WUWEI IN THE DAODEJING: UNDERSTANDING DAOIST ETHICS

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When way-making (dao) prevails in the world,
The finest racing steeds are used to provide manure for the fields;
But when way-making does not prevail in the world,
Warhorses are bred just outside the city walls.

Daodejing, Chapter 46

The work of Laozi, the Daodejing, also called the Laozi, does not specify and prescribe moral codes. As the main text of both the daojia (the philosophical wing of Daoism) and the daojiao (Daoist religion), it merely describes the ways of dao and the process of cultivating de. But since the classic is considered as one of Daoism’s authoritative canons (particularly in the daojiao) and its author a recognized Daoist figure—later Daoists even assigned to Laozi a divine status—we consequently ask, “If the Laozi points out and suggests no rules for morality, then what specific ethical connotations does the work convey?”

This paper aims to investigate and shed light on the Daoist conception of morality by exposing the meanings of Laozian wuwei. It shall examine Laozi’s Daodejing to explicate the implications of wuwei (the principle of non-doing and effortless action) as an ideal ethical conduct, one that’s rooted in the attitudes of deep deference, non-affectiveness, and cooperation.

Wuwei in the Daodejing

Laozi’s wuwei is different from that of Zhuangzi. Laozi considered wuwei as a leadership tool, in fact, as the specific technique to take care of a community, whereas Zhuangzi, Master Lao’s putative follower, viewed it as an attitude of carelessly wandering and flowing
around and beyond nature, exhibited to free the self from the morbid and absurd world.7

Like his contemporary Kongzi, Laozi devised ways and means to mend the chaotic socio-political condition of pre-Qin China. Unlike Master Kong who "wanted to tamper, orchestrate, plan, develop, and propose solutions”, Laozi suggested to his men to "take their hands off of life”8 and follow the way of the way-to move as nature moves.9 And because the primary activity of dao together with ziran, naturalness is non-doing, Laozi asked dao’s followers to embody its wuwei character:

Human beings emulate the earth,
The earth emulates the heavens,
The heavens emulate way-making [dao],
And way-making emulates what is spontaneously so [wuwei].

It was thus in meditating dao’s ways and dynamics that Laozi came to advice wuwei, only by ascertaining the nature of dao or "way-making” do humans get a guide for leading effectively and behaviour properly. But what does wuwei mean exactly? What is it and what’s with it that can benefit people and can be used as a management tool?

Wuwei: Dao’s Chief Movement

The Laozi’s thirty-seventh Chapter tells this line: “Dao chaos, wuwei er wubuwei” (“Dao does not do anything but everything gets done.”) Although the passage does not appear in the Mawangdui and Guodian manuscripts, what Laozi clearly conveys here is that the ultimate reality’s way is the way of wuwei, the very essence of wuwei. Because wuwei is wu action, dao does not act; it really does nothing. With wuwei, doing ceases: what dao does instead is abstain from suspend its interventional activities towards the ten-thousand things, towards society and its constituents:

Way-making [dao] gives things life
Yet does not manage them.
It assists them
Yet makes no claim upon them.
It rears them
Yet does not lord it over them.
It is this that is called profound efficacy.12

Since dao is wuwei, so should the princes of the communities be. They must recall and put to heart the message of the Daodejing:
If someone wants to rule the world, and goes about trying to do [wei] so, I foresee that they simply will not succeed.

Those who would rule it ruin it;
Those who would control it lose it.\textsuperscript{13}

Hence in the words of the sages:
We do things noncoercively (wuwei)
And the common people develop along their own lines;
We cherish equilibrium (jing)
And the common people order themselves;
We are non-interfering in our governance (wushi)
And the common people prosper themselves;...\textsuperscript{14}

At first glance, wuwei as the primary nature of dao and as the suggested Daoist leadership style—the no-control, non-interventional (laissez-faire) type—is easy to comprehend. But what must still be understood is its paradoxical nature: How can nature lead by not leading, do by not doing, and act by not acting? How can the ultimate reality be immobile and stoic when it is the source of all movements and of all things? With wuwei, how can leaders not intervene when they play "active" roles and when managing people implies meddling with their affairs? We answer these by discussing the two basic interpretations of wuwei:

1. Wuwei as the Principle of Non-Doing
Wuwei is commonly rendered as the principle of non-doing and effortless action. As the principle of non-doing, it is conceived as the demeanor that does not impose and coerce. It is conduct that does nothing to things and never interrupts their activities, but it lets them be. As several experts insist, however, wuwei as non-action is not passivity, renunciation, indifference, complete inactivity, or laziness.\textsuperscript{15} On the contrary, it entails the accomplishment of goals and purposes, since it is the dao, the way, or the ultimate reality of the vast cosmos that performs the tasks and provides the benefits. A person who practices wuwei, she who does not act, is aware of dao's natural tendencies; she intimately knows nature's ways in that she believes that dao will always and in all ways come to her aid—she therefore "surrenders everything to the Dao to work through [her] life."\textsuperscript{16} As Crawford says:

The real meaning of 'wu-wei' is that, when a person is in touch with the 'way of ultimate reality,' which is Tao, there is an embodiment of 'being and action'
that is truly nurturing and creative because it springs from the deepest source of meaning in a person's life. In effect, "wu-wei" is an experience of self-surrendering to an Ideal of ultimate significance, such as Tao, or, for those who profess a theistic spirituality, to God.17

"Adherents are not enjoined not to act," Bokenkamp also clarifies, "but to still their hearts, to quiet the minds of passion, and to make the movements of the Dao their own through following its precepts [and it processes]."18 The person of wuwei then does not act because she surrenders, lets go of her personal actions,19 and patterns herself after nature and allows it to do the trick. This is what non-action truly means.

2. Wuwei as the Principle of Effortless Action

Wuwei is also regarded as the principle of effortless action, for it signifies unhindered, "flowing" action, that is, action performed with ease and done without trying.

That wuwei is effortlessness and easiness is explained in two ways. First, wuwei conduct is without effort and struggle because the mighty hands of dao actually realize the desired act; dao, the true agent takes care of things. Second, wuwei is actually the wise attitude of "fitting in", of "bending with the bamboo", of adjusting or adapting [bian] to the phenomena, circumstances, events, or environments at hand.20 It is the prudent act of harmonizing [he] with anything that one encounters or that one is presented with. Thus, it is effortless because it necessitate cognitive and behavioral reconfiguration, on the part of the agent, to the ways (dao) of things and creatures (wuxun) and of the nature of situations.21 As Watts says, wuwei is the "going with the grain, rolling with the punch, swimming with the current, trimming the sails to the wind, taking the tide at its flood, and stooping to conquer."22

As effortless action, then, wuwei asks people to acknowledge the ways of beings, and not force their wants, demands, and categories on them.23 Thus, the Daoist sage (the shengren) who executes wuwei always knows that "when we insist on going against the grain [against the nature of things], friction results, things become difficult, and disaster ensues."24

In sum, because the wuwei way respects the natural ways of being of everything, wuwei can be a practical ruling principle. When rulers adopt it, they realize immediately how futile their personal intentions and intrusive actions are, and that it is only by trusting their subordinates will they (subordinates) become effective and efficient citizens of the state. By doing nothing, effortlessly behaving, and relying
upon the innate capacities and skills of men and women, leaders act like the way. Thereby, like dao, they literally get "everything done". And, with no effort at all, "nothing is left undone".

The Ethics of Laozian Wuwei

What I propose in this paper is that Laozi's wuwei must not only be regarded as an expedient means, (though Laozi recommended it specifically as that, as a leadership device, and though this is the "dominant approach" to wuwei), but it must also be viewed as a Daoist ethical ideal or advice. While it can be advantageously seen as a pragmatic means to lead society, the Daoist theme's inherent and constant disclosure for morality must be seen as well. It is also, as it can be readily deciphered, a proposal to live a good life.

Roger Ames, the noted contemporary sinologist, writes of wuwei this:

[Wuwei] means that we must think ecologically, and try to be flexible and accommodating. That is, we must recognize that we do not exist as "individuals" independent of our various contexts. On the contrary, in order to achieve the most productive relationships in our natural, social, and cultural environments, we must respect the shared qualities and interdependence of everything in the natural world. In addition, we must work with these similarities and realize our own possibilities.

... Therefore, we must allow things to be what they are without making them be something that they are not [emphasis mine].

Although his contention in the passage suggests a construal of wuwei that makes individuals see their significant role and attitude in the creation of harmonious relationships with other things and persons, it also elicits the moral facet of the principle: wuwei is about respect. As depicted above and in Ames's discussion, the principle of non-doing urges beings not to interfere with the processes of dao, of everything; beings who observe the principle ought to facilitate (i.e., work with and for) the growth of the world and every single thing in it. This is so because, as what is put forth in the Daodejing's twenty-fifth chapter, wuwei is action that conforms with dao. Since dao automatically lets the ten-thousand things alone, humans, in embodying wuwei, ought likewise to allow-to "optimize non-interference" towards the surrounding
entities to flow, that is, to leave them to their own devices and let them be naturally.

As it moves us to model our actions after the spontaneous and insouciant dao, wuwei enjoins us to acknowledge everything, to honor the presence of every human (of whatever race, color, status, gender, or nationality) or non-human creature. It asks us to let the birds, worms, snakes, trees, and men and women, be what or who they are and refrain from ushering in or, worse, imposing our narrow, finite categories and egoistic interests onto their “otherness”. It asks us to be like water which without forcing itself, bows down meekly, un-condescendingly to anything it meets (see Chapter 8 of the Daodejing).

Now, this pure and sincere acknowledgement of the existence of beings in the world points to one of the principle’s moral implications: an implication so easy to grasp that, due to wuwei’s “let-be” (Gelassenheit) quality, it often escapes the analytical mind. It is the implication that makes us realize that the principle compels us to show “concern” (Sorge) to use Heidegger’s term, to all. And this “concern”, care, kindness, or respect is that moral behavior and value that the principle upholds and urges human beings, as moral agents, to adopt.

Furthermore, as a direct consequence of the former, wuwei also incites humans, while practicing true humility like an infant, to support all creatures. This is also one of wuwei’s significant connotations that should be noted here. Not only is wuwei an all-embracing, respectful attitude, but it is also an attitude that’s wont to help in the unique flourishing of things. We recall Chapter Fifty-Seven of the Daodejing: “dao sustains the ten-thousand things (wanwu), but does not become their master or king;” and its thirty-eighth chapter that purports:

It is because the most excellent (de) do not strive to excel (de).
That they are of the highest efficacy (de).
And it is because of the least excellent do not leave off striving to excel.
That they have no efficacy.
Persons of the highest efficacy [people who embody dao] neither do things coercively.
Nor would they have any motivation for doing so.

Non-coercive action (wuwei) means that we become the crutches of things, their props, even if they’re not lame, inadequate, or incompetent. Laozi, through wuwei and the other themes he brings up in the Daodejing, wants people, without giving them a privileged place in the scheme of the universe (since they’re only one of the wanwu’s), to ally with all creatures. The respect, “concern”, understanding, and tolerance that wuwei demands from people tells them to “go beneath” things in order to
carry and assist them, and thus to be “cooperative with other daos.” As Hao says, we must avoid introducing our traces to the grand work of the ultimate reality and its “ten-thousand” manifestations. Or as Ames, taking wuwei as ziran, writes:

...[Wuwei is] action which accommodates the other to whom one is responding on their own terms. Such spontaneity [ziran] involves recognizing the continuity between oneself and the other, and responding in such a way that one’s own actions, while serving one’s own ends, at the same time promote the interests and well-being of the other [emphasis mine].

Consequently, we must take everything in the world with our bare hands and, as much as we can, cultivate them like the plants in our fields and gardens. Just as we want these plants to thrive and bloom, to bear bountiful produce, we want beings, including ourselves, to expand; we want them to reach their purposes. Thus, aside from the deep-seated type of deference and reverence for things that the Daoist principle demands, wuwei also naturally urges that we become “stewards” of these equally valid creatures and beings, humans and non-humans alike.

Our interpretation seems abstruse, or oxymoronic because of the misconception of wuwei as an idea that promotes indifference, anarchism, mediocrity, and laziness, and is therefore unconcerned about moral rules and absolutes. How can a principle for reclusive, “inactive” living propose an “active” ethical life? It must be recalled that Laozi intends wuwei to be an alternative to the prevalent Confucian li (the principle of rites and proper behavior). Thus, the Daoists (particularly Master Lao) don’t do away with the practice and teaching of proper ethical conduct. They actually have that in mind. Their proposed alternative, wuwei, unfortunately misinterpreted most of the time, is about instigating people to live well, specifically to live virtuous lives. “The [Daoist] abandonment of the attempt to ground ethics in some rational scheme [together with the adoption of wuwei] leads to an increase in compassion and toleration, not to amorality, and will help us recognize the equal worth of all individuals [emphasizes mine].” Thus, even if it brings no set of laws, wuwei indeed motivates people to become better by moving them to exercise kindness, openness, tolerance, and deference towards, as modern Deep Ecology teaches, nature and fellow beings of the earth and the universe or of the “total-field”. Wuwei is active after all.

Moreover, it can be said that the sort of moral life that Daoists encourage humans beings to live through non-action is even desirable,
since it is the most practical. As Clarke writes: "An axiological ethics, one based on rules (as in the rule-deontologist ethical theory), might encourage a rigid and unemotional attitude which could lead to uncaring and even brutal conduct."\(^{39}\) And as Bo Mou conjectures:

...when the fixed and formulated moral rules or commands are enforced upon people from outside, they are often counter-productive in the way that they might spoil or even destroy the people who have more or less spontaneous \([wuwei-like]\) morality within.\(^{40}\)

It can be said then that \(wuwei\) as an ethical ideal is closer to the Daoist teachings and it primarily considers the elements of virtue ethics (namely, an idea of a flourishing life, a list of virtues that will contribute to the creation of this flourishing life, an idea of moral cultivation to generate the virtues, and a philosophy of man),\(^{41}\) that is, it tries to address the deeper personal ethical question: "what kind of person do I wish to become?"

Let us explain this further. First, what is the Daoist "flourishing life"? According to Laozi, the flourishing, well-rounded life for the Daoists is an integrated life, a sagely (shengren) life lived in harmony with the whole cosmos, with nature, with \(dao\). Second, since this sagely, mystical existence is co-lived with the world, the virtues that Daoism exhorts its followers to possess thus are the ones we have mentioned in the preceding paragraphs: respect, understanding, tolerance, meekness, non-contentiousness, and cooperation. These are the virtues that \(wuwei\) engenders. And if these values and ways of behavior are applied, then that "integrated" and "harmonious" life will surely be generated and be lived always.

As to the Daoist way of moral cultivation, one must primarily discern and meditate the movements of \(dao\). One ought to acquire and develop \(dao\)'s virtues as well. Finally, the human being, for the Daoists, is a being whose worth is equal to that of the other creatures on the planet. They, humans and non-humans, are on the same objective level (if there are levels based on Daoism's all-inclusive, non-dual thinking).\(^{42}\) Again, like Deep Ecology, Daoism proposes the "rejection of the man-in-environment image in favour of the relational, total-field image."\(^{43}\) The Daoists see the human persons as a precious entity like any other entity. Human persons are no better than a cockroach, a log, a flower, an ant, etc. They are equally valuable. This view, as does the principle of non-doing, thus expects the human being to be the "caretaker" of fellow human beings and of all the beings in the relational cosmos. Humans are
URGED TO SHOW RESPECT, REVERENCE TO EVERYTHING, AND DESPITE ODDS, TO SUPPORT ALL OF THEM.

BY REFERRING TO THE COMPONENTS OF VIRTUE ETHICS AND BY PERSONALLY REFLECTING ON ITS MAIN QUESTION, THE PERSON WHO PRACTICES WUWEI IS CALLED ON BY THE PRINCIPLE TO BE SENSITIVE, RESPECTFUL, AND ACCOMMODATING. HE IS ASKED BY WUWEI TO BECOME A SUPPORTIVE CO-CREATURE LIKE DAO, TO BE THE "COACH" AND FRIEND (YOU OR PENG) TO EVERYONE.

CONCLUSION

I PRESENTED IN THIS PAPER THE BRIEF BACKGROUND AND THE MEANINGS OF THE DAOIST PRINCIPLE OF WUWEI, SPECIFICALLY AS IT IS EXPRESSED IN THE WORK OF THE ALLEGED FOUNDER OF DAOISM, LAOZI. I UNDERSCORED THE "DOMINANT APPROACH" TO THE PRINCIPLE AND CONCLUDED THAT IT CAN BE USED AS AN EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP PRINCIPLE. I HAVE ARGUED, HOWEVER, THAT WUWEI MUST NOT ONLY BE SEEN AS THAT, BUT IT MUST ALSO BE ALLOWED "TO SHOW FROM ITSELF" MEANINGS THAT WILL IDENTIFY THE TYPE OF ETHICS THAT LAOZI SUGGESTED THE FOLLOWERS OF THE DAO TO BEAR IN MIND AND EXHIBIT AS THEY LIVE AND BEHAVE TOWARDS PEOPLE AND THE UNIVERSE.

HAVING Brought OUT INTO THE LIGHT THE ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF LAOZIAN WUWEI, I HOPE THAT THESE IMPLICATIONS—WUWEI, AS PROMOTING TO A GREAT EXTENT VIRTUE ETHICS, MEANS EXERCISING RESPECT AND KINDNESS TOWARD, AND BECOMING A SUPPORTIVE ENTITY TO ALL CREATURES, TO WOMEN AND MEN, TO BEASTS, TO VEGETATION, TO THE WORLD AS A LIVING ORGANISM, AND TO THE EVOLVING UNIVERSE—HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO THE UNDERSTANDING OF DAOIST MORAL PHILOSOPHY. THE PRINCIPLE, REGARDED BY MANY AS INACTIVITY, HAS REAL "ACTIVE" ETHICAL CONNOTATIONS. AND, CONTRARY TO WHAT MOST SCHOLARS HAVE ARGUED, THIS STRONGLY SUGGESTS THAT THE LAOZI IS CONCERNED WITH HUMAN MORALITY.

FINALLY, THE HOLISTIC, KIND ATTITUDE THAT WUWEI LIVING BRINGS SHALL HOPEFULLY LEAD PEOPLE TO SEE THE RICHNESS OF ANCIENT DAOIST THINKING AND MOVE THEM TO BECOME CLOSER TO THE DAO—THUS, LETTING DAO TO ALWAYS PREVAIL. THOUGH THIS WORK MAY NOT BE EXHAUSTIVE, I HOPE TOO THAT IT WILL INSPIRE MORE RESEARCH ON DAOIST PHILOSOPHY, PARTICULARLY IN THE PHILIPPINES.44

ENDNOTES


2. Though modern specialists still doubt his authorship, Master Lao is presumed the writer of the Daodejing here.
Dao or the way, the tradition’s main theme, describes and explains the fundamental nature and workings of the ultimate reality or nature. It is likewise referred to as the whole cosmos and the processes of the world: it is both “what the world is and how it is.” David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, “Chinese Philosophy,” in Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ed. E. Craig (London: Routledge, 1998) [article online]; available from http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/G001SECT5; 04 November 2004.

The treatise, composed of about 5000 Chinese characters, deals specifically with the two concepts.

In western conception, for a religion to be regarded as such, it essentially has to have rules or a code of conduct, if not stated explicitly, then at least implicitly. Further, the classic is not the only main text of daoism; modern-day daoists have the Dazang collection that includes a number of ancient and modern works. James Miller, Daoism: A Short Introduction (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003), 3.


Wu and wei are literally translated as “absence of or nothing” and “action or doing”. Thus, the principle is often understood as “doing nothing.” Changchh Hao, “Wu-wei and the Question of the Other” (Ph.D. diss., Fordham University, 2002), 23.

Ibid., (Chapter 51), 157. See also Chapter 10, 90.

Ibid., (Chapter 29), 122.

Ibid., (Chapter 57), 166.


Stephen K. Bokenkamp, Early Daoist Scriptures (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 52. Fox as well expresses wuwei as “conformity or alliance with” the dao this way: “[Wuwei] is action that is taken ... [that] accords with nature, which follows the natural course of events, rather than competing with it. ... it represents ... the emulation of the dao itself.” Alan Fox, “Wuwei in Early Philosophical Daoism” (paper presented to the International Society for Chinese Philosophy at the 1995 Eastern Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association, 28 December 1995), 2.
Recent works of Fraser and Hansen strongly suggest this construal of *wuwei*; it is, for them, the most apt. The principle as non-action, they contend, is the release of *zhī*, "a word that refers to [personal] intention, purpose, motivation, or determination [or self-interest]." According to Fraser, because *wei* "refers to action undertaken intentionally, for some motive of the agent," thus the principle, by removing or negating (*wu*) *wei*, and that is through obtaining "stillness or calmness" (*jing*) and being "plain and unadorned" (*pu*), "results in activity that conforms to natural processes, thus allowing things to happen 'of themselves,' without being produced or interfered with by the agent."

Hansen, on the other hand, explains that since *wei* signifies human action (rather than 'natural' action) and 'action done due to social conventions,' which are made manifest through 'knowledge'-names, distinctions and desires, which are reflections of artificiality, thus *wuwei* means "lack of *wei". To abandon *wei* is *wuwei* and this interpretation implies the returning of the person to "naturalness" (*ziran*), to "plainness", to "simplicity" (*pu*), all appropriate senses and synonyms of *wuwei*. "Thus to follow Wu-wei," Hansen concludes, "is to give up names, distinctions, desires, any deliberate action based on them." And he further posits: "Wu-wei and 'abandon knowledge' [wuzhi] are [therefore] linked slogans." Fraser, "Wu-wei, the Background, and Intentionality," 14-17; Chris Fraser, "On Wu-wei as a Unifying Metaphor," (review of Effortless Action: Wu-wei as Conceptual Metaphor and Spiritual Ideal in Early China, by Edward Slingerland) Philosophy East and West 57, no. 1 (January 2007): 99; Chad Hansen, A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought: A Philosophical Interpretation (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 214; Chad Hansen, "Wu-wei," in Encyclopedia of Chinese Philosophy, ed. Antonio S. Cua (London: Routledge, 2003), 784-786.


Alan Fox is the first to have elucidated the cognitive and behavioral dimensions of *wuwei*. See his paper "Wuwei in Early Philosophical Daoism".


Like Heidegger’s *Sein*, the term "beings" refers to things that humans deal (or are concerned) with.

Fox, "Wuwei in Early Philosophical Daoism," 8.


This could be taken by some (particularly by Jewish, Christian, or Muslim readers) to mean "following or obeying the will of God or of the Almighty", thus interpreting *wuwei* as the epitome of an ideal ethical conduct. However, this is unstressed here because Laozi did not refer to the *dao* as the Supreme Being, as God, the way these readers do—the Daoists looked at *dao* metaphysically, aside from the fact that modern readers have to bracket their assumptions and biases in order to study past texts and peculiar traditions squarely and objectively. See footnote no. 2 for a description of dao. Cf. Jie-Lo Liu, “The Daoist Conception of Truth: Lao Zi’s Metaphysical Realism vs. Zhuang Zi’s Internal Realism,” in Comparative Approaches To Chinese Philosophy ed. Bo Mou (Aldershot, United Kingdom: Ashgate, 2003), 282.


Though most of the time misconstrued (i.e., Daoist humility is often equated to stooping down, or to becoming a weakling or a doormat), this is one of the principle’s recognized and oft-mentioned connotation. Perhaps, specialists of today need to work further to understand clearly this specific meaning of *wuwei*.

Laozi, *Dao De Jing* (Chapter 38), 135.


Hao, “Question of the Other,” 4.


See also J.J. Clarke, *The Tao of the West: Western Transformations of Taoist Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 93.

Thomas Merton, the famous Cistercian who, because of his fascination with the work, translated the *Zhuangzi*, even used Daoist concepts, including *wuwei*, to explain his quiet mysticism. See Thomas Merton, trans., *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (London: Burns and Oates, 1965).


Clarke, *Tao of the West*, 93.


For a thorough discussion of virtue ethics’ elements, see Bryan W. Van Norden, “Virtue Ethics and Confucianism,” in *Comparative Approaches To Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Bo Mou (Aldershot, United Kingdom: Ashgate, 2003), 105-117.


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