

*Effortless Action: Wu-wei as Conceptual Metaphor and Spiritual Ideal in Early China*. By Edward Slingerland. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. Pp. xii + 352. \$60.00.

This provocative work is the most ambitious general study of pre-Qin thought to appear in more than a decade. It deals with what is increasingly recognized as one of the period's key themes, the ethical ideal of perfected action and the processes of cultivation, or uncultivation, by which it might be achieved. The book has two specific aims, one substantive, one methodological (p. vii). The substantive aim is to show that the notion of *wu-wei* 無為, which Slingerland renders as “effortless action,” functioned as a shared ideal and problematic for both Daoists and Confucians and that internal tensions in this ideal motivated much of the development of Warring States thought (5). The methodological aim is to illustrate the fruitfulness of conceptual metaphor theory, familiar from the work of Lakoff and Johnson, by employing it to articulate and support the book's substantive theses (vii).

For Slingerland, *wu-wei* is “a state of personal harmony in which actions flow freely and instantly from one's spontaneous inclinations...and yet nonetheless accord perfectly with the dictates of the situation at hand, display an almost supernatural efficacy, and (in the Confucian context at least) harmonize with the demands of

conventional morality” (7). He expands on this characterization in various ways, without making it entirely clear how all the features he identifies fit together. On the one hand, he explains that *wu-wei* is a phenomenological feature of the agent’s subjective mental state: “*wu-wei* properly refers not to what is actually happening (or not happening) in the realm of observable action but rather to...the phenomenological state of the doer” (7), primarily one of effortlessness and unselfconsciousness (29–33). But *wu-wei* is also “action that...accords in every particular with the normative order of the cosmos” (5), so beyond its phenomenological features, it must include an objective normative component as well. Another remark suggests that *wu-wei* fundamentally is not a phenomenological state after all, since “it represents not a transitory state but rather a set of dispositions” (7). Probably these various statements are meant to emphasize that the crux of *wu-wei* is to achieve and sustain a certain sort of psychological state, which then reliably generates effortless, normatively appropriate, efficacious action.

The phrase ‘*wu-wei*’ plays essentially no role in Confucian texts and is absent from large chunks of the *Zhuangzi* 莊子. So Slingerland’s thesis that *wu-wei* is the joint ideal of both Daoist and Confucian thought faces a daunting justificatory challenge, which he proposes to meet by applying conceptual metaphor theory (10). On his interpretation, *wu-wei* is not to be understood literally, as “non-doing,” since in

the state denoted by *wu-wei*, the agent is not actually inactive, doing nothing at all

(11). This gap between literal meaning and actual reference indicates that the term

*'wu-wei'* functions metaphorically, referring to “a metaphorically conceived

situation” in which action occurs even though the agent exerts no effort (11).

Slingerland hypothesizes that *wu-wei* became a technical term for effortless action

because it is the most general of a network of conceptual metaphors for effortlessness

and unselfconsciousness, including families of metaphors for “following” (29), “ease”

(30), and “forgetting” (33). This network expresses a unified, “deeper conceptual

structure,” appeal to which justifies the claim that “apparently diverse ideals of

perfected action” are in fact articulations and developments of a single metaphorically

conceived ideal, though the term of art denoting it—*'wu-wei'*—may not appear in a

particular text (11).

Once we have a grip on the conceptual structure of *wu-wei* through the families

of metaphors that constitute it, we can identify *wu-wei* as a central problematic of

pre-Qin thought and trace its development by examining the use of these metaphors in

texts from the *Book of Odes* 詩經 and *Book of History* 書經 (chapter 1) through the

*Xunzi* 荀子 (chapter 7). Each text presents its own strategy for achieving *wu-wei*,

responding dialectically to difficulties in the approaches of earlier texts (12).

These strategies tend to fall into two camps, which Slingerland labels

“internalist” and “externalist” (12). The former, represented by Mencius, the *Daodejing* 道德經, and Zhuangzi, assume that each of us by nature possesses sufficient resources to reach the perfected state. All we need to do is allow our inherent potential to manifest itself. The latter, represented by Xunzi and the *Analects*, hold that we do not possess such resources. The perfected state can be attained only by extensive training in practices to which, without education, we would not naturally gravitate. Both paths are subject to difficulties, arising largely from what Slingerland calls the “paradox of *wu-wei*” (12), his label for a tension implicit in the conception of effortless, perfected action as a state that we need to work to achieve. “How,” he asks, “can a program of spiritual striving result in a state that lies beyond striving? It would seem that the very act of striving would inevitably ‘contaminate’ the end-state” (6). In Slingerland’s account of the dialectical development of pre-Qin thought, each text proposes ways of resolving this tension yet ultimately runs aground on it. The dialectic ends in an aporia (19, 267).

This is a rich, stimulating work, full of interpretive insights that shed light on conceptions of ethical perfection in early Chinese thought. Slingerland has focused squarely on a distinctive theme of pre-Qin discourse, the valorization of spontaneous, immediate, yet appropriate action. He rightly explains that this theme follows directly from the Chinese model of knowledge as skill, which yields “an ideal of perfectly

skilled action rather than comprehensive theoretical knowledge” (4). (More precisely, we should say that on the skill model of knowledge, theoretical knowledge is itself construed as a form of skill.) He insightfully notes that “what *wu-wei* represents is a perfection of a unique and ultimate skill,” that of being “a fully realized human being and embodying the Way” (9). His readings of many textual passages are perceptive and thought-provoking. The book draws on a wide range of secondary literature; many of the discussions amount to an informative synthesis of mainstream views on the major pre-Qin texts. The account of the dialectical interaction between the texts also helps to reveal nuances in their positions. (Though he does not mention it, Slingerland’s dialectical narrative in some respects follows in the footsteps of those sketched by A. C. Graham in *Disputers of the Tao* and Chad Hansen in *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought*.) Because most of the discussion that follows will be critical, I should emphasize that my view of many parts of the book is positive. Specialists in early Chinese thought will benefit from reading and thinking through Slingerland’s discussion of the texts, whether they ultimately agree with his interpretations or not.

That said, in my view the book’s overarching theses are not merely unconvincing, but fundamentally misconceived. In what follows, I will unpack this claim by sketching a number of problems with Slingerland’s account. For brevity, I will focus

on only his basic architectonic themes, substantive and methodological. I will point out two sets of difficulties in each area.

First, the overall framing device of the book—that much or all of ancient Chinese thought is an expression of an ideal of *wu-wei*—is problematic, for two reasons. One is that Slingerland’s interpretation of *wu-wei* is implausible. The other is that his attempt to sweep all of the views, ideals, and phenomena he describes under one rubric, as aspects of “the same thing” (11, 270), blurs crucial distinctions between the views and issues at stake.

On Slingerland’s account, the hallmark of *wu-wei* is effortlessness, or a lack of exertion. The grounds for this unorthodox claim are unclear, since the book treats it as an axiom, rather than showing that it best explains the texts that directly address *wu-wei*. *Wu-wei* activity may sometimes be effortless, but there is little reason to think this is its distinguishing feature. Literally, *wu-wei* is the absence of *wei* 為, which, as Slingerland agrees (14, 89), means roughly “to do” or “to act,” not “to exert effort.” *Wei* probably refers to action undertaken intentionally, for some motive of the agent. (This is how the Mohist *Canons* explain it, for instance.) *Wu-wei* would then refer to not intentionally initiating action for one’s own reasons. From the *Daodejing*, the text in which *wu-wei* figures most prominently, we might suggest as a first interpretive step that *wu-wei* is the absence of action motivated by the agent’s desires, will,

ambition, knowledge, education, language, or socialization. (Following Slingerland's lead, I here pass over the political aspects of *wu-wei*, though in fact these are central in the *Daodejing*.) Removing these motives results in activity that conforms to natural processes, thus allowing things to happen "by themselves." Passages on *wu-wei* in the *Zhuangzi* and *Guanzi* 管子 reiterate this conformity with natural patterns and clarify that *wu-wei* activity is a sort of unmotivated, reflexive response to the particular situation, in which the agent relinquishes himself and goes along with things. Doing nothing at all is thus *wu-wei*, as is reacting to things non-intentionally, as when we reflexively catch a ball thrown in our direction.

If this account of *wu-wei* is even partly correct, then it threatens the basis for Slingerland's central thesis. For Daoist texts appear to use *wu-wei* quite literally, not metaphorically, to refer to the absence of activity that involves intentional "doing," or at least "doing" grounded in the wrong sort of motivation. Slingerland partly agrees with this interpretation, for he acknowledges that in the *Daodejing*, "*wu-wei* comes closest to being adequately rendered literally as 'non-doing' rather than metaphorically as 'effortless action'" (77).<sup>1</sup> Recall, however, that the grounds for taking *wu-wei* to be a metaphoric expression of an ideal of effortless action were that

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<sup>1</sup> Slingerland may be of two minds about the literal meaning of *wu-wei*, since he explains it in one place as "in the absence of/without doing exertion" (7), but in others as "non-doing" (11, 77) or "no-doing" (89).

the phrase does *not* refer literally to “non-doing” or “non-action.” If the literal meaning of *wu-wei* is “non-doing,” and the *Daodejing*, the major source text for the concept, uses it in roughly just that sense, referring to the absence of “doing,” then the justification for the book’s central thesis collapses. Slingerland contends that ultimately even in the *Daodejing*, *wu-wei* “retains its metaphoric sense of nonforced or effortless action” (89), but he has not shown that it has such a sense to begin with. Far from a shared ideal, *wu-wei* is best understood as a key feature of, or means of achieving, a perfected state according to one particular conception of it, that of one branch of Daoism.

Is the problem merely terminological? Perhaps Slingerland has identified *something* shared by all the texts he discusses, but merely mislabeled it. If so, the problem could be rectified merely by substituting a more general term, say ‘perfected action’, for the phrase ‘*wu-wei*’ in his discussion.

Provided we work at a high enough level of abstraction, it seems correct to say that the various pre-Qin texts share, to various degrees, a conception of the perfected state of human life as involving a form of immediate, appropriate response to the particular situation. This ideal is prominent in *Xunzi* and the Daoist texts and detectable, though not stressed, in *Mengzi*, the *Lunyu*, and *Mozi*. (Slingerland does not seriously consider the Mohist view of action, instead anachronistically dismissing



Mohist thought as “non-mainstream” (289, n. 21).) This observation has rightly won the status of a consensus, I think, and we find it in one form or another in the work of Munro, Fingarette, Graham, Hansen, Hall and Ames, Eno, Kupperman, and Ivanhoe, among others.

Still, the content of perfected action is construed differently enough in the various texts that the claim that they expound a unitary ideal glosses over crucial distinctions. In this regard, Slingerland notably downplays normative controversies about the content of ideal action, focusing instead on moral psychology and methods of ethical cultivation, the heart of his dialectic of “internalism” versus “externalism.” The problem is that early Chinese thinkers’ diverse prescriptions for cultivation grow out of radically disparate conceptions of ethical perfection. In Xunzi, for instance, the perfected state lies in flawless, immediate performance of elaborate, artificially wrought cultural practices, since culture is the vehicle that brings us into accord with the patterns of the cosmos. In the *Daodejing*, by contrast, it is a simple life free of artificial cultural embellishment, for such artifice creates a rift between human action and the Way. Or, to take a less extreme comparison, it is remarkable that none of the most famous passages about skill in the *Zhuangzi* mention *wu-wei*. One plausible explanation is that these texts are not expressing the ideal of *wu-wei* at all, but exploring different normative views. Given the diverse range of conceptions of ethical

perfection in pre-Qin thought, it is hard to see what interpretive insight is gained by claiming that all are instances of a single ideal, instead of simply pointing out the partial similarities along with the profound differences.

A second set of substantive problems surround Slingerland's interpretation of the paradox of *wu-wei*. Just as he tends to slip a variety of disparate views under the single label of *wu-wei*, he sweeps several distinct issues together into his conception of the paradox, some of them paradoxical, some not. Once these are sorted out, it seems unlikely that the paradox plays the pivotal role in early Chinese thought that he contends.

According to Slingerland, the paradox is that since we have not already achieved the ideal of effortless action, we must expend effort to achieve it, but in so doing we thereby prevent ourselves from achieving it. If acquisition of an effortless state is understood synchronically, this is indeed paradoxical: one cannot be effortless while simultaneously exerting effort. But as long as the process of achieving the effortless state is understood diachronically, no paradox arises. We can and frequently do acquire the ability to act effortlessly, as when we master skills or regain a physical ability through rehabilitation after injury. Acquisition begins with deliberate exertion, but eventually we internalize the skill and develop the ability to act automatically and sometimes effortlessly.

On the other hand, if we take *wu-wei* to refer to the absence of intentional action, as I suggest, then the conceptual structure of intentionality may indeed render the directive to achieve *wu-wei* paradoxical, even construed diachronically. To cite just one of several potential paradoxes, on some accounts of intentionality, an agent cannot intentionally cause herself to perform actions that are wholly non-intentional, because intentions (unlike effort) remain in effect over time, even when not consciously held in mind, and their scope covers all the subsidiary actions that contribute to their fulfillment. For example, this morning I set to work on this review spontaneously, without consciously forming an intention to do so. Nevertheless, my activity was intentional, because it is part of a project I am performing intentionally. At some level of description, any voluntary movement an agent performs is intentional, merely by virtue of being an action rather than a reflex.

Slingerland subsumes under the paradox of *wu-wei* an idea he borrows from David Nivison, the “paradox of virtue,” which he takes to be “structurally equivalent” (6).<sup>2</sup> In his account of the dialectical development of pre-Qin thought, it is actually the latter paradox that plays the more prominent role. Slingerland states this paradox

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<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, Slingerland extends the paradox of *wu-wei* to cover a wide range of issues related to moral or educational cultivation or transformation, including the problem of how to get a beginning student to distinguish proper from improper actions (255), the “sudden” versus “gradual” controversy in Chan Buddhism, the debate between the Cheng-Zhu and Lu-Wang factions of Neo-Confucianism, and even Plato’s learning paradox (7, 267–68).

in several ways (6, 71, 261, 266–68), which tend to conflate two distinct claims, one about the acquisition of virtue, the other about its exercise. Once these are untangled, we can see that the two paradoxes do not parallel each other as closely as Slingerland suggests, and probably neither fills the central role he assigns to them.

Following Nivison, Slingerland claims that the process of acquiring virtue is paradoxical, because virtue can be acquired only by an agent who either is not trying to acquire it or already has it in some incipient form (6, 71, 261, 267). This claim is confused. (Slingerland's grounds for it run it together with the second claim I will discuss, about the exercise of virtue.) People can and regularly do identify weaknesses in their character and correct them by training themselves to act for reasons that previously they overlooked or did not act on. To commence acquiring a virtue, all an agent needs is the capacity to learn to recognize either a reason for acquiring that virtue or the reasons for which agents with that virtue reliably act. One need not already possess the virtue, even in an incipient form; nor is there anything paradoxical about consciously setting out to acquire a virtue one lacks. Suppose Sally, who has always been selfishly materialistic, reads a novel about the hardships faced by the rural poor, reflects on some normative considerations, and forms the intention to live an ethically better life by developing a beneficent character. At first, the benevolent actions she performs might be motivated mainly by her reasons for valuing

beneficence, rather than by the reasons for which beneficent agents typically act, such as a concern for others' welfare. But as she develops the habit of attending to the sorts of reasons that typically prompt benevolent actions, beneficent motives are likely to play an increasingly prominent role in guiding her actions. Eventually, if she becomes a genuinely beneficent person, they will come to play a central role, though her original reasons for valuing beneficence may (and in my view should) continue to play a peripheral or background role in her motivational system.

Slingerland runs his implausible claim about the acquisition of virtue together with a distinct, much more credible claim about the exercise of virtue, specifically about how an agent's motivation affects the agent's degree of virtue. This second claim is that if an agent's main reason for performing a right or good action is the desire to be virtuous, then paradoxically this motivation reduces the moral worth of her action, preventing her from being fully virtuous (6, 71). For instance, a genuinely beneficent agent is motivated mainly by concern for others' welfare, not by the desire to be beneficent (though, again, this desire may continue to factor in the virtuous agent's motivation, albeit peripherally). To the extent that the latter motivation dominates, the agent is less virtuous. To qualify as fully virtuous, then, one must aim primarily not at being virtuous, but at the sorts of ends that virtuous agents aim at.

Virtue is genuinely subject to this sort of conceptual tension. But the case of

virtue does not really parallel that of *wu-wei*. If *wu-wei* is mainly a sort of effortless action, as Slingerland proposes, then, as I have explained, an agent could probably achieve effortlessness as a result of a desire to do so. After all, acting on a desire is not the same thing as exerting effort or “trying too hard.” On the other hand, if *wu-wei* is activity not motivated by the agent’s reasons, as I’ve suggested, then clearly a desire for *wu-wei* will paradoxically prevent the agent from achieving it, since acting for any desire at all will prevent it. Here there is a partial parallel with virtue, but an important difference as well. Virtue requires that the agent be motivated by reasons other than the desire for virtue. *Wu-wei* requires that the agent be motivated by no reasons at all.

Conflating the issues concerning the acquisition and exercise of virtue leads Slingerland to see both his “internalist” and “externalist” views as subject to the conceptual tension that he suggests drives the dialectical development of Warring States thought (70–75, 265–67). The purported tension is that aiming to be *wu-wei* or virtuous prevents us from being so. As Slingerland sees it, “internalist” views try to resolve the tension by claiming that we already are inherently virtuous, only to find themselves at a loss to explain why we need education to manifest virtue. “Externalist” views explain why we do not already manifest virtue, but supposedly cannot explain how we manage to intentionally develop it, since they assume we

begin without it. But provided we clearly identify the issue at stake as the acquisition of virtue, rather than its exercise, the only view plagued by this sort of tension would be the implausible, extreme “internalist” position that every person innately possesses completely self-sufficient moral motivation and knowledge. (Of the classical Chinese philosophical texts, only the *Daodejing* comes close to this view, though of course the text does not express its stance in these terms.) So it is unlikely that this tension drives the dialectic. Other factors must be doing the work, among them disagreement over normative issues. This is not to deny that the particular views presented in the classical texts are subject to various conceptual tensions, some of which Slingerland ably points out (e.g., 112–17, 163–73). But the problems are specific to each view, not built into the very structure of a discourse supposedly centered on an inherently paradoxical ethical problematic.

Slingerland’s secondary aim is to demonstrate the fertility of conceptual metaphor theory in interpreting early Chinese thought, and here too the book’s results are of dubious value. Metaphor theory obviously has the potential to contribute to the interpretation of philosophical texts from any culture or era. Textual interpretation involves reconstructing the roles of and relations between various concepts employed in a text, and there is every reason to think this process may be facilitated by tracing out and unpacking key metaphors. Indeed, Sarah Allan has already applied metaphor

theory to early Chinese thought with interesting results, in *The Way of Water and Sprouts of Virtue* (SUNY, 1997). (Allan's work is a puzzling omission from Slingerland's otherwise thorough bibliography, since her book is his major predecessor in applying metaphor theory to early Chinese texts.) As Slingerland applies it, however, the conceptual metaphor approach can hardly even be taken seriously. It is too rough to yield plausible interpretive conclusions, and it tends to impose alien conceptual relations on the texts rather than uncovering those operative in the texts themselves. Let me explain these points in turn.

First, as Slingerland employs it, the conceptual metaphor approach is unable to capture the conceptual relations that articulate the content of key concepts. On the one hand, on his approach the criteria of identity for a conceptual metaphor or family of metaphors are so vague that fundamentally disparate ideas can all too easily be run together as sharing the "same" conceptual structure. For instance, Slingerland takes *wu-wei* to have a "conceptual schema structure" (29) comprising at least twenty different words or "metaphoric expressions," including "following" (*cong* 從), "conforming to" (*yin* 因), "at ease" (*an* 安), "still" (*jing* 靜), "forgetting" (*wang* 忘), and "unaware" (*bu zhi* 不知) (29–33). He never fully spells out the methodological consequences of this sprawling structure, but the implication seems to be that any textual passage that employs any of this long list of words or phrases is thereby



alluding to *wu-wei*. Slingerland thus sees metaphor theory as validating the guiding intuition of his project, which is that the Confucius of *Analects* 2:4, who at seventy can *follow* his heart's desires without transgressing norms, the *unconscious* joyful foot-tapping to music in *Mencius* (4A:27), and Cook Ding's *conforming* to natural patterns in carving up oxen (*Zhuangzi*, Book 3) are "all somehow representations of the 'same thing'" (270).

The obvious objection is that the three passages are not about the same thing at all. Confucius is following his own desires, which after a lifetime of habituation have come fully into line with socio-ethical norms; Cook Ding is conforming to natural, human-independent patterns while performing socially useful work; and the *Mencius* passage describes people unconsciously dancing to the rhythm of artificially produced sounds that happen to move them. It hardly speaks in favor of the metaphor approach that Slingerland can wield it to support his untested interpretive hunch about these sources. To justify his claim here, we would need to show that the passages express ideas with similar theoretical associations and consequences. Merely identifying a few parallels in metaphoric imagery will not do the trick.

On the other hand, the looseness of the metaphor approach also leads Slingerland to overlook crucial conceptual relations. Many of the relations that articulate the content of *wu-wei* are contrastive, for instance. In the *Daodejing*, *wu-wei* contrasts

with desire, will, choosing, thought, knowing, grasping, education, language, and culture. These contrasts are part of the content of the concept. Yet because they are not part of the metaphor schemas Slingerland associates with *wu-wei*, they slip through his methodological net, playing little or no role in his general characterization of the notion (29–35).

The second major problem with Slingerland’s methodology is that it imposes alien metaphor schemas on the classical texts, thus distorting the views they express. Oddly, he does not concentrate on the intuitively promising route of reconstructing metaphors that are undeniably operative in the texts, as Sarah Allan does in her study of the pervasive water and plant imagery in pre-Qin thought. Slingerland treats such metaphors in passing, such as the valley and mother metaphors in the *Daodejing* (99, 103) and the “intention as commander” and “*qi* 氣 as water” images in *Mencius* 2A:2 (155). But, astonishingly, his overall approach is based on a set of purportedly culturally universal—and deeply Cartesian—metaphors for the self, identified by studying not ancient Chinese texts, but the locutions of modern American English (27–29). The most fundamental of these is the “Subject-Self” schema, which Slingerland takes to be a metaphorical schema by which we understand ourselves as a split between an independently existing “Subject”—a person-like “locus of consciousness, subjective experience, and our ‘essence’”—and a “Self,” which

encompasses everything else about us, such as our bodies, emotions, social role, and personal history (28–29). This schema is manifested in figures of speech in which agents refer, for instance, to forcing themselves to do something (28). Given the Subject-Self split, Slingerland suggests that we naturally tend to conceive of agency (or “self-control”) on the model of a person (the Subject) forcibly manipulating a physical object (the Self) (29). The imposition of this metaphorical schema on the Chinese texts explains Slingerland’s idiosyncratic construal of *wu-wei* as “effortless” action. He thinks that action is typically conceptualized as the Subject exerting force on the Self, and on his rendering, in the *wu-wei* state, “action is occurring even though the Subject is no longer exerting force” (29). Thus he takes *wu-wei* to denote action in which there is no experience of force or effort.

This line of reasoning raises numerous problems. First, it is not at all clear that the object-manipulation metaphor supports Slingerland’s conception of *wu-wei* as “effortless” action. The crux of his metaphoric basis for understanding *wu-wei* is the notion of *force* in the model of manipulating an object. But this notion is redundant: there is no significant difference between “manipulating” and “forcibly manipulating” something. Hence even if we did conceive of self-control or agency on the model of a person moving an object, *wu-wei* would probably not map onto the absence of force. It would more naturally map onto movement of the object *by itself*, without the person

doing anything. So it would amount to “non-doing,” not “effortless action.”

Second, Slingerland here explicates *wu-wei* by appeal to an everyday, concrete scenario—a person moving an object, such as a coffee cup. The implication is that *wu-wei* itself is a relatively abstract notion. How, then, can it function as a metaphor for ideal action? As Slingerland observes (21), metaphors usually involve a projective mapping from a relatively concrete source domain to a less structured target domain, as when we think of life as a journey and our goals as destinations along the way (23). Even if we grant Slingerland’s contention that *wu-wei* is a relatively general, high-level metaphor, it is difficult to see what the source domain is and how elements of the source domain map onto anything.

Third, exercising agency is importantly different from moving an object. Modeling the former on the latter would be a huge philosophical blunder, one so colossal that we should hesitate before ascribing it to any thinker, ancient or modern. (Presented with the idea that self-control can be understood on the model of an inner Subject moving an object-like Self, what philosopher would not ask, “But how does the Subject itself move?”) Perhaps ancient Chinese theories of action are indeed based on this mistake, but the proposal that they are calls for extensive, meticulous supporting argument. It cannot stand merely on the observation that in English the syntax of sentences about moving one’s body (“I lifted my arm”) (29) sometimes

parallels that of sentences about moving objects (“I lifted my cup”), and that when people experience conflicting motives, they sometimes use figures of speech that refer to forcing themselves to act or holding themselves back (28–29).

The Subject-Self schema leads Slingerland to such bizarre interpretive claims as that, for the *Daodejing*, “within the Self there is an essence that determines the proper behavior of the Subject, and this essence spontaneously emerges once space within the Self has been cleared” (105). The Daoist ideal of *zi ran* 自然 (“so-of-itself”) “refers to the way a thing is when it follows its own internal Essence” (35). Setting aside the far-fetched attribution of a notion of essence to the *Daodejing*, these interpretations would have surprised the writers of texts about *wu-wei* in the *Guanzi* and *Huainanzi* 淮南子, who explicated the notion in terms of *yin* 因 (“contextual coping”), a kind of attuned response guided by the situation, not the agent’s Self. As the *Guanzi* says (Book 36), “the way of *wu-wei* is *yin*,” which is “relinquishing oneself and taking things as one’s model,” as a shadow follows the body.

Slingerland’s interpretive enterprise is thus based on a manifestly Cartesian conception of mind and a confused picture of agency derived from a naively literal interpretation of contemporary American figures of speech. He imposes these on an ancient Chinese intellectual milieu notable precisely for the absence of anything resembling a Cartesian framework. The whole approach is misconceived. It would be

preposterous to take the Subject-Self and object-manipulation metaphor schemas as a basis for interpreting contemporary American philosophical texts. So why should we expect them to provide a fruitful interpretive route into classical Chinese thought?

Reading *Effortless Action*, one cannot help wondering whether the metaphor approach yields any compelling interpretive insights that would have been unavailable had Slingerland never heard of Lakoff and Johnson. My impression is that it does not. Indeed, the best parts of the book are the many stretches where the metaphor approach drops out of sight and Slingerland just attends to the texts. I finished the book convinced that the value of his often very interesting discussions of particular aspects of pre-Qin thought would be enhanced by jettisoning the entire apparatus of conceptual metaphor theory. I conclude that the book falls far short of its methodological and substantive aims.<sup>3</sup>

Chris Fraser  
*Chinese University of Hong Kong*  
cjfraser@cuhk.edu.hk

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