi* to namelessness (*wú míng*) and the absence of speech (*yán*). Namelessness opposes *wú-wéi* to education, culture, and norms instilled through socialization processes employing language—which is to say, most such processes from very young childhood on. For in the early Chinese theoretical framework, names are associated with

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learned normative roles: naming someone or something '*x*' determines how that person or thing should be treated and what duties the person is responsible for. Speech (*yán*) includes teaching, commands, inspiring tales of exemplary conduct, and probably any motivation instilled through culture or linguistic communication, including such things as advertising and public service announcements. The rejection of names and speech probably also entails a rejection of conceptualization in favor of a sort of direct, uncontaminated response to the world. (Thus the claim that the "five colors make people's eyes blind," for instance.[19]) We might say that whereas the features of the "stillness" group amount to a rejection of intentions, those in the "plainness" group amount (among other things) to a rejection of the capacity for intentional states that require language.

(iii) The "self-so" group refers to outcomes of *wú-wéi* both for the individual agent and as a political policy. This group emphasizes two main ideas. First, achieving the state of *wú-wéi* by removing the factors in the first two groups results in activity that conforms to natural processes, thus allowing things to happen "of themselves", without being produced or interfered with by the agent. Thus when the ruler practices

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[18] See, for instance, *Dào-dé-jīng* chapters 3, 10, 19, 29, 37, 48, 57, 63, and 64. (Citations are to chapters in the traditional text.)

[19] For this claim, see *Dào-dé-jīng* chapter 12. See also chapters 2, 3, 10, 18, 19, 32, 37, 43, 48, 64, and 65.

*wú-wéi,* things "transform of themselves" (*zì huà*), "settle themselves" (*zì dìng*), and "rectify themselves" (*zì zhèng*). Second, *wú-wéi* is practically efficacious: it tends to yield practical success, or at least prevent failure. The claims here go beyond the obvious point that we cannot fail to achieve our aims when we have none to begin with. For the text claims that though one takes no action (*wú-wéi*), nothing is left undone (*wú bù wéi*), and that only by *wú-wéi* or undertaking no affairs (*wú shì*) can one govern (*zhì*) the world and achieve sociopolitical "order". *Wú-wéi* is cited as a way to avoid failure (*bài*) and loss (*shī*) and to achieve success (*chéng*).[20]

    *Wú-wéi* is attained by emptying (*xū*) the heart of desire and motivation through a process described as "loss" (*sǔn*).[21] Presumably, the notion of "loss" is intended to resolve one of the paradoxical aspects of *wú-wéi*. If *wú-wéi* is the absence of any action motivated by the agent's intentions or aims, then we cannot intentionally pursue *wú-wéi,* on pain of thereby

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preventing ourselves from achieving it.[22] By contrast, if the process of achieving *wú-wéi* is not one of actively, intentionally purging our hearts of desires, aims, and projects, but of somehow just passively "losing" these, then the paradox might seem to be circumvented (though *wú-wéi* may remain paradoxical in other respects).

    The theoretically interesting passages in the *Zhuāng-zǐ* that mention *wú-wéi*—all of which fall outside the so-called "inner" chapters considered by some scholars to form the anthology's core—emphasize emptiness, stillness, tranquility, and the non-intentional character of natural processes, such as water welling up from a spring, the sky's covering the world, the earth's holding it up, and the shining of the sun and moon. The association of *wú-wéi* with natural processes underscores part of the normative justification for *wú-wéi:* by intentionally acting on their own initiative, agents separate themselves from the Way (*dào*), the natural process of the cosmos. *Wú-wéi* ensures that we flow along with the Way.

    "Arts of the Heart", Book 36 of the *Guǎn-zǐ,* helpfully contextualizes *wú-wéi* as follows:

> Thus the gentleman is not dazzled by likes, not compelled by dislikes. Tranquil and *wú-wéi,* he eliminates knowledge and reasons. His responding is not something he sets up; his movements are not something he selects. Error lies in employing things oneself; fault lies in change and transformation. Thus a ruler who has the Way, at rest he seems to lack consciousness, and in

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[20] See *Dào-dé-jīng* chapters 2, 3, 7, 10, 17, 29, 37, 43, 47, 48, 57, 63, 64, 65, and 75.

[21] See *Dào-dé-jīng* chapters 3, 16, and 48.

[22] The paradox of *wú-wéi* described here—which is only one of several paradoxical aspects of *wú-wéi*—is distinct from that discussed by Edward Slingerland (2003), *Effortless Action,* Oxford: Oxford University Press. Slingerland understands *wú-wéi* mainly in terms of an absence of effort, rather than an absence of intention or motivation, and so construes the paradox as the problem of how one can "try not to try", i.e., exert effort to not exert effort. In my view, Slingerland confuses two senses of "trying", "trying" in the sense of acting with an intention and in the sense of exerting effort to achieve an end. (Not all intentional action is effortful, and not all effortless action or movement is unintentional. Moreover, there is nothing paradoxical about intending to perform an action effortlessly.) Partly because of this confusion, he mischaracterizes *wú-wéi* and overlooks the deeper paradox associated with *wú-wéi,* that of how one can act without intention, given that intentionality is a defining feature of action. (I discuss Slingerland's interpretation of *wú-wéi* at length in a forthcoming review in *Philosophy East and West* 57:1 (2007).)

responding to things he seems to be their mate.[23]

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To this an internal commentary adds:

> "Tranquil and *wú-wéi,* he eliminates knowledge and reasons" describes being empty (*xū*) and plain (*sù*). "His responding is not something he sets up; his movements are not something he selects," this describes going along with things (*yīn*). Going along with things is relinquishing oneself and taking things as one's guide/model. Sensing and only then responding, this is "not something he sets up". Movement that follows the [natural, proper] patterns, this is "not something he selects".

Elsewhere the commentary tells us that "the Way of *wú-wéi* is going along with things (*yīn*)." This accords with a description from the Han era *Huái-nán-zǐ,* which explains that "'*wú-wéi*' refers to not acting in advance of things. 'Nothing is not done' (*wú-bù-wéi*) refers to what is done in going along with things."[24] Another *Huái-nán-zǐ* passage clarifies that "'*wú-wéi*' does not refer to being inert and unmoving, but to having nothing issue from the self."[25]

To sum up, *wú-wéi* refers in some contexts to non-interference with things by literally "doing nothing". In other contexts, in its most literal use, it seems to refer to a sort of untrained, uncultured, non-linguistic, unmotivated, unpremeditated or unplanned, non-intentional reaction to the particular situation, in which the agent empties or relinquishes himself and flows along with things. *Wú-wéi* activity conforms to the natural patterns of the world and for that reason is efficacious.


## 5. *The Philosophical Motivation for* Wú-Wéi

*Wú-wéi* as I've just characterized it may seem nearly unrecognizable as a form of human activity at all. Why then did some early Daoists valorize it? They may have been motivated by a number of philosophical and religious beliefs.

First, they were working in a philosophical context in which knowledge, reasoning, judgment, and action were all explained in terms of the exercise of practical abilities. For classical Chinese thinkers, knowledge is explained by appeal to know-how, specifically the ability to distinguish (*biàn*) different kinds (*lèi*) of things and respond to them

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correctly—for instance, by doing and praising good acts and avoiding and condemning bad ones. Distinguishing different kinds of things is in effect a type of pattern recognition, and in early Chinese thought the same basic process of pattern recognition that explains knowledge is taken as the basis for explanations of perception, judgment, reasoning (and thus deliberation), and action. Moreover, action is treated mainly at the level of patterns of skilled activity, not individual acts issuing

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[23] See Tang Xiaochun and Li Zhenxing (1995), *Xīn-yì Guǎn-zǐ Dú-běn* [Newly Explicated Guanzi Reader], Taipei: San Min, vol. 2, p. 668. This and all other translations are my own.

[24] See He Ning (1998), *Huái-nán-zǐ Jí-shì* [Collected Commentaries on *Huái-nán-zǐ*], Beijing: Zhonghua, Vol. I, p. 48.

[25] He Ning (1998), Vol. II, p. 661.

from individual pieces of practical reasoning. These features of early Chinese philosophers' conceptual scheme made it easy to view the perfected agent as someone for whom reasoning, judgment, and action effectively collapse into an ongoing process of perception and skilled response.[26]

Second, the writers of the texts probably held a deeply romantic, quasi-religious vision of the cosmos as possessing an inherent normative order or Way (*Dào*), from which intentional activity and cultural artifice separate us. Other thinkers, such as the Mohists, had attempted to ground their normative ethics in the cosmic normative order exemplified by *tiān* (the sky, heaven, nature) itself. Such attempts raise the question of why, if such a natural order exists, human beings do not automatically conform to it, since after all we too are part of nature. The answer to this question given by some Daoist texts is that we *can* conform to it automatically, if only we eliminate interference from cultural influences and our own value judgments and desires, which are inherently partial and incomplete, and thus prevent us from flowing along with the comprehensive unity of the Way. Another aspect of this romantic vision was the model provided by natural processes. *Tiān* (the sky, nature) takes no action, yet natural cycles proceed and living things grow and reproduce "by themselves". Analogously, ideal human activity ought to be something that just occurs "by itself", as an aspect of natural processes.

Third, the political aspects of *wú-wéi* may have been motivated partly by the many disastrous, heavy-handed political, social, and military policies adopted by despotic rulers during the chaotic Warring States era, when the primary sources for the doctrine of *wú-wéi*

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were written. Against a background of frequent, catastrophic wars and disruptive interference in people's social, economic, and personal lives, a laissez-faire political program of "doing nothing", naïve as it sounds, may have seemed prudent and enlightened—indeed, to some extent it genuinely would have been preferable to the available alternatives. The distressing social and psychological consequences of untrammeled desire and ambition in the turbulent, rapidly transforming social and political climate of the era probably also inspired the conservative advice to reduce desires and "do nothing". At some level this advice is akin to a contemporary social critic suggesting that we can enhance our well-being by moving out of the fast lane, being less ambitious and covetous, and living a quieter, more focused life.

Fourth, to some early Chinese thinkers, the normative ethical and political debates between leading schools of thought such as the Confucians, Mohists, and their opponents seemed interminable and in principle irresolvable. On the one hand, each side's premises seemed to beg the question against the other's. On the other, some thinkers seem to have become convinced that there simply are no correct general ethical norms (I will return to this point in the next section). Yet in practice we often have the experience of acting appropriately, without invoking explicit, general ethical norms, by responding immediately to the particular situation. This experience may have inspired advocates of *wú-wéi* to believe that the ethically perfected agent is one

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[26] A preliminary articulation of this conceptual scheme is presented in my Ph.D. dissertation, Chris Fraser (1999), *Similarity and Standards: Language, Cognition, and Action in Chinese and Western Thought,* University of Hong Kong. A more well-developed, but partial version of my account is found in Chris Fraser (2002), "Mohism", *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mohism/).

who simply "reacts to", or "goes along with", the particular situation in a natural, appropriate way, without conscious deliberation, judgment, or intention. *Wú-wéi* may thus have seemed to provide an answer to normative issues.

Finally, the smooth, flowing, automatic response to the environment characteristic of perfected skill usually involves no deliberation and often no conscious intention at all. In contexts in which skill mastery allows us to "let the body take over" (Searle 1983, p. 150), the advice to be "empty", "self-so", and "do nothing" is overstated, but not utterly preposterous. (I will return to this point below.) Though this suggestion is speculative, I suspect that advocates of *wú-wéi* were impressed by the phenomenon of skill mastery and extrapolated from it in two ways. On the one hand, in light of their metaphysical and religious beliefs, these thinkers could easily have thought that *wú-wéi* was an accurate characterization and a reliable means of aesthetically excellent, normatively correct action in all contexts, not only those involving patterns of action in which the agent has become expert after long practice and

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habituation. At the same time, they may have thought that the scope of skill mastery could be expanded to comprise all of our activity. Life as a whole would then form a single flow of skilled action that the ideal agent could perform in the same immediate, automatic way that you or I ride a bicycle or drive a car.

## 6. *A Contemporary Construal of* Wú-Wéi

As a charitable philosophical approach to understanding *wú-wéi,* I want to suggest that at least some of the descriptions of it in ancient texts are a roughly accurate, though exaggerated characterization of the sort of automatic action that occurs when an agent relying mainly on Background capacities, without prior intentions or conscious intentions-in-action, performs a series of subsidiary or habitual actions as part of a larger pattern of action, such as performance of a skill.[27] In taking *wú-wéi* to be this sort of "automatic action", I am characterizing it more narrowly than the original texts do. This proposal does not cover all aspects of *wú-wéi*. In particular, it does not cover the political aspects, nor the use of *wú-wéi* to describe processes of nature. Moreover, it requires that we jettison religious and metaphysical aspects of *wú-wéi* that the writers of the *Dào-dé-jīng* and other texts would have regarded as core parts of the concept, such as how it is action driven by the *Dào* of the cosmos.

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[27] I want to be careful here not to suggest that this sort of activity is *wholly* subsumed by the Background. The sort of activity that *wú-wéi* theorists had in mind might have included not only pure Background activity, but any sort of action that phenomenologically appears not to issue from conscious deliberation or judgment, especially deliberation or judgment based on standards or practices involving a high degree of artifice. Besides activity issuing directly from non-intentional Background capacities, this description might cover other sorts of automatic, non-deliberate responses to particular situations, such as action issuing from intentions that have settled into the status of dispositions. Consider, for instance, intentions to perform certain long-term or habitually repeated actions, such as eating a certain diet in order to lose weight. Such intentions can become part of our dispositional structure, but they still have intentional content and so are not purely Background capacities. Another example might be actions that issue from spontaneous, unconscious intentions-in-action, such as when I just naturally pet my cat after he jumps into my lap. One difficulty in pinning down just what sort of activity *wú-wéi* refers to, of course, is that the ancient sources are imprecise about what exactly *wú wéi* is. To my knowledge, they give no concrete examples aside from actually just doing nothing at all.

This characterization also discards most of the elements of *wú-wéi* having to do with "plainness" and lack of

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education, the second of the three sets of features identified in section 4. But it does retain a sense of *wú-wéi* activity as guided by the world rather than by the agent's intentions. I will argue that the doctrine of *wú-wéi* as presented in the texts is untenable—in effect, a philosopher's fantasy. But the concept of *wú-wéi* is not entirely fantastic. It contains elements that can be extracted and developed as part of plausible contemporary views in action theory and ethics.

As a provisional attempt along these lines, I'm now going to discuss a stipulatively defined conception of *wú-wéi,* rather than the notion presented in the early texts. The sort of *wú-wéi*-like activity I have in mind can be characterized by three features.

> (1)     It is a non-intentional, immediate and unpremeditated, typically efficacious response to the particular situation; in which
> (2)     the agent experiences her movements as reactions to, and guided by, things in the environment, rather than issuing from her own initiative; and
> (3)     her conscious experience is empty and still, free of desires, thoughts, or intentions.

This characterization preserves many of the attributes of *wú-wéi* as described in ancient texts, with the notable exception that it does not rule out education, training, knowledge, culture, and language. These latter factors I think typically are causally necessary conditions for development of the capacity for *wú-wéi*-like activity as just characterized.

I want to suggest that activity manifesting the first feature—a non-intentional, immediate, efficacious response to the particular situation—occurs as part of most normal action, provided we understand the description "non-intentional" to apply at the level of subsidiary actions or movements, and not at the level of the overall action or flow of activity. This feature seems to me to capture one aspect of the role of Background capacities in action. The subsidiary movements that make up an action will typically involve immediate responses to environment caused and guided by Background abilities. Examples include subtly shifting the position of one's fingers in response to the feel of the keys while typing on a computer or transferring one's body weight from one side to another in response to the shape of the hill while skiing. These responses are non-intentional insofar as they themselves generally are not part of the content of the agent's intention, and the agent usually does not form any discrete intentions concerning them. (Of course,

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they are still intentional insofar as they are parts of an overall flow of intentional action, but I will set this point aside until the next section.) Searle's insightful account of how rule-following behavior can become part of an agent's Background capacities (1995, pp. 137ff.) shows how even the performance of complex social practices can become *wú-wéi*-like in this sense.

Unlike the first feature, the second and third features describe particular sorts of conscious experiences, and thus cannot plausibly be said to apply to most or all normal actions. In most actions, even if portions of the action manifest the first feature,

the agent may be consciously thinking about something else, and so the second and third features may not hold. The second feature—experiencing one's movements as reactions to the environment—might hold only in the performance of certain skills, when the agent is consciously experiencing the sort of immediate response characterized by the first feature. (Familiar examples of such skills might include skiing, tennis, and driving.) The third feature—the experience of a sort of "empty" conscious state—is probably crucial to the highly focused performance of challenging skills, such as those found in competitive sports or the performing arts. But it is sometimes manifested in the performance of everyday habitual actions as well. I suspect we all regularly have experiences corresponding to the third feature for short stretches of activity—as when we walk down the street without thinking about anything in particular—but they are so fleeting that most of us generally pay little attention to them.

The second and third features may seem mysterious, so let me explain how I think we can understand them.

The second feature—experiencing one's movements as reactions to, and guided by, the environment, rather than something one initiates—is an attempt to articulate the phenomenological experience of "world-guidedness" associated with efficacious skilled action. By "world-guidedness", I mean initially that such action reliably responds to and is guided by what is "really out there", without bias or distortion due to misperception or misjudgment by the agent.[28] This characterization

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is unacceptably vague, but I hope that we can take it as given, for the sake of discussion, that skilled action does manifest some sort of relatively uncontroversial world-guidedness. But beyond this general, uncontroversial point, I want to suggest that in *wú-wéi*-like activity, the experience of action becomes in some respects similar to the experience of perception. Perception is world-guided in a way that intentional action is not. In Searle's terminology, it is characterized by a world-to-mind direction of intentional causation. Perceptual judgments are produced in us without intentional activity on our part. Yet perception is not entirely passive, either. The process of detecting sensory stimuli and causing perceptual judgments is constructive, involving the exercise of Background capacities that structure perceptual interpretation (1995, p. 132). I suggest that within the context of an overall pattern of intentional action, with a mind-to-world direction of intentional causation, certain of the agent's responses to the environment can be thought of as having a world-to-mind direction of causation, somewhat analogous to that we find in perception.

The idea is roughly that the Background functions as a kind of "program" that determines how we perceive and respond to situations. As Searle explains, it enables perceptual interpretation, provides motivational dispositions, establishes certain sorts of readiness, and disposes us to certain forms of behavior (1995, pp. 132–37). In certain contexts, we can simply activate this program and thereafter allow our movements to be triggered and guided directly by features of the situation, rather than

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[28] An obvious question to ask here is how the skilled agent can be justified in taking her bodily movements to be direct responses to how things are in the environment. Couldn't she be deluded? The answer is that her justification is grounded in the efficacy—the reliability—of her skill: the racket connects and the tennis ball flies over the net, or the skier successfully makes her way down the hill without falling. The world-guidedness and reliability that are partly constitutive of skill seem to me to be the core of the Daoist response to skepticism.

by conscious thought. Of course, such responses are not purely passive, non-intentional reactions, as described by ancient proponents of *wú-wéi*. Contrary to the passage from "Arts of the Heart" quoted earlier, much "setting up" goes on before we are capable of them. Moreover, they are contingent on our first intentionally activating the Background "program" as part of carrying out some higher-level intention, and they can be "deactivated" at any time by our changing our higher-level intention.[29] Thus they are in every respect expressions

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of the self and its intentionality, and not merely passive or involuntary reflexes. Yet within the context of some higher-level pattern of intentional action, we can experience our movements as to some extent elicited and guided by the world.

The third feature is the conscious experience of feeling empty and still, free of desire, thought, and intention. This feature represents an attempt to capture a distinctive aspect of the experience of acting in cases where Background capacities are enough to carry us through a pattern of action without conscious intentions, and conscious attention to individual subsidiary actions (or to anything at all) would in fact tend to interfere with efficacious performance. Here I think characterizations such as "empty", "desireless", "without thought", "without choosing", and so forth misdescribe or exaggerate what actually occurs, but in an understandable way. For much of the typical waking day, our conscious awareness is unfocused, rapidly shifting, and divided in several directions at once. Compared with this sort of everyday, busy or "noisy" conscious experience, the conscious awareness of an agent focused on the performance of a challenging skill task may indeed seem "empty" and "still" or "calm". (For many of us, I suspect, merely to suspend subvocalization—inner "talking to ourselves"—is enough to make our conscious awareness feel "empty".) In fact, I suggest, the consciousness of such an agent is not literally "empty"—it could not be, since consciousness by definition always has content—but just focused in a distinctive way. I can think of two fairly obvious ways to characterize this focus. The first is in terms of the center/periphery distinction Searle helpfully introduces in mapping the main structural features of consciousness (1992, pp. 137–39). We can be conscious of a vast amount of information simultaneously, but we automatically push most of this content to the periphery of our attention, shifting it back to the center only when it is needed. As Searle points out, the center/periphery distinction is often mischaracterized as a distinction between conscious awareness and the unconscious (1992, p. 138). But many things of which we are said to be "unconscious" are actually conscious, just peripherally so.

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[29] Searle himself seems to lean toward a similar explanation when he discusses such responses to the environment in the context of trained athletes whose bodies respond to stimuli such as a starting gun or a tennis serve in less time than it takes to consciously perceive the stimuli (Searle, 2001, pp. 291–92). As Searle emphasizes, the readiness to respond to stimuli in this way is still the product of intentionality and remains under intentional control. As such, it remains different from genuine reflex movements, such as pulling one's hand away from a hot stove, which are not under intentional control. Hubert Dreyfus has also suggested that skillful coping in general involves world-to-mind causation, though I think his characterization of such action paints a false contrast when he says, "In making a backhand stroke, for example, we do not experience our intentions as causing our body to move; rather, we experience the situation as drawing the movement out of us." (See Dreyfus (2001), "Phenomenological Description Versus Rational Reconstruction", *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 217: pp. 181–96, especially p. 185.) I don't see why we cannot experience the movement *both* as caused by our intentions *and* as elicited by the situation.

One reason the conscious experience of an agent immersed in a flow of action may feel "empty", at least metaphorically speaking, is that the center of her conscious attention is taken up completely by the environment with which she is coping. Desires, intentions, and other thoughts may still be present, but they are pushed to the far periphery because of the demands of the skilled task.

The second explanation of the quasi-empty state is that an agent immersed in a flow of action may have a near-total lack of *self*-consciousness. By "self-consciousness" here I mean conscious awareness of one's own experiences and mental states, obtained by directing one's attention toward them (cf. Searle 1992, pp. 142–43). In the sort of flow of action we are describing, the agent's consciousness may feel "empty" because her attention is focused entirely on the *object* of her experience—the environment and things in it to which she is responding—and not on the experience itself, nor on her own thoughts. In fact, her consciousness has content—namely, representations of her environment—but the focus on the environment and the absence of self-consciousness combine to make her conscious experience feel especially "transparent", as if it were in some sense "empty".

Explaining this third feature—the emptiness experience—by appeal to an absence of self-consciousness puts it in tension with the second feature—the experience of world-guidedness—which is in fact a form of self-consciousness. But the tension can be resolved by appeal to the center/periphery distinction. We can say that though the experience of world-guidedness involves a distinctive sort of consciousness experience of one's movement, the content of this experience usually lies at the periphery of the agent's conscious awareness. Hence the center of the agent's consciousness may still be experienced as "empty".

I suggest that the *wú-wéi*-like state characterized by these features is one that genuinely exists, provided we understand it to obtain at the level of subsidiary actions by which we execute some higher-level action, and not at the "top" level at which we formulate and carry out intentions. Moreover, I want to suggest that ancient Chinese writers were right to valorize this state, for at least three reasons: It is intrinsically good, practically efficacious, and, as another side of its efficaciousness, it may play an indispensable role in the exercise of virtuous judgment. Let me briefly expand on these three points.

The experience of *wú-wéi*-like activity, as I've tried to characterize it, is typically associated with the excellent performance of skilled activity. (Indeed, it may approach the status of a causally necessary condition for

truly exceptional performance.) I suggest the experience of *wú-wéi*-like activity may bring with it an inherent sense of satisfaction arising from the adept exercise of skill. It also typically produces gratifying feelings of normatively appropriate spontaneity and of connecting with the world and feeling fully at home there. As such, it seems to be a deeply satisfying experience, one that probably has intrinsic value in itself, beyond the value of the excellent performances in which it is manifested.[30] I think the

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[30] Obviously, other factors besides skill mastery and the occurrence of a *wú-wéi*-like state play a role in determining whether, all things considered, a particular sort of performance counts as a good activity or not. Consider the case of a masterful sociopath, who tortures and murders the innocent in a skillful, *wú-wéi*-like manner. Clearly, any good inherent in his skillful performance is massively outweighed by the injustice and pain inflicted on his victims.

regular experience of *wú-wéi*-like probably contributes to the overall excellence of a human life.[31] These points make it easy to understand how an ancient thinker might have been inspired to suggest that the best life would be one in which all of life took place in a state akin to *wú-wéi,* as a continual experience of "flow".

In *wú-wéi*-like activity, reliable, well-honed Background capacities take over the guidance and execution of action, responding automatically to the particular situation with a sensitivity and speed that cannot be matched by deliberate, conscious thought and intention. For this reason, such activity generally tends to be practically successful. This is obvious in the case of skills. But I wish to suggest that one of the insights of Daoism is that it may apply to many aspects of life.[32] In some decision-making situations, for instance, once the relevant facts, principles, and goals have been identified and rationally evaluated, the normatively or prudentially most justified response to a situation may sometimes be found most effectively by setting deliberation and ratiocination aside and trusting our Background capacities, manifested in *wú-wéi*-like state,

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to guide us. (This is not to suggest that we cannot then go on to cite reasons that explicitly justify judgments reached in this way.) I assume that this is just what we typically think of as trusting in expert intuition or expert experience. Judgments delivered by our Background capacities in this way may sometimes be *more* reliable than those reached through an explicit process of reasoning.[33] This might sound dangerously close to the advice one would find in the latest pop-psychology self-help best seller. Yet I think it correctly captures aspects of the exercise of rationality and of how we actually do reach many judgments.

My third point is an extension of the second. If the exercise of Background capacities in a *wú-wéi*-like state sometimes facilitates prudentially appropriate judgment and action, then the same holds for ethical judgment and action. Interestingly, one passage in the *Zhuāngzǐ* (Book 18) hints at just such a connection between *wú-wéi* and ethical judgment, claiming that "In the world, right and wrong in the end cannot be settled; yet *wú-wéi* can settle right and wrong."[34] Ancient Daoist writers were deeply impressed with the limitations of normative theories and explicit normative standards in guiding action.[35] They emphasized that a capacity for practical judgment was needed to guide action in particular cases. Even if a general ethical

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[31] Philip J. Ivanhoe has argued for a similar claim in an interesting paper entitled "Spontaneity as a Normative Ideal in Early Chinese Philosophy", presented at "Taking Confucianism Seriously", a symposium held at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, June 28-29, 2004.

[32] The famous Cook Ding story in the *Zhuāng-zǐ* seems to me an illustration of the practical application of a *wú-wéi*-like state. Despite his tremendous skill, Cook Ding does not have superhuman powers that carry him through his work effortlessly, without obstacles. He still faces "hard parts". But his response is to focus his attention on the situation, letting self-consciousness and non-relevant content shift away to the periphery of conscious awareness, and then let his Background capacities flow. The story concerns the performance of a skilled task, but the example set by Cook Ding is intended to apply generally, as Lord Wén Hùi concludes that from the cook's words, we learn how to "nourish life".

[33] An example of this may be so-called rational akratic action, when an agent acts against his all-things-considered best judgment, yet is rational to do so, because his best judgment was in fact faulty in some way. (Dan Robins brought this sort of case to my attention.)

[34] For the quoted passage, see Chen Guying (1999), *Zhuāng-zǐ Jīn-zhù Jīn-yì* [Zhuangzi: Contemporary Commentary and Interpretation], Taipei: Commercial Press, p. 468.

[35] I have in mind, for instance, the writers of books 2 and 17 of the *Zhuāng-zǐ,* the "Discourse on Equalizing Things" and "Autumn Waters".

norm is available, neither the exact features of the situation that trigger action guided by the norm nor the exact content of the action can be specified in advance.[36] (Hence in action we usually do not have intentions with such precisely specified conditions of satisfaction.) Both the triggering and the content of the action depend on Background capacities for pattern recognition

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and for skillfully adjusting one's responses to particular situations. In case of a virtuous agent, the exercise of these capacities may often take place in a *wú-wéi*-like state, and such a state could play a crucial, perhaps indispensable role in determining the virtuous agent's response to complex ethical situations.

## 7. Wú-wéi: *A Critique*

The discussion in the preceding section focused entirely on what I called subsidiary actions, which occur as parts of higher-level actions or patterns of action. I suggested that if we temporarily set aside the context of the higher-level action of which such subsidiary actions are a part and just consider them in themselves, they can manifest a state with some of the features associated with *wú-wéi*. During the performance of a higher-level action, an agent may indeed sometimes experience subsidiary actions as *wú-wéi*-like. This phenomenon may explain part of the ancient Daoists' fascination with *wú-wéi*. Provided it is characterized in a sufficiently restricted way, we can say that a *wú-wéi*-like state genuinely exists, that it is an ideal genuinely worth endorsing, and that its achievement can contribute to a good life.

But the *wú-wéi*-like state I've been discussing is of course not the *wú-wéi* of the ancient texts. Moreover, when we shift our attention back to the overall flow of action, rather than subsidiary actions, we quickly see that neither overall nor subsidiary actions are really *wú-wéi* in the ancient sense, for two main reasons. First, *wú-wéi* as literally presented in the ancient texts is a state free of any influence from the desires, goals, or values of the agent and largely free of the influence of language, education, and culture. Against this, we can point out that in most cases, a substantial portion of the Background capacities that enable *wú-wéi*-like activity to occur will have been acquired intentionally, through deliberate training and education, and will be largely the products of the agent's motivations, values, culture, and so forth. Some of our Background capacities are innate, hard-wired into the structure of our brains and bodies. But many are acquired through patterns of activity that are definitely not *wú-wéi*.

Second, and more important, the subsidiary actions I characterized as *wú-wéi*-like always occur as part of higher-level intentional actions or patterns of activity. As Searle explains, the subsidiary actions are thus intentional as well, for the higher-level intentionality permeates

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[36] Partly because of the idiosyncratic way in which early Chinese writers thought about explicit normative standards—they conceived of them as models or paradigms, rather than as general, abstract descriptions—these aspects of action tend to lead Daoist writers toward a radical particularism in ethics. Some of them seem to think—on the basis of not very convincing arguments—that there simply are no general ethical norms. But these writers are not completely off base in noticing that we do not have intentions about the most concrete features of our actions (precisely how we move our arms and legs, to take an extreme example). Of course, as Searle suggests, we do have higher-level intentions, which apply no matter what the concrete features are.

all of the component actions and movements that make up an action, even if the action is some long-term pattern of activity such as learning Cantonese or training for the Olympics. (To repeat a remark of Searle's cited earlier, "Intentionality reaches down to the bottom level of the voluntary actions" (1990, p. 293).) Fundamentally, all of this activity is part of "doing *x*", where *x* is the content of the higher-level intention. The agent's capacity to perform subsidiary actions in a *wú-wéi*-like manner does not actually make them non-intentional. It merely enables the agent to shift the intentions she frames to a higher level. ("Intentionality rises to the level of the Background abilities" (1990, p. 293).) In principle, she could always shift downward again and form a separate intention for each subsidiary action.[37]

We can make the same point by noting that in real life action typically occurs not in discrete bits, such as the contrived example of raising one's arm, but as what Searle calls "a continuous flow of intentional behavior" (1990, p. 293). Much of what we do in the course of this flow can be carried out in a *wú-wéi*-like state. But the flow itself is intentional, and thus all the activity that constitutes it is intentional. Non-intentional Background capacities sometimes carry us through extended segments of the flow. But with the possible exception, in a limited range of cases, of activity directed at filling basic biological needs, these capacities are always employed as part of a pattern of intentional action. The tennis champion may return service automatically, without a single conscious thought. But first she must intentionally set out to play the game.

So it seems to me that the ancient Chinese conception of *wú-wéi* is based on a fundamental misconception of action. The doctrine of *wú-wéi* is in effect the idea that all of life could slip into the non-intentional Background. But as Searle explains, the Background is a background *to* intentionality. It functions only when activated by intentional content (1990, p. 294). All action, even if it appears to issue directly from Background capacities, is ultimately intentional or rooted in intentional action.

Motivated partly by their religious and metaphysical beliefs, certain ancient Daoists seem to have thought they could isolate the phenomenon of *wú-wéi*-like skilled or habitual activity and detach it from the

context of an intentional flow of action and the desires, values, education, and social norms typically incorporated into any such context. By taking the self and agency out of the picture in this way, these theorists sought to ground all action in the *Dào* itself, giving it a sort of normative authority. This aim explains the false contrasts their texts draw between "acting" (*wéi*) and activity issuing from the self (*jǐ*), on the one hand, and "responding" (*yìng*) or "going along" (*yīn*) and activity impelled by external "things" (*wù*), on the other. In fact, of course, "responding" does not properly contrast with "acting": it is one *kind* of acting. Action does not issue either from the self or from things, but from causal interaction between the self *and* things.

We might be tempted to say that, taken literally, *wú-wéi* is a vision of all of life as a single basic action, within which everything we do is but a series of subsidiary actions, requiring no separate intentions. But such a vision would still not fit the literal

[37] Part of Searle's thesis of the Background, of course, is that any such shift of intentions downward would have to bottom out at some level of brute physical capacities—some minimal level of intentional causation of bodily movement, such as causing individual muscles to contract—or else action would be impossible.

description of *wú-wéi,* for life conceived of as a single, extended action would still be a flow of intentional activity. Even if life were just one long downhill ski run, we would still need to intentionally push off at the top. Much as some early Daoists would have like to relinquish their capacity for agency in exchange for the metaphysical comfort and normative authority of having their every movement be guided by the world in itself, humans cannot avoid exercising agency, for to relinquish it is already to exercise it.

[p. 91]

*Chinese Glossary*

*bài* 敗
*biàn* 辯
*chéng* 成
*dào* 道
*Dào-dé-jīng* 道德經
*Guǎn-zǐ* 管子
*Huái-nán-zǐ* 淮南子
*jǐ* 己
*jìng* 靜
*Lǎo-zǐ* 老子
*lèi* 類
*pú* 樸
*qǔ* 取
*shī* 失
*shì* 事
*sī* 思
*sù* 素
*sǔn* 損
*tiān* 天
*wéi* 為
*wén* 文
*wú* 無
*wù* 物
*wú bù wéi* 無不為
*wú míng* 無名
*wú shì* 無事
*wú wéi* 無為
*xíng* 行
*xū* 虛
*xué* 學
*yán* 言
*yīn* 因
*yìng* 應
*yù* 欲
*zhì* 志
*zhì xíng* 志行
*zhì* 治

*zhī* 知
*zhí* 執
*zhì* 智
*zì dìng* 自定
*zì huà* 自化
*zì zhèng* 自正
*Zhuāng-zǐ* 莊子
*zì-rán* 自然