

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, educate, 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 *natural* 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 advise *wuwei*: only by ascertaining the nature of *dao* or "way-making" do humans get a guide for leading effectively and behaving properly. But what does *wuwei* mean exactly? What is it and what's its use 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 chao wuwei er wubuwei*" ("*Dao* does not do anything but everything gets done.") Although the passage does not appear in the Mawangdui or 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 suspending 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.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;...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.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.”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’

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*),²⁵ 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].²⁶

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*.²⁷ 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,²⁸ 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.²⁹

Furthermore, as a direct consequence of the former, *wuwei* also incites humans, while practicing true humility like an infant,³⁰ 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.³¹

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*."³² As Hao says, we must avoid introducing our traces to the grand work of the ultimate reality and its "ten-thousand" manifestations.³³ 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].³⁴

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.³⁵ How can a principle for reclusive, "inactive" living propose an "active" ethical life?³⁶ 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* [emphases mine]."³⁷ 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".³⁸ *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 too 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 work² may not be exhaustive, I hope too that it will inspire more research on Daoist philosophy, particularly in the Philippines.⁴⁴

ENDNOTES

¹ Laozi, *Daodejing: A Philosophical Translation*, trans. Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall (New York: Ballantine, 2003), 149.

² Though modern specialists still doubt his authorship, Master Lao is presumed the writer of the *Daodejing* here.

¹⁹ 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 *zhi*, "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, "*Wuwei*," in *Encyclopedia of Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Antonio S. Cua (London: Routledge, 2003), 784-786.

²⁰ Boye Lafayette De Mente, *The Chinese Have A Word For It: The Complete Guide to Chinese Thought and Culture* (Illinois: Passport Books, 1996), 13; Fox, "*Wuwei* in Early Philosophical Daoism," 23.

²¹ Alan Fox is the first to have elucidated the cognitive and behavioral dimensions of *wuwei*. See his paper "*Wuwei* in Early Philosophical Daoism".

²² Alan Watts, *The Watercourse Way* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975), 75 quoted in Yueh-Ting Lee, "Daoistic Humanism in Ancient China: Broadening Personality and Counseling Theories in the 21st Century," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 43, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 70.

²³ Like Heidegger's Being (*Sein*), the term "beings" refers to things that humans deal (or are concerned) with.

²⁴ Fox, "*Wuwei* in Early Philosophical Daoism," 8.

²⁵ Edward Gilman Slingerland, "Effortless Action: *Wu-wei* as a Spiritual Ideal in Early China" (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1998), 31.

²⁶ Roger T. Ames, "The *Zhuangzi* and The Philosophy of Daoism," *Calliope: Exploring World History* 11, no. 2 (October 2000): 15.

²⁷ 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. Jee-Loo 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.

²⁸ Alan Fox, "Process Ecology and The 'Ideal' *Dao*," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 32, no. 1 (March 2005): 52.

- Chan, Wing-Tsit. "The Story of Chinese Philosophy." In *The Chinese Mind: Essentials of Chinese Philosophy and Culture*, ed. Charles A. Moore: 31-76. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1968.
- Clarke, J. J. *The Tao of the West: Western Transformations of Taoist Thought*. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- De Mente, Boye Lafayette. *The Chinese Have A Word For It: The Complete Guide to Chinese Thought and Culture*. Illinois: Passport Books, 1996.
- Hansen, Chad. *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought: A Philosophical Interpretation*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Laozi. *Dao De Jing ("Making This Life Significant"): A Philosophical Translation*. Translated, with Introduction and Commentary, by Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall. New York: Ballantine, 2003.
- Liu, JeeLoo. "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: 278-293. Aldershot, United Kingdom: Ashgate, 2003.
- Miller, James. *Daoism: A Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2003.
- Naess, Arne. *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*. Translated and Edited by David Rothenberg. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Van Norden, Bryan W. "Virtue Ethics and Confucianism." In *Comparative Approaches To Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Bo Mou: 99-121. Aldershot, United Kingdom: Ashgate, 2003.
- Zhuangzi. *The Way of Chuang Tzu*. Translated by Thomas Merton. London: Burns and Oates, 1965.
- _____. *Zhuangzi: Basic Writings*. Translated by Burton Watson. New York: Columbia University Press, 1964, 2003.

Unpublished Materials

- Crawford, Paul Duncan. "Being as a Way of Doing: An Inquiry into the Spirituality of Being." Ph.D. diss., University of Victoria, 1998.
- Fox, Alan. "Wuwei in Early Philosophical Daoism." (Paper presented to the International Society for Chinese Philosophy (ISCP) at the 1995 Eastern Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association, 28 December 1995).
- Fraser, Christopher J. "Wu-wei, the Background and Intentionality." In *Searle's Philosophy and Chinese Philosophy: Constructive Engagement*, ed. Bo Mou, forthcoming. (Revised version of a paper presented at *Searle's Philosophy and Chinese Philosophy: Constructive Engagement*, 2nd International Society of Comparative Studies of Chinese and Western Philosophy (ISCWP) International Conference, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, 14-15 June 2005).
- Hao, Changchi. "Wu-wei and the Question of the Other." Ph.D. diss., Fordham University, 2002.
- Villaver, Ranie B. "The Wuwei Principle of Daoism and Filipino Gender Sensitivity: An Interpretation of the Principle of Non-Doing and Effortless Action." Master's Thesis, University of San Carlos, 2006.

Electronic Sources

- Ames, Roger T. "Daoist Philosophy." In *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. E. Craig. London: Routledge, 1998. Article online. Available from <http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/G006>; 4 November 2004.
- Hall, David L. and Roger T. Ames. "Chinese Philosophy." In *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Craig. London: Routledge, 1998. Article online. Available from <http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/G001>; 04 November 2004.

