Metic Intelligence or Responsible Non-Action? Further Reflections on the Zhuangzi, Daode jing, and Neiye

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Russell Kirkland has argued persuasively against reading a specifically interventionist ecological sensibility into the Zhuangzi, Daode jing, and Neiye, the three preeminent "Daoist" texts of Warring States and Han vintage. His discussion centers on what he calls "responsible non-action" as a central tenet of the moral reasoning of ancient or classical Daoism.1 Classical Daoists, he argues, unlike both classical Confucians and modern Westerners, accepted all the processes of life and death, including the destructive ones. They thus achieved redemptive action by means other than on behalf of others or to "fix" or "improve" the world; indeed, ancient Daoist moral reasoning specifically precluded such intervention. In summary, Kirkland's arguments suggest that, however much Daoism (broadly understood) may seem resonant with an "ecological" sensibility, interventionist misreading of these texts would allow the ends to justify the means.

In response, I want to examine these problems and texts from another point of view. These texts suggest several possibilities for what I will call noninterventionism. By this I mean modes of action that are indirect, work at a distance, and do not involve heroic, deliberative, or even necessarily deliberate intervention. In these texts, Daoists frequently did intervene in these ways. Their modes of action differed from the contemporary model of heroic intervention and included the extender effects of individual self-cultivation, transform-
Noninterventionist Action

In the “Mastering Life” chapter (19) of the Zhuangzi, Confucius is faced with the situation of someone apparently drowning in the flood. The falls at Lüliang are so precipitous that the water falls from thirty fathoms and races in rapids for forty ft “so swift that no fish or other water creature can swim in it.” Confucius sees a man dive into this maelstrom and, supposing that the man was in some kind of trouble and intended to end his life, he ordered his disciples to line up on the bank and pull the man out.” But, the story continues, after the man had gone a couple of hundred paces, he was pulled back into the water, strolled along the bank and sang a song. Confucius runs after him and asks whether he has some special way of staying afloat. The “Daoist” explains to Confucius that: “I have no way. I began with what is born, grew it by essential nature, and completed it by means of fate.” He continues: “I was born on land so I feel at ease on land; that is inborn. I grew up on the water so I feel at ease on water; that is essential nature. I don’t know why I do what I do; that is fate!”

Here, the apparent victim not only does not need saving, but also is more adroit than Confucius and his disciples. Indeed, the narrative of the Zhuangzi uses the swimmer to show the limits and inefficacy of the heroic intervention Confucius, at least, intended. Confucius does not come off very well. He initially misunderstands the nature of the situation and mistakes the man first for a ghost (and not in need of aid) and then for a suicide. At no point does he himself intervene, beyond ordering his disciples to save the man, which they seem unable to do. (The water was too turbulent that “not even a fish could survive in it,” and the swimmer only emerged after a few hundred paces.) In this apparent human crisis, Confucius lacked the means to intervene effectively.

Parenthetically, we might extend this implied critique of heroic intervention as inefficacious to Ruist persuasions on ecological matters. Our accounts of the biographies of the figures known as Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi suggest that their official positions (when they had them) did not enable them to act, beyond attempts at persuasion. Their persuasions to rulers certainly addressed ecological concerns—the most famous is probably Mencius’s Ox Mountain (6A8)—but there is little explicit record of such persuasions having specific effect. Probably more important is the inclusion of yue lìng, or “monthly ordnance” calendrics, within the Li ji that gave agricultural regulation the force of ritual command, at least by Han times, when the Li ji was probably compiled.3

Here and elsewhere, the Zhuangzi rejects or ridicules heroic intervention. Can we, therefore, infer that ancient Daoists rejected any kind of intervention, or either their own or others’ behalf? I suggest that these texts presentor sanction at least two modes of action that constitute alternatives to heroic ecological intervention. The first is self-cultivation: literal self-preservation through cultivating one’s vital essence (jing). The second is nurturing others and even “transforming the people” (hua min) through indirect action.

Self-cultivation

In the Zhuangzi, Robber Zhi upbraids Confucius for the folly of the so-called sage-kings who sought reputation, made light of death, forgot their origin, and did not “cultivate their fated span” (zhou ming).4 In contrast, the tree that is too guarled for the carpenter is left on the mountains to live out its allotted fate.5 In the Zhuangzi, as in other Warring States texts, everyone is born with an allotted life span, ming or fen.6 The problems of fate and fatalism reappear in any number of Warring States philosophical debates.7 Zhuangzi 12 describes the emergence of notions of decree and fate as part of the origin of the world:

In the far beginning there was nothing and nothing had no name. Then One arose from it and there was One but it had no form. Living things acquired it in order to come alive, and it was called power (de). The formless had allotments (fen) but they were still not divided out, and they were called fates (ming).8

According to Zhuangzi 6:

that life and death are decreed, that there are regularities of night and day, this is Heaven. Everything in which people cannot intervene, this is the nature of living things.9
Zhuangzi's Confucius advises his disciple Zigao that "nothing is as good as bringing about what has been decreed; this is what is truly difficult." 19 In these passages everything has its allotment. In Kirkland's reading of classical Daoist ethics, such decrees cannot and should not be interfered with. Classical Daoist ethics also sanctions subtle action through indirectness and resonance with natural processes and the action of "fate."

The most straightforward of these modes of indirect action is active self-cultivation. It is in the Neiye that one first meets clear references to the personal cultivation of such forces as qi (life energy), jing (vital essence), and shen ("nūmen"), which "became a central theme in certain versions of modern Taoism, as well as in Chinese medicine." 20 In the Neiye, de/power is not an intrinsic force, but rather the ability to succeed (as suggested by its homonym de/acquire) by constant self-cultivation or "acquisitional agency." 21 The Neiye specifies that the cultivation of de must be worked on each day:

Respectful and cautious, and avoiding excesses, he daily renews his Power (de).

He comes to understand everything in the world and thoroughly examines its four extremities. 22

These classical Daoist texts represent self-cultivation practices as active interventions upon one's own person that could, depending upon the text and period, permit one to survive through difficult times, enhance longevity, or even (in Six Dynasties Daoism) become an immortal.

**Action at a Distance**

Whatever their power to optimize individual survival, could the extended effects of self-cultivation practices in any sense constitute an ecological intervention, however indirect or subtle? The Daode jing repeatedly describes the indirect strategies by which "the sage" or sage-ruler causes the people to prosper without, apparently, doing anything at all; indeed, the extent to which wa wei informs the Daode jing (DDJ) is well known. To cite a few examples: 23

The sage makes a dwelling in wa wei concerns (wa wei zhi shi, DDJ 2).

They use wa wei and nothing is undone (DDJ 48).

The words of the sage say: I use wa wei and the people transform of themselves (min zi kua, DDJ 57).

Act by means of wawei (DDJ 63).

Zhuangzi I describes a numinous man (shen ren) of Guye who concentrates his shen and "protects creatures from sickness and plague and makes the harvest plentiful." 24 This passage suggests the view that a realized sage can have a nurturing effect on the world at large by acting at a distance. The Zhuangzi makes no suggestion that these salvific effects are intended; they appear to be a beneficent byproduct of self-cultivation practices.

Other passages in Warring States and Han texts suggest that self-cultivation also benefits others indirectly. The Li shi chuanqi chapter "Living Out One's Lot" (Jin shu) describes how sages used knowledge of yin and yang to understand what benefits the myriad creatures and to live out their allotted lifespans, without augmentation or diminution of what had been allotted them:

Sages investigate the conformity of yin and yang, discriminate what benefits the myriad creatures to live to the greatest advantage, and by making the numinous essence (jing shen) tranquil, they preserve their longevity and lengthen it. This lengthening is not a matter of either shortening or extending it, but rather of bringing its [allotted] number to completion (li qi shu). Bringing its number to completion consists in eliminating harm. (Li shi chuanqi 3.2, pp. 3b–4a)

This passage suggests a view that what fate allots is not inviolable, and it requires the activities of a sage or a ruler (discussed below) to guarantee it.

**Transforming the People through Example and Efficacy**

Turning to more direct forms of intervention, the rhetoric of several Warring States works on government and military strategy suggest that good rulers, like sages, brought about conditions that enabled
both people and other living things to "complete their ming," to live out their allotted spans, in peace.

Sunzi's *Art of War* stresses that the effective general acts with speed and avoids destruction of life and matériel. Sunzi's "Debate on Principles of Warfare" makes it clear that a true king does not punish the people. His military regulations

do not seize those who offer allegiance, do not leave in place those who resist, and do not imprison those who flee for their lives (literally, who flee "for the sake of their ming." (Sunzi 55/15/60)

Similarly, in his punitive expeditions

those who submit to the sword he allows to live, those who resist, he kills, and those who flee for their lives (for their ming) he treats as precious tribute. (Sunzi 55/15/61)

The *Huainanzi* (Hnz) contains extensive discussions of "transforming the people" (*hua min or min hua*), in both the "Art of Rulership" chapter (Hnz 9) and "The Great Family" (Hnz 20). Correspondingly negative rhetoric attaches to vicious rulers like Zhou of Shang, whose subjects and ministers were in such terror that "none could feel certain of his fate" (Sunzi 57/15/85).

A Skeptical Note

Attempts to apply a paradigm of Daoist action or non-action to the contemporary ecological situation are open to both textual and philosophical objections. But we must also ask whether the present crisis is different in kind, rather than merely in degree, from previous crises, such as the agricultural straits of the Han. E. N. Anderson, Francesca Bray, and others have assessed the magnitude and effects of that crisis and considered the kind of changes it produced in Han government and social policy. We may nevertheless ask: does our current situation entail a degree and kind of interference with nature/Dao that is beyond the conceptual scope of these texts? Is our technological grasp of implements of mass destruction, through atomic warfare in the 1950s and 1960s and now through environmental disaster, simply beyond what these texts envisaged? Unsustainable levels of specifically chemical pollution, new diseases, and the prospect of global warming suggest the possibility of damage beyond even the power of Dao to reverse.

If we take the current situation to be different in kind and not merely degree, we cannot apply the textual precedents of the past with any felicity to Daoist attitudes toward predictability. Skeptical instincts suggest that we simply do not know what Zhuang Zhou would have done. To underscore an obvious point, our sources for Warring States and Han history are such that we have mostly texts. Daoists are not texts, and texts do not act (or not act) with purpose, one way or the other. We need to be careful about inadvertently equating what we might consider to be the logical or philosophical implications of a text with the actions of any person. Texts are not persons; we cannot predict the behavior of Daoist humans from Daoist texts, especially within a tradition that prized "flexible response to circumstances" (xing bian) and the ability to deal resourcefully with unpredictable events. Truly unpredictable circumstances might prompt action outside of what we have in our texts.

Conclusion

Imponderables aside, the textual evidence shows that notions of self-cultivation, indirect action, and action at a distance as the basis for effective rule figured prominently in wide range of Warring States and Han thought. These modes of actions were ascribed to sages, rulers, and generals, all individuals in one or another sense charged with public welfare.

Most moderns would, of course, reject utterly the idea that self-cultivation or action at a distance could address a "real" ecological crisis. That prima facie rejection, however, would ignore the porosity of notions of selfhood in a wide range of Chinese thought: the inseparability of "inner" and "outer," the high cultural value of "selflessness," macrocosm-microcosm identifications, and constructions of individuality that differ from Western norms. Any number of practices in both these texts and Chinese folk belief reflect this belief in a porous border between inner and outer, for example, the contiguity of practices for the management of the flow of qi in both fengshui and traditional medicine.
Many Warring States and Han accounts of indirect action specifically involve responses to rapidly changing or unpredictable circumstances, what the Greeks called *metis*. I have argued elsewhere at length that this subtle cast of mind thoroughly informed classical Chinese moral reasoning, philosophy, and political thought, but was especially prevalent in Daoist texts such as the *Daode jing* and the *Zhuangzi*. In a recent study, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, James C. Scott argues that a single body of ideas, which he calls high modernism, lies behind a diverse range of ideas. Scott argues that the disasters of the twentieth century come from a neglect of *metis*, and only the presence of individuals of *metis* within high modern societies has prevented even worse harm being done by such grand schemes of human improvement.

The cultural ecologist E. N. Anderson remarks that most of the world's traditional societies "encode in their moral teachings practical wisdom about the environment and the individual's duty to treat it with respect." In the Chinese case, some of these practices may be more directly visible in the texts and practices of the Han synthesists and later Daoists than in Warring States Daoist texts. We risk grave anachronism and misreading if we impute to them specifically interventionist attitudes toward "nature" or ecology that, in fact, run counter to their own ethics. Nevertheless, they may have broad lessons for our own ecological situation in the casts of mind and modes of action they represent. These include notions of porosity of self and metic intelligence. Flexible boundaries between self and other indubitably contributed to Chinese practical wisdom about the environment. Similarly, the resourceful and ingenious attitudes associated with metic intelligence in China and elsewhere may provide alternatives to heavy-handed intervention.

**Notes**


6. Ming and fen have interesting differences from and similarities to Greek moira or aitia. For discussion, see Lisa Raphals, "Fatalism, Fate and Stratagem in China and Greece," a chapter in *Early China, Ancient Greece: Thinking through Comparisons*, ed. Steven Shankman and Stephen Durrant (Albany: State University of New York Press, forthcoming 2001).

7. Despite Confucius's notorious reluctance to discuss gods, spirits, and fate, the Zhuangzi (and the Xunzi) attribute discussions of fate to him. Mohists accuse Ruists of fatalism. Both the Zhuangzi and the Xunzi emphasize the importance of fate but reject fatalism, albeit in very different ways. The Zhuangzi stresses the importance of alignment with inevitable change in the fates of peoples and times (and, presumably, endangered species). Xunzi de-emphasizes inevitability and attempts to counter the charge of fatalism by stressing free will and the importance of individual action. For both, fate can, in different senses, be mastered and trodden strategically. For further discussion see Raphals, "Fatalism, Fate and Stratagem."

8. Zhuangzi 12:424. I use both the terms "decrec" and "fate" to translate ming in order to avoid introducing a kind of crypto-fatalism into the texts.


10. Zhuangzi 4:163. This phrase could also be translated as "Nothing is as good as following one's destiny."


14. Passages are numbered according to the Wang Bi edition. For discussion of wanzi in other Warring States and Han texts, see Roger T. Ames, *The Art of
Non-Action and the Environment Today:  
A Conceptual and Applied Study of Laozi’s Philosophy

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Based on textual and lexicological investigations, this paper attempts to reinterpret the concept of wuwei (non-action) and discuss its significance in both the contexts of Laozi’s philosophy and current environmental issues. In comparison with general actions, wuwei refers to a higher standard of human actions and their results. Wuwei is not term with a single meaning, but is a cluster of similar terms and phrases. In fact, wuwei represents a different value orientation from prevailing convention and demands the most appropriate manner of actions.

This paper differs from most other works in the discussion of environmental ethics or comparative studies—which have focused on the theoretical aspects of the relations of humans and nature—by focusing on two aspects. The first is the conceptual investigation and interpretation of wuwei. The second is a discussion of two cases, namely, the conflagration of Indonesian rain forests and the miserable experience of the Inuit community caused by a campaign conducted by Greenpeace. Superficially, the two aspects have no direct association at all; however, if we believe that Laozi’s philosophy conveys profound wisdom and reflection of human societies and history, there must be something universal and applicable. This paper is an attempt at demonstrating how the significant doctrines of Laozi’s philosophy may be applied to the modern ecological context. Certainly, this experiment is based on serious textual study and conceptual investiga-