

Brownstein comments on Slingerland, *Trying Not to Try*
Columbia Society for Comparative Philosophy
May 9th, 2014

This is an awesome book, and I'm very grateful to have the opportunity to talk about it with Ted and everyone else here today. I'm not qualified to comment on whether the paradox of *wu-wei* unifies ancient Chinese thought, and I'm curious to hear what the other experts here have to say about this, but I totally agree that spontaneity is a cornerstone of well-being and sociality (18) and that trying not to try is inherently difficult. I take these to be the central claims of the book (in addition to the exegetical historical claims): (1) spontaneity is integral to a good life and (2) spontaneity is self-deflecting (just like fighting to fall asleep or trying to win at Mindball).

One of the things I like best in the book is Ted's attention to the "passivity" of action at its best. I mean this in the most provocative, in-your-face-Kantians kind of way. (Half joking! Let's not fight about Kant.) When Charlie Parker says, "don't play the saxophone. Let it play you," (1) I think he is saying something profound about action at its best. Parker is describing a kind of abdication of agency that is rife throughout first-hand accounts of expertise. Ben Gordon illuminates the phenomenon well by contrast: as soon as you're trying to be in charge of what you're doing, *trying* at all, you know that you're out of the zone. It seems to me that this kind of passivity—of abdicating one's own role in the generation of action—is a crucial part of why spontaneity is an element of well-being. Scholars in the skill literature who are suspicious of concepts like flow, the zone, etc.—scholars like Barbara Montero, Jason Stanley, and Julia Annas—will say that these kinds of reports of passivity are misleading or misinformed, or apocryphal in cases like Steve Blass'. But even scholars like Peter Railton, Ellen Fridland, John Sutton and Sian Beilock, whose more anti-Intellectualist views of skilled action are dead-on (in my view), still don't often talk about passivity as a positive phenomenon (i.e., as something with an important positive presence in expert action).

Of course, this abdication of a kind of agency occurs in the context of the most astounding agential feats out there. What Charlie Parker and Ben Gordon can do is not just something that happens; *they* hit the right note or buckle the defenders knees with a sick crossover. And yet, as Ted notes, Michaelangelo's "own contribution" to his artwork is minimal. So how can we understand this? Perhaps we can call this *Wu-Wei* Paradox Sequela Number One: who plays the saxophone when it's playing you? Or to put that in a slightly less undergraduate stoner philosophy-ish way: if it's not to be just a pretty metaphor that in *wu-wei* *my* drives or motives or agency are in harmony with what the world demands—if this harmonizing is really supposed to explain what's distinctive of this kind of activity—then what should we say about the contribution of one's self to one's action in these kinds of cases? What is it to be an agent in the case where the distinctive kind of action one performs is marked by letting go?

Switching gears a bit now, I may have missed something obvious, but I didn't understand how Ted's account of the adaptive value of spontaneity explained the paradox of *wu-wei*, as I

understood it. The 4 versions of the paradox Ted discusses have the form, “ Φ ing is good, but in order to Φ , you’ve got to already Φ .” For Confucius, you must love the way, but you must already be *wu-wei* to truly love the way (79); for Laozi, you must stop deliberating and just be spontaneous, but to stop deliberating and be spontaneous you’ve got to want to stop deliberating and be spontaneous non-instrumentally (109); for Mencius, you must be natural, but the right kind of natural, which you can only recognize by being natural (166); and for Zhuangzi, you must not value any “way” as right, but this too is an instruction to follow a certain way (164).

Now, the evolutionary story, as I understand it, goes something like this: in our ancestral past, spotting deception was very valuable, so trustworthy indications of congruence between another’s actions and motives were very valuable. *Wu-wei* is one such indicator: it’s reliable and unfakeable. Sprinkle in a story about selective pressure over many generations, and we can understand why people who are *wu-wei* are attractive (i.e., they have *de*).

I’m not a philosopher of biology, so don’t know how plausible this story is, but I find it interesting. (Ted cashes it out as a story about the origins of virtue, but I wondered, incidentally, if it could equally be a story about the origins of love, i.e., a story about how unfakeable commitments to others are attractive.) I don’t understand, however, how this evolutionary story explains the paradoxes of the form “ Φ ing is good, but in order to Φ , you’ve got to already Φ .” Here’s the worry crassly: I thought the paradox was about why *wu-wei* is so elusive, not about how *wu-wei* could lead to *de*.

Here’s another, perhaps related, question about the evolutionary story: I can easily see why *wu-wei* might enable me to “move through the human world with the same ease as Butcher Ding’s blade through the ox,” but I’m having more trouble seeing how *wu-wei* is going to get me “properly situated in the cosmos” (40). The cosmos entails heaven, nature, tradition, in sum, it seems, anything bigger than me. This side of *wu-wei* is supposed to cut off the possibility of being an expert butcher or tennis player or whatever yet remain an atrocious person (42). But the “bigger than me” stuff constituted by culture and tradition strike me as very different from the “bigger than me” stuff constituted by nature and the cosmos. The evolutionary story shows why being *wu-wei* can get you the former, i.e., why *wu-wei* is pro-social. But pro-social behavior in our evolutionary history is not the same as being properly situated in the cosmos. For example, Ted discusses the role of *wu-wei* in creating the shared values that were important for making in-and-out group discriminations yea those many generations ago, but I’d venture that the color of one’s skin played a pretty dominant role in in-and-out group discriminations in our ancestral past too, and this is presumably not something with any normative force for us today. In the book, Ted is definitely live to charges of conservatism against Confucian ethics, but I guess I’d like to hear more about possible conservatism in evolutionary justifications of ethics in general. I also can’t help but note the complete absence of any women in the texts and traditions Ted discusses. I’m really a fan of this work, and don’t mean this in the wrong way, but are we failing a philosophical version of the Bechdel Test here?

Ted writes, “The goal of this book is to explore the many facets of spontaneity, as well as the conundrum it presents: why it’s so crucial to our well-being and yet so elusive” (7). It seems to me

that one giant facet of spontaneity not directly included here is impulsivity. Isn't impulsivity the dark side of spontaneity? I have in mind the voluminous literatures on addiction, heuristics and cognitive biases, delay-discounting, implicit bias, and so on. One of the central lessons of the last 40 years of empirical psychology, it seems to me, is that we must be on guard against our unreflective and impulsive feelings, thoughts, behaviors, etc. In their chapter in the *Handbook of Implicit Social Cognition*, Keith Payne and Daryl Cameron capture the thought in a quote from Rousseau: "virtue is a state of war, and to live in it we have always to combat with ourselves." I don't agree with this advice entirely, and I think the Slingerlandian account of spontaneity could actually motivate a response to it, but I DO think we have to reckon with its force. Here's one way of trying to reckon with it, without going full-Kantian: how do you know when to be spontaneous, and when to be *not* spontaneous? In the recent *Lego Movie*, the wise man Vitruvius, voiced over by Morgan Freeman (of course), points out what's difficult about answering this question, in effect articulating what I'll call *Wu-Wei* Paradox Sequela Number Two: "trust your instincts, unless your instincts suck."

Because we're wired up to crave sugar, to reason terribly about probability, etc., and because we live in a world structured by injustices, it's safe to say that a good deal of our instincts suck. Mencius seems to have something to say here, distinguishing our good nature from our bad nature, and growing the sprouts that can take injustice head on, but what I'd like to know is whether and how growing those sprouts is something that requires or utilizes spontaneity instead of simply fighting against it, as Rousseau recommends. In the "Learning from *Wu-wei*" chapter Ted makes a number of suggestions—from minding our manners to utilizing the mere exposure effect—but I think all of these strategies cut both ways. It seems like I need to figure out, reflectively, which virtue-inculcating things to expose myself to, or I need to deliberate about which *Wu-wei* strategy to use under which circumstances, etc. But now it looks like I'm just back to a deliberation-first, totally un-*wu-wei* ethical strategy. And I for one don't want to end up there.

Finally, I'm interested in the comparison between this book and Bert Dreyfus and Sean Kelly's 2011 *All Things Shining*. There are a number of parallels between the books, in particular ideas about the relationship between effortless expertise and *de*, or what Dreyfus & Kelly call charisma, as well as an emphasis on the passivity of action at its best. Also, Dreyfus & Kelly write,

When things are going at their best, when we are the most excellent version of ourselves that we can be, when we are, for instance, working together with others as one, then our activity seems to be drawn out of us by an external force. These are shining moments in life, wondrous moments that require our gratitude. In those episodes of excellence, no matter the domain, Odysseus's voice should ring through our heads: 'Be silent; curb your thoughts; do not ask questions. This is the work of the Olympians.' (81)

Ted writes, "one of the key features of the *wu-wei* state is a sense of being absorbed in some larger, valued whole—typically referred to as the Dao or 'Way,'" (15) and it's clear that Dreyfus & Kelly share this notion, which they call the sacred. Here's my sense of their project: Dreyfus & Kelly's goal is to articulate a middle way between Nietzsche and David Foster Wallace, on the one hand, and Martin Luther and Elizabeth Gilbert (the author of *Eat, Pray, Love*), on the other. Both sides are

concerned with finding meaning in life in worlds where we have not simply inherited a set of moral values or an unquestionable sense of how everything hangs together. Nietzsche and Wallace see the challenge to be one of self-creation, finding the strength of will to create a meaningful world *ex nihilo*. Luther and Gilbert see the challenge as being fully receptive, of letting the saxophone play you completely. Dreyfus & Kelly find fault with both of these extremes and see the middle articulated in Melville, who argues that we can connect with the sacred by “[lowering] the conceits of attainable felicity . . . in the wife, the heart, the table, the saddle, the fire-side, the country.” (163) This is a kind of pedestrian polytheism; the great Sperm Whale taking the place of Zeus. Thus, D&K write, “there is no essential difference, really, in how it feels to rise as one in joy to sing the praises of the Lord, or to rise as one in joy to sing the praises of the Hail Mary pass, the Immaculate Reception, the Angels, the Saints, the Friars, or the Demon Deacons” (193).

Ted’s description of gardening in Vancouver sounds pretty similar to what Dreyfus & Kelly say, so I’m curious whether Ted sees any fault lines between his project and theirs. Talk of “The True Person” and the “Perfect Person” in the ancient literature kind of gives me a rash, but I’m not sure I’m ready to completely ditch sanctity in favor of “whooshing up” while gardening or chanting “We Will Rock You” at the Barclays Center. So a final question: is *wu-wei* Zeus, the Sperm Whale, or something else altogether?