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Brian J. Bruya

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# THE REHABILITATION OF SPONTANEITY: A NEW APPROACH IN PHILOSOPHY OF ACTION

**Brian J. Bruya**

Department of History and Philosophy, Eastern Michigan University

I think I could turn and live with animals, they're so placid and self-contain'd,  
I stand and look at them long and long.

They do not sweat and whine about their condition,  
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,  
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,  
Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania of owning things,  
Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thousands of years ago,  
Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth.

Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself" (Whitman 1959)

Love animals: God has given them the rudiments of thought and joy untroubled. Do not trouble their joy, don't harass them, don't deprive them of their happiness, don't work against God's intent. Man, do not pride yourself on superiority to the animals; they are without sin, and you, with your greatness, defile the earth by your appearance on it, and leave the traces of your foulness after you—alas, it is true of almost every one of us!

Father Zossima, in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (Dostoyevsky 1995, VI, 2g)

The aim of this article is to provide a definition of Daoist spontaneity that may carry over to current philosophical discourse and eventually aid in conceptualizing a variety of dimensions—metaphysical, psychological, cognitive-scientific, aesthetic—of action theory. Currently, discussions around the philosophy of action are still dominated by the free-will-versus-determinism debate that has persisted in a variety of forms for over two millennia.<sup>1</sup> With the help of a clarified notion of spontaneity, it may be possible to add an interesting and useful new dimension to these discussions. I begin by defining and taxonomizing a Daoist notion of spontaneity. Following this, I explore approximations of this notion from the history of Western philosophy, elaborating the metaphysical limitations that inevitably arise. Finally, I formulate criteria for an up-to-date action theory based on a rehabilitated notion of spontaneity, then examine an influential contemporary theory in this light.

As I demonstrate below, the traditional Western philosophical conception of spontaneity presupposes a human/nonhuman dichotomy. "Spontaneity," fundamentally meaning "self-caused movement,"<sup>2</sup> translates in the nonhuman realm, according to traditional Western theorists, into natural teleology or determinism and in the human realm into voluntarism. Because Daoist philosophy does not presuppose an intransigent human/nonhuman dichotomy, it may prove to be a valuable resource for reconceptualizing action in an age that no longer views humans as standing outside nature. Any Daoist conception that appears similar to a Western conception

of spontaneity will refer to something significantly different from its Western cousin, and yet because it still describes self-caused movement, the parallels may be worth investigating, provided that distinctions are appropriately elucidated.

### *Daoist Self-Causation*

#### *The Zi of Ziran*

In defining Daoist spontaneity, I shall examine the two major early Daoist texts, the *Laozi* and the Inner Chapters of the *Zhuangzi*, and rely on context to flesh out a satisfactory meaning. *Zi* 自, the first character of the binomial term *ziran* 自然, common in both the *Laozi* (approximately fourth century B.C. at the latest) and the *Zhuangzi* (fourth century B.C. at the earliest), can be found to carry three discrete meanings (see table 1). The first and most easily apprehended meaning is the coverb “from,” as in *zi gu ji jin* 自古及今 (from the past up to the present) (*Laozi* 21). More than just a preposition, it connotes a sense of active force, as “action from.” In this sense, it can take on temporal, spatial, and abstract metaphorical meanings. *Zi* 自 as “from” occurs once in the *Laozi* and nine times in the more narrative-oriented *Zhuangzi*.

The second meaning of *zi* found in these texts is the reflexive pronominal adverb, indicating the self as agent (and sometimes simultaneously object)—“to do oneself” or “to do for, or to, oneself,” as in *zi wei* 自謂 (to refer to oneself) (*Laozi* 39). Unlike the first meaning above, which is value-neutral, this meaning is often used in an approbatory or disapprobatory context in these texts. In the *Laozi*, reference to the self in this way is almost always negative—the actions are things that should not be done: self-promotion, showing off, et cetera. But occasionally in the *Laozi* and more often in the *Zhuangzi*, reference to the self using *zi* 自 can be positive: to know oneself, to understand oneself, to make oneself happy.

The third meaning of *zi* in these texts is the meaning most germane to the phrase in question, *ziran* 自然 (*Laozi* 17). It also carries a strong sense of reflexivity, but there is something more as well. We find occurrences with this meaning in the following phrases, which if translated according to definition 2 would go something like this:

自化 *zi hua*, to transform oneself (*Laozi* 37)

自正 *zi zheng*, to correct oneself (*Laozi* 57)

自來 *zi lai*, to come oneself (*Laozi* 73)

The “something more” begins to be evident in the third example, where the “self” no longer makes sense as a direct object and is more appropriately interpreted as adverbial. When this understanding is applied to the second example, more fully written *min zi zheng* 民自正, rather than being rendered “the people correct themselves,” it is better translated as “the people of themselves become correct / are rectified,” which is how it is rendered separately by Wing-tsit Chan and D. C. Lau.

There appear to be two purposes in adding the “of”: (1) it emphasizes impetus over effect—it makes clear that the central focus of attention in the sentence is not that the people become correct but that they accomplish becoming correct from their own resources, without external motivation or assistance; and (2) the “of” soft-

ens the causation away from single-impetus deliberateness to a more vague, multivalent causation. Consider, for example, the following hypothetical statements:

the universe moves itself  
the universe moves *of* itself

In both of these statements, the basic meaning is the same: the universe is moving, and the agent behind the movement is the universe. In the first, however, there is an implicit agent/object dichotomy, an intentionality, and a path of causation—the universe is both agent and object, the causation is directed, and it is directed at the universe. In the second, the agent/object dichotomy does not apply. When saying that the universe moves *of* itself, the possibility of an external cause is simply removed, and no claim is made as to paths of causation or intentionality. The “of,” then, indicates a kind of self-causation, without any presuppositions regarding self, causation, or their relationship.

This third meaning of *zi* occurs seventeen times across the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*, in nearly half of these occurrences appearing in the term *ziran* 自然, a term that in modern Chinese is most often rendered into English as “nature.” Something worth noting about this term in its classical usage is that *ran* is nothing more than a pronominal adverb, meaning “like this” or “this way,” or “so” (as in *Laozi* 21: *wu he yi zhi zhong fu zhi ran zai* 吾何以知眾甫之然哉—which Ames and Hall translate interpreting *fu* 甫 as *fu* 父, “father”), as in “How do I know that the sire of the many is so?” The main force for the meaning of *ziran* comes from the *zi*. It is quite common in the classical language for *ran* also to act as an adverbial intensifier, as in *Mengzi* 1A/6, *cu ran wen* 卒然問 (to abruptly ask). Therefore, in the term *ziran*, the *ran* may refer to and intensify *zi*.<sup>3</sup> For instance, the sentence *Wo ziran* 我自然, in *Laozi* 21, could mean that I (*wo*) develop out of myself, and that’s all.

There is a usage in *Zhuangzi* 2 that ties the three meanings of *zi* together and shows how the second and third meanings could derive over time from the first. The phrase is *shi qi zi ji* 使其自己 (each is allowed to arise from itself). This passage occurs in the chapter’s first episode, about the music of nature. A figure named Nanguo Ziqi progresses from a lengthy description of the music (a piping sound) of the earth as caused by the wind blowing through hollows, to the music of humans caused by blowing through wind instruments, and finally to the music of *tian* 天 (nature/sky/heavens). In the music of nature, he says, there are countless different sources of blowing, and “each is allowed to arise from itself.” The term *zi ji* 自己 in this phrase, which is also common in contemporary Chinese as a binomial meaning “oneself,” has a much more interesting and complex meaning in its classical usage. In the classical language, *ji* is the reflexive personal pronoun, and the anterior *zi* carries the first meaning of *zi* above—“from.” *Zi ji* means, at the most basic level, “from oneself.” However, I have placed this particular passage under meaning 2 in my table because it is primarily identifying the self as agent of the act. Further, it is easy to see from context how it can cross over into meaning 3. The full passage goes on to say *xian qi zi qu* 咸其自取 (they all choose [notes] of their own accord), which conveys the entire significance of the passage: there is a self-causation in the workings of nature

Table 1 Occurrences of *Zi* 自 in the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*

Definition	Passage	Source	Translation
1. From	自古及今	<i>Laozi</i> 21	From antiquity right up to present
	自此以往	<i>Zhuangzi</i> 2	Going on from here
	自無適有以至於三	<i>Zhuangzi</i> 2	Proceeding from nothing to something, one arrives at three
	而況自有適有乎	<i>Zhuangzi</i> 2	Let alone proceeding from something to something
	自我觀之	<i>Zhuangzi</i> 2	From my vantage point
	自吾執斧斤以隨夫子	<i>Zhuangzi</i> 4	Since we took up our axes to follow you, sir
	自其異者視之	<i>Zhuangzi</i> 5	Look at them from the standpoint of their differences
	自其同者視之	<i>Zhuangzi</i> 5	Look at them from the standpoint of their similarities
	自古以固存	<i>Zhuangzi</i> 6	From ancient times it has steadily persisted
	自其所以	<i>Zhuangzi</i> 6	He did it from that
2. To do oneself; to do for/to oneself	天地所以能長且久者，以其不自生	<i>Laozi</i> 7	The reason the world can persist for long is that it does not live for itself
	自遺其咎	<i>Laozi</i> 9	Bring tragedy upon themselves
	不自見，故明	<i>Laozi</i> 22	Those who do not promote themselves get seen
	不自是，故彰	<i>Laozi</i> 22	Those who do not insist they are right get noticed
	不自伐，故有功	<i>Laozi</i> 22	Those who do not boast of themselves make accomplishments
	不自矜，故長	<i>Laozi</i> 22	Those who do not think too highly of themselves endure
	自見者不明	<i>Laozi</i> 24	Those who promote themselves do not get seen
	自是者不彰	<i>Laozi</i> 24	Those who insist that they are right do not get noticed
	自伐者無功	<i>Laozi</i> 24	Those who boast of themselves do not make accomplishments
	自矜者不長	<i>Laozi</i> 24	The who think too highly of themselves do not endure
	自知者明	<i>Laozi</i> 33	To know oneself is acuity
	自勝者強	<i>Laozi</i> 33	To conquer oneself is strength
	是以侯王自謂曰孤寡不穀	<i>Laozi</i> 39	This is why the high nobility used diminutives to refer to themselves
	是以聖人自知，不自見	<i>Laozi</i> 72	This is how it is that sages know themselves but do not promote themselves
	自愛，不自貴	<i>Laozi</i> 72	They love themselves but do not hold themselves as precious
	其自視也亦若此矣	<i>Zhuangzi</i> 1	They viewed themselves in the same way as [the little birds]

Table 1 (continued)

Definition	Passage	Source	Translation
	吾自視缺然	<i>Zhuangzi</i> 1	I view myself as being inadequate
	其堅不能自舉也	<i>Zhuangzi</i> 1	It wasn't strong enough to hold itself up
	使其自己也	<i>Zhuangzi</i> 2	Each is allowed to arise from itself
	奚必知代而心自取者有之	<i>Zhuangzi</i> 2	Why must it be that those who [purport to] understand things are the ones whose minds may choose for themselves
	自彼則不見	<i>Zhuangzi</i> 2	If you take yourself as "other," [other things] will not appear [to you]
	自知則知之	<i>Zhuangzi</i> 2	If you [venture to] understand yourself, you will understand those [other things]
	愚者自以為覺	<i>Zhuangzi</i> 2	A fool thinks he is enlightened
	自喻適志與	<i>Zhuangzi</i> 2	Pleasing himself, he went where he wished
	實自回也	<i>Zhuangzi</i> 4	There is a substantial sense of [actions] coming from myself
	自事其心者	<i>Zhuangzi</i> 4	In the service of one's own mind
	自掎擊於世俗者也	<i>Zhuangzi</i> 4	They bring upon themselves the assaults of the worldly
	山木自寇也	<i>Zhuangzi</i> 4	Mountain trees plunder themselves
	膏火自煎也	<i>Zhuangzi</i> 4	Grease fires burn themselves out
	將求名而能自要者	<i>Zhuangzi</i> 5	If someone pursuing fame can do this by wanting it for himself
	不足以自反	<i>Zhuangzi</i> 5	Enough to cause you to examine yourself
	自狀其過	<i>Zhuangzi</i> 5	Admit to their own shortcomings (Graham [ <i>Zhuangzi</i> 1981] adds "freely" at the beginning, which would put it under 3 below)
	吾自以為至通	<i>Zhuangzi</i> 5	I thought I was enlightened
	當而不自得	<i>Zhuangzi</i> 6	Didn't feel proud of themselves for doing what was right
	自本	<i>Zhuangzi</i> 6	It is its own roots (Mair [ <i>Zhuangzi</i> 1998] says, "from its roots," which would put it under 1 above)
	自根	<i>Zhuangzi</i> 6	It is its own branches (Mair says "from its branches," which would put it under 1 above)
	不能自解者	<i>Zhuangzi</i> 6	Cannot free oneself from the bonds
	似不自己	<i>Zhuangzi</i> 7	Seemingly not for himself
	自失而走	<i>Zhuangzi</i> 7	Lost his composure and ran away
	列子自以為未始學	<i>Zhuangzi</i> 7	Liezi felt for himself that he had never begun to learn
	使物自喜	<i>Zhuangzi</i> 7	Lets things make themselves happy

Table 1 (continued)

Definition	Passage	Source	Translation
3. Of one's own accord	百姓皆謂我自然	<i>Laozi</i> 17	The common people say, "We are spontaneously like this"
	希言自然	<i>Laozi</i> 23	To speak but rarely is natural
	道法自然	<i>Laozi</i> 25	<i>Dao</i> emulates the spontaneous
	侯王若能守之，萬物將自賓	<i>Laozi</i> 32	If the high nobility could keep to this, all things would follow along of their own accord
	民莫之令而自均	<i>Laozi</i> 32	Without being ordered, they would come into harmony of their own accord
	侯王而能守之，萬物將自化	<i>Laozi</i> 37	If the high nobility could keep to this, all things would develop of their own accord
	天下將自正	<i>Laozi</i> 37	Everything under the heavens would become correct of its own accord
	夫莫之命而常自然	<i>Laozi</i> 51	Without being ordered, it is always just spontaneous
	我無為而民自化	<i>Laozi</i> 57	I do nothing overtly, and the people develop of their own accord
	我好靜而民自正	<i>Laozi</i> 57	I cherish tranquility, and the people become correct of their own accord
	我無事而民自富	<i>Laozi</i> 57	I do not interfere, and the people become prosperous of their own accord
	我無欲而民自朴	<i>Laozi</i> 57	I have no untoward desires, and the people becomes simple of their own accord
	以輔萬物之自然	<i>Laozi</i> 64	Although they could assist things in developing spontaneously, they would not dare
	不召而自來	<i>Laozi</i> 73	Is to come without being summoned
	咸其自取	<i>Zhuangzi</i> 2	They all choose [notes] of their own accord
常因自然	<i>Zhuangzi</i> 5	Routinely accords with the spontaneous	
順物自然	<i>Zhuangzi</i> 7	In the spontaneity of your accord with events	

Occurrences: *Laozi*, 30 (0.6%); *Zhuangzi*, 38 (0.2%).

Note: 不自適其適者也 (*Zhuangzi* 6) not included because it is commonly recognized as an interpolation.

such that no external force is needed—all things arise and function of their own accord. So the *zi* in *shi qi zi ji* 使其自己 (each is allowed to arise from itself) carries the meaning not only of “action from,” and not only of “action performed by the self,” but also of “self-caused action.”

The term *spontaneous* is often used to translate the third sense of *zi*, as self-caused action. If one adopts “spontaneity” as a rendering of this kind of self-causation, it is safe to conclude that it is synonymous with “natural.” The self that is referred to is never divorced from a wider, interactive context; it is always assumed to persist within an organic web of mutual influence, and because of this one cannot conceive of an egoistic or deviant form of Daoist self-causation. There is no sense, in a Daoist context, of either an atomist or an individualist perspective of agency.

### *The Taxonomy of Daoist Self-Causation*

This minimal notion of Daoist self-causation requires further expansion and an attempt at characterizing early Daoist metaphysics. Although it is an understatement to say that there are many lacunae with respect to our understanding of the explicit and implicit cosmologies of the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*, one thing seems certain: that there is no metaphysical break between human and animal or human and spiritual.<sup>4</sup> This metaphysical continuum is possible due to the basic energy/matter known as *qi*, which appears to have widely been assumed to make up everything in the universe, including stones, clouds, breath, emotions, people, spirits, et cetera.<sup>5</sup> In such a world, teleologies exist only inasmuch as each particular item in the universe tends to act as one of its kind, drawing on particular resources at hand and responding to particular circumstances as accumulating to each unique self but within restricted parameters. Human beings have the distinction of being able to work against this natural teleology, an effect typically brought on by excessive desire stemming from a constituent sense organ (Lewis 2006). By returning to the unassuming simplicity of one’s natural state, a person can recapture the impulses that maintain harmony and quietude.

A human being receives information about the external world not only through the five senses but also through the perception of the flowing of *qi*, which carries information (to varying degrees depending on the subject, the object, and the circumstances) concerning the fluctuating interior conditions of a thing, a person, a place, a group, or a situation in general. Knowledge in both of these senses refers to an understanding of circumstances that reaches from general tendencies on the scale of populations or entire systems to minute or subtle tendencies of an individual or specific situation. There being no ontological difference among a stone, a person, or a circumstance, information is derived from each in the same way. Where more sentience is involved, cognitive-affectivity<sup>6</sup> plays a larger role in shaping circumstances and conveying and receiving information. The *xin* 心, heart, the human organ responsible for cognitive-affectivity, both senses and processes this information (Geaney 2002).

Causation in a Daoist world is a kind of influence and reaction. Whether of a flower, a squirrel, a human being, a forest, or a state, influence and reaction come in

patterns that follow naturally from circumstances (Lewis 1999). In familiar force mechanics, causality is a notion of pushing, of collision and ricochet—the vector, mass, and material of two billiard balls cause, or determine, their vectors after collision. Causality in Daoist thought is more of a mutual pulling or a drawing forward. Both circumstances and interior motivations draw an individual forward as a river draws forward its contents, attracting rivulets and channeling the water and everything in it. On the level of sentience, Daoist causation is centered on understanding circumstances through all of the information that one can garner and, ideally, reacting in a way that maintains or enhances overall quiescence, stability, and harmony.

Speaking of this process using the term *causation* can be misleading because the Western philosophical tradition of causation leads one to conceive of causality as efficient causality, of change caused exteriorly and discretely. In Daoist terms, however, a change, rather than being caused, is drawn out, attracted, elicited, allowed. So self-cause, as I have been calling it up to now, is not, after all, an impelling force and certainly not one exerted by an essentialized being. Self-cause is the flowing with circumstances according to one's own particular makeup and conditions. The river metaphor must not be understood as an inexorable flow that is either acquiesced to or resisted but a more subtle flow, as with wind currents—each particular pattern of *qi* following the directions most suitable to interior and exterior conditions.

The difference that goes along the scale of sentience from stone to animal to human is one of sensitivity to the information that is carried by the flowing *qi* and the complexity of the internal response. Humans are more sensitive and have more variables at work internally, accounting for a more complex decision-making process. Which conditions carry the most weight? Which course is more attractive? Which aspects of the overall situation, internally and externally, should be given precedence? These are the types of questions that are often answered beneath conscious awareness, with proper answers cultivated ahead through engendering simplicity, reducing desires, and practicing specific skills. This does not mean that these questions cannot be asked explicitly, or that deliberation plays no part in Daoist self-causation. This kind of self-causation lies between the extremes of automaticity and strain. Not enough of a sense of self (the awareness and understanding of interrelated systems and characteristics of circumstances) leads to automaticity, and too much of a sense of self leads to strain.

We can turn to episodes in the *Zhuangzi* to distill out several distinct aspects of self-caused action. There is perhaps no book in any philosophical tradition that speaks of self-caused action more vividly than the *Zhuangzi*.<sup>7</sup> Using the work of Angus Graham, who has elaborated this topic more than anyone else,<sup>8</sup> I have identified sixteen core episodes (see table 2 below) that speak to the topic of self-caused action and analyzed them for discrete concepts, of which I count twenty-four that are directly germane to the notion of spontaneous action; those that can be found in four or more episodes number ten. Working with a Daoist text is much like defining terms related according to Wittgensteinian family relations: there are no essentials to speak of, merely notions that indicate and overlap.

I find that these notions of spontaneous action can be classified under the two general categories of *wholeness* and *fluency*. As this analysis progresses, the reader may be tempted to equate wholeness with the mental and fluency with the physical, but one should be hesitant to do so in terms that are not precisely defined within a Chinese context, because of the danger of accidentally imputing a mind/body split derived from the Platonic Divided Line or Abrahamic theology. Wholeness and fluency speak to nothing more than the *self* and *causation* of the sort of Chinese self-causation mentioned above that, in dominant Western terms, is not really self-causation at all because the self is not an essentialized self and causation is not efficient causation.

Because of this terminological infelicity, I shall, for the moment, drop the term *self-causation* in favor of terminology more appropriate to a Daoist context. Instead of “self-causation,” I will use “holistic fluency,” understanding that not only do these terms carry very little information at the moment but also there is the added risk of appearing unrigorous for choosing traditionally nontechnical terms. It is important to recognize that because we cannot stuff Chinese notions into Western boxes and expect a perfect fit, we must choose from our full vocabulary terms that best fit the notion in question, even if they do not possess traditional philosophical cachet. Each of the sixteen episodes of the *Zhuangzi* under analysis speaks to both wholeness and fluency.

*Wholeness.* Daoist wholeness is fairly straightforward and is best divided into the two subcategories of *collection* and *shedding*. Collection is the bringing together of all of the energies of a person first into a state of calm and then to a focus on the

Table 2 *Zhuangzi* Skill Episodes

Episode	<i>Zhuangzi</i> chapter	Graham page
Bell Stand	19	135
Beyond Sounds	7	89
Buckle Maker	22	139
Carpenter	19	138
Cicada Catcher	19	138
Cook	3	63
Ferryman	19	136
Fighting Cock	19	135
Fisherman	21	140
Innkeeper’s Concubines	20	141
Music of Nature	2	48
Painter	21	139
Sage	25	141
Swimmer	19	136
Ultimate Person	19	137
Wheelwright	13	139

activity.<sup>9</sup> Collection is calm focus within broad awareness. This involves a comprehensive view of an entire domain of activity in addition to a particular focus on relevant changing aspects of it. Shedding is the elimination of everything that can act as an obstacle to the endeavor, such as distractions, consideration of rewards, discursive knowledge, selfishness, the external form of an object, and even perception (paradoxically), even skill, itself. This process of collection and shedding can be viewed as a balancing and purifying of the person, bringing the cognitive-affective state to something often compared to a calm pool of water that mirrors the surroundings.

Collection is a process of engendering internal coherence by exploiting natural internal resources through concentrative practices. Shedding contributes to cognitive-affective unity by diminishing distractions that would threaten the process of collection. Collection and shedding proceed in tandem and supplement each other. Shedding clears a space for collection, and collection fills the space, thereby facilitating shedding.<sup>10</sup>

*Fluency.* In addition to the obvious, such as accuracy and reliance on methods and skill, fluency involves two main notions: *ease* (or effortlessness) and *responsiveness*. Of the sixteen episodes under examination, fully eight explicitly mention the effortlessness of the agent.<sup>11</sup> Since it is difficult to see at first how ease is anything but supervenient on action itself, I will begin with responsiveness, perhaps the most important of all the notions of spontaneous action.

1. Responsiveness. In chapter 2 of the *Zhuangzi* (referred to above with reference to *zi*), one finds an illustration of the *ganying* 感應 process, which is the sensitivity-and-responsiveness (causation) process of the natural world. In a meditative description, the wind is said to create all kinds of sounds in the hollows of the natural world, but it becomes evident that the wind doesn't create the sounds as much as the sounds arise with the wind. This is accomplished not by the wind successively blowing through each hole but by the eliciting of sound from them all at once, in cooperation with them. This "eliciting" is the "drawing forth" notion of causation mentioned above and, by the way, an accurate description of the actual physics involved in such a situation, in that wind is created by pressure and temperature differentials rather than an actual "blowing," as we put it in common parlance. The difference between *ganying* and straightforward efficient causality is that *ganying* presupposes a sensitivity that can be aroused.<sup>12</sup> The wind is not drawn unilaterally by an external force; rather, the holes respond to the wind by helping the flow along. Perhaps it is best to say that there is simply a draw, and both the wind and sounds arise as a result.

The important move to make in understanding Chinese causality as distinct from traditional Western causality is to shift from a paradigm of force mechanics to a paradigm of fluid mechanics. Fluid mechanics is most tractable in understanding movement as involving dynamic systems rather than discrete objects. One may object by suggesting that a tree is made of the same basic matter whether it is grown in China or in Greece, so why should we shift paradigms when thinking about one or the other? In the West, where objects were viewed as individual things, a kind of force mechanics was adopted as a paradigm for *all* movement (with inherent teleology a traditional part of the equation). In China, where things were viewed as fundamen-

tally transformative (Reding 2004, chap. 5), a variety of what we would today recognize as fluid mechanics was adopted as a paradigm for understanding the phenomenon of cause and effect.<sup>13</sup>

Therefore, conceiving of spontaneous action in a Chinese context involves more than thinking of an agent acting autonomously. We must think systemically of attraction, channels or conduits, and responsiveness. Human action as Daoist self-causation is modeled on natural systems in the sense that actions are performed by following an appropriate course that develops out of circumstances (each of which is unique and not reducible to components alone) and are predictable only probabilistically. Spontaneous action emerges from situations rather than being an effect of this or that isolated cause or being a volition of this or that isolated agent.

In Zhuangzi's famous episode of the cook carving up a side of beef in virtuosic manner, the cook explains that through years of practice he no longer sees the carcass as such but depends on the patternings of nature. This dependence relation between the agent and the circumstances implies a responsiveness in action. In *Zhuangzi* chapter 6, after listening to Confucius describe how a pair of Daoists are beyond the pale of social customs, Yan Hui asks Confucius on what he depends for acting, the obvious answer being *li*, ritual propriety. Confucius (speaking as a Daoist) explains, however, that the ideal state for human beings is existing in such comfortable dependence on the natural order of things that one forgets it, just as fish forget that they are in, and dependent on, water, slicing through it without obstruction.

Bringing responsiveness back down to the level of a specific activity, a fisherman is described in *Zhuangzi* chapter 21 as being in such perfect harmony with his activity that he appears not to be fishing at all. Likewise, a king in the same episode, who discovers the fisherman and offers his crown to him on the basis of his obviously high accomplishment, is himself analogized to the fisherman in that he is praised as "adapting himself to the moment." Spontaneous action in a Daoist sense is neither impulsive nor isolated, nor is it necessarily routine. It arises only in response to situations.<sup>14</sup>

The main organ of responsiveness is the heart, which was described above as the seat of all cognitive-affectivity. In the *Zhuangzi*'s story of the wheelwright, which illustrates the limitations of discursive transmission of knowledge, the wheelwright says that in carving a wagon wheel out of wood he feels it in his hand and responds from his heart and that it is something he cannot put further into words. The heart is depicted elsewhere in early literature as a sense organ, picking up and responding to the affectivity of situations, and at this point in the early literature there is a curious conflation, or rather undifferentiation, of cognitive-affectivity and the external circumstances with which it interacts. For instance, in the Xiang Commentary of the *Yi Jing*, we find the following passage:

Nature arouses [*gan* 感], and the myriad things come forth through transformation. The sage arouses the hearts of people, and the world achieves harmony and stability. Watch those things that are aroused, and the *affectivity/circumstances* [*qing* 情] of nature and the myriad things will be visible.

What we see in the world can originally be felt, and it is through this external arousal and internal responsiveness to it that one responds spontaneously.

2. Ease from Wholeness. Effortlessness is apparent in the fluency of responsiveness. Again and again craftsmen in the *Zhuangzi* are described as completing difficult or complex tasks with great ease. Ease in this sense contrasts with strain rather than difficulty; there is an effortlessness despite the difficulties involved and, indeed, in response to difficulties. Ease refers to the quality of the flow of responsive interaction between the agent and the environment. Although ease may appear to be supervenient to the responsiveness, or a trait of it, it is actually more closely related with another notion, that of shedding, mentioned above. It is wholeness that allows for fluency.

Several passages relate the dependence of fluency on wholeness. In the account of the maker of bell stands, the artisan relates that he first calms his heart, and then he sheds all thought of reward, honor, skill, and even of his own body. As these distractions melt away, his dexterity concentrates, his aptitude attains its peak, and he achieves a complete vision of the bell stand growing in the wood of the trees themselves. Only at this point does he dare to move a muscle, and the resulting bell stand dazzles viewers as unearthly. It may seem ironic that the bell stand is called “unearthly” (*shen* 神, referring to the spiritual) because it is exactly with the nature of the trees that the bell-stand maker is working. The point, however, is that the artisan has transcended the normal human obstacles that tend to draw us away from nature. *Shen* refers to the highest *natural* achievements of the human being. The purpose of calming is to be able to sense that nature and respond to it. If he cannot attain this level, he says, he gives the whole thing up.

Likewise, the carpenter who can create circles and right angles by hand without any tool or calculation achieves a single-minded concentration and mental composure such that he is steadfast in regard to both internal and external distractions. The swimmer who swims in a roiling river with unearthly ease does so by shedding a strong sense of self and following the currents of the water. The hunchbacked catcher of cicadas who picks them off trees with a long pole as if off the ground with his hand first settles himself into a stillness resembling tree roots and sheds distractions to the point where only the wings of the cicada exist. And the so-called ultimate person, who is at ease underwater, high above the ground, or even on fire, responds to the transformation of things through an inner wholeness that is described as a unity of nature, a tending and purification of energies, and a containing of his charismatic power. Ease is thus a result of wholeness and becomes apparent in fluent responsiveness.

To recapitulate, Daoist self-caused action is a holistic fluency that can be analyzed generally as cognitive-affective focus (collection), the shedding of distractions, ease, and responsiveness to constantly changing circumstances. If one allows “spontaneity” as a technical term for Daoist self-causation, it would be consistent with the Western etymology of the term, but, of course, both “self” and “causation” mean something quite different in the different cultural contexts.

For decades, now, Westerners and Chinese alike have plumbed the Chinese tradition for approximations of Western philosophical notions with the purpose of demonstrating the richness of the Chinese philosophical tradition. In the process, the tradition itself has been enriched by the infusion of new ideas and perspectives from the West. Now that I have fleshed out a notion of spontaneity in the Daoist tradition, I will attempt a reversal of the traditional process of transcultural enrichment and attempt to locate approximations of a Daoist-like spontaneity in the Western tradition, with the expectation ahead of time that it will illuminate significant aspects of Western philosophy of action that may be augmented by the interchange.

As I go forward, I will compare several Western theories of action with the Daoist theory laid out above. I will often refer to deficiencies in the Western theories. It should be emphasized that while I believe that there is, indeed, something valuable to be taken away from the Daoist position, noted deficiencies in Western theories are not meant in an absolute sense. While the White House lacks the graceful eaves of Chinese temples, it is no less aesthetically pleasing or architecturally sound. The promise that I find in the Daoist point of view is one that can expand current theories and point out missed opportunities rather than overturn an existing paradigm.

### *Spontaneity in the West*

In the Western tradition, there is no lack of philosophical discourse regarding the topics of cognition, affectivity, or causation, but the emphases are significantly different from the Daoist tradition, as we have seen already. When tracing through the Western tradition for examples of spontaneity, the metaphysics will constantly be at odds with Chinese *qi* cosmology,<sup>15</sup> degrading any promise of exact correspondence to Daoist spontaneity before it can be fulfilled. Nevertheless, the approximations displayed over the course of more than two millennia of philosophical speculation provide a sound basis for developing a future theory of spontaneity for philosophers working today.

In what follows, I will analyze major sources for laying the foundation of a new theory of spontaneity.

#### *Aristotle*

In Aristotle, there are four candidates for approximations to Daoist spontaneity: (1) Automaton, (2) Physis, (3) Hexis, and (4) Practical Syllogism.

*Automaton*. This term is often translated “spontaneity” (e.g., by Hardie and Gayle [Aristotle 1930]) because in early Greek it means very close to what we mean today by “spontaneity” and is the term that the Romans translated into the Latin *sponte*. But Aristotle specifically redefined it for his own use, referring to something that happens contrary to the usual. As an aberration, it runs counter to a Daoist notion of spontaneity, which describes the usual order of things, at least in regard to the nonhuman realm. *Automaton* for Aristotle refers to something that happens unexpectedly and rarely, such as a rock suddenly hitting a person on the head. In fact, *automaton* re-

fers to the contrary of nature: “The difference between spontaneity [*automaton*] and what results by chance [*tyche*] is greatest in things that come to be by nature [*physis*]; for when anything comes to be contrary to nature, we do not say that it came to be by chance, but by spontaneity” (Aristotle 1930, 197b34–36). A better translation of *automaton* here may be Hippocrates Apostle’s “chance” (*tyche* is then translated as “luck”) (Aristotle 1991).

*Physis*. This term, translated “nature,” appears to come quite close to a Daoist notion of spontaneity. For Aristotle, nature is the shape (*morphe*) or form (*eidos*) of something that moves or changes. Something that exists by nature is a substance (*ousia*), the essence (*ti en enai*) of which exists by virtue of the shape or form. The form of a living thing is its soul (*psyche*), which directs movement, and as such it is self-moved. As moved mover, which is what concerns us here, the self-moving of the animate object (i.e., humans and other animals) involves the impelling forces of desire and imagination. I will speak more about animate objects below, but interest should first be turned toward inanimate objects that are moved by nature.

Inanimate objects are moved in one of two ways according to Aristotle: by their nature or by force. The defining difference between these is not, as one might assume, that between external and internal causes, for both are conceived to be caused externally. Inanimate objects move by nature when they move from their natural potentiality to actuality, as when fire moves up or earth moves down. If fire moves down or something made of earth moves up, this movement is caused by force. Aristotle is careful to clarify that inanimate objects, such as fire, that appear to move up by their own accord are not in actuality self-moved, for to be self-moved they would also have the ability to direct themselves to stop or to move in the opposite direction. Instead, objects are imbued by nature with potentiality that when activated externally results in movement of a certain kind.

Aristotle gives several examples of what he calls the principle of motion of being acted upon, namely the natural movement from potentiality to actuality. This is the normal motion of all things unless obstructed. The examples are fire that moves upward; things made of earth that move downward; the student who immediately upon becoming a scientist begins investigating; heavy things that move down; and light things (such as water becoming air) that move up. Each of these things moves from one place to its opposite place, the movement of which is potential before happening and actual while happening. In other words, all the activity of the natural world moves in natural transformations directed by the natures of the objects themselves, but catalyzed externally. “Whenever that which can act and that which can be acted upon are together, then the potential always comes to be in *actuality*” (Aristotle 1991, 255a34). In the complex movements of nature, objects are constantly moving this way and that under the influence of each other, moving either according to nature or contrary to it, depending on whether the influence of one upon another is respectively catalyzing or forceful.

This is an interesting parallel with Daoist spontaneous movement, in that a movement occurs based on natural tendencies in accord with external forces (circum-

stances) conducive to these tendencies. Aristotle is careful to clarify, however, that it is not self-caused movement. The overt reason is stated above, but a more subtle reason lies in Aristotle's conception of the self. For Aristotle, the self is fundamentally a discrete substance disconnected from other discrete substances, so the only way for inanimate objects to move is by the pushing of one object against another, rather than, for instance, the flowing of *qi*-constituted objects in confluence. The notion of the self as a discrete, monadic substance becomes enormously problematic for Aristotle and sends him in a number of complex directions in order to account for the paradoxes that it spawns. It is worth noting that most philosophers working in philosophy of action today would be hesitant to support explicitly an ontologically essential self as agent, and yet the notion persists implicitly in current theories that do not explicitly characterize the self as complex.

Something intriguing occurs in Aristotle's explanation of natural movement. In explaining the natural actions of insentient objects in regard to potential and actual motion, Aristotle offers the example of the learner who is potentially a scientist. Now a learner is hardly insentient, and yet the example is used again when Aristotle says, "an object with a quality changes so as to be in activity, for a man who has just become a scientist immediately begins investigating, unless something prevents him" (Aristotle 1969, p. 158). Contrary to his previous claim that there is a radical difference in the cause of movement between animate and inanimate objects, here a person is characterized as an object in the natural world, acting not sentiently/deliberately, but with a certain automaticity according to nature (*physis*). Elsewhere, Aristotle says that humans act according to desire, with important contributions from the imagination and intellect. Here, he is offering a very different scenario, one that prompts Daniel Graham in his volume dedicated to the *Physics*, where this passage originates, to declare it an aberration incompatible with other depictions of human action in Aristotle (Aristotle 1999). This conclusion is likely accurate, but it leaves one wondering if Aristotle had not been onto something that, if developed, could have provided some interesting insights. It would appear as if Aristotle had stripped his learner of imagination, desire, and intellect, but it doesn't have to be this way. We could instead conceive of the learner, having reduced extraneous desires, as coordinating his imagination and intellect with his tendency to learn or investigate (arising from accumulating conditions and culminating at this point) and spontaneously going off to investigate at the appropriate time. One could even go so far as to suggest that this example is evidence in Aristotle that there does not have to be a radical divide between the animate and inanimate.

*Hexis.* Ontologically, Aristotle does not posit a radical divide separating humans from other animals, but ethically he does. He does not turn to nature as a model for human conduct. Movement *qua* movement may be natural to humans inasmuch as humans are animals, but the similarity ends there. Unlike animals, humans are capable of virtue and vice, of pursuing happiness and pursuing (harmful) pleasures. Habits are not off the table for animals but are only worth discussing with regard to humans, who turn to habit as an avenue for achieving happiness through virtuous actions.

Because Aristotle entertains the notion of habit only as it pertains to virtue as habit, it is difficult to draw precise conclusions about habitual action apart from virtuous action, but one may try as follows. Any action performed by an individual disposes that individual to performing that action again under similar circumstances. This is most clear in the case of the arts, in which by repetition, we dispose our limbs to producing a specific action or set of actions without exerting mental effort. Although Aristotle's psychology is complex, fundamentally the role of habits for Aristotle is to work as a pretheoretic counterforce to other pretheoretic forces in the soul, namely emotions, especially desire. By cultivating from childhood a character disposed toward acting virtuously against psychic impulses to do the opposite, one predisposes oneself to do so again and again. Reason also plays a key role as a guide in deliberate choice, but reason, according to Aristotle, does not have the motive force of either habit or desire, and so relies on habit as its spring for action.

We do not have from Aristotle an account of habit with regard to the crafts, but we can compare what we have said so far with the Daoist perspective. The first point to acknowledge is that Aristotle has a moral emphasis in his psychology and metaphysics that the Daoists do not. The subjectivity that Aristotle requires for the accurate ascription of moral responsibility eventuates in an expansion of the importance of the self and an ontological distance from others, both of which the Daoists contrarily diminish. Habit, for all of its forcefulness in Aristotle, cannot play the final role in moral action, for then blame would ultimately go to the creator of the habit, namely one's parents or teachers. Aristotle takes this up specifically (1135a16 ff.) and says that the ascription of blame requires that the perpetrator act voluntarily with deliberate forethought. Thus, regardless of the power of habit, rational deliberation is still the final appeal in guiding actions of habit. One may be ready to act in a certain way, but it takes the proper reasoning to decide which actions are appropriate to specific situations. A moral action for Aristotle requires rational calculation, the kind of discursiveness that runs contrary to Daoist spontaneity. It bears repeating that Aristotle distinguishes between actions of bare skill and moral action, which requires higher mental faculties, and he allows for the guidance of moral action by intuition (1143b), but he still holds that reason is what separates the moral agent from children and brutes (1144b) and that intuition does not gain its highest value until it is discursively demonstrable.

There is nothing in Aristotle's account of habit and virtue that explicitly contradicts the Daoist notion of spontaneity. It is the first Western account we have of the role of habit in the automaticity of action. A major distinction lies in Aristotle's moral exceptionalism with regard to adult humans. With the separation of humans from nature, the person is stranded alone in a world of sensory apprehension and efficient cause, with intuition a mysterious faculty acknowledged but not refined and emotion an inner disturbance to be combated through the cultivated automaticity of habit.<sup>16</sup> Whereas in Aristotle there is a desideratum of higher definition and more clarity whenever possible, the Daoists understand excessive definition and rationalization as impeding the spontaneous flow, which requires attuned responsiveness from participatory members. Theoretical isolation is the antithesis of attuned responsiveness,

leading toward dissociation and effort—even with the aid of cultivated habit—rather than wholeness and ease. The shedding associated with wholeness tends toward the vague, rather than the distinct, giving rise to inchoate potential rather than distinct teleologies. Aristotle emphasizes the importance of particularity when applying general notions to specific circumstances, but he does not adequately explain how to do so in the absence of law-like associations. Rather than habit as virtue inhibiting inner disturbances, the Daoists shed the desires that give rise to such disturbances, falling back into indefiniteness; rather than applying practical wisdom from universal principles to particular circumstances, the Daoists allow themselves to be drawn into the force of circumstances. Whereas an Aristotelian is fighting an inner battle against extremes on two fronts and an outer battle against ignorance and objects of desire, the Daoist is emptying himself inwardly, attuning himself outwardly.

*Practical Syllogism.* Related to *hexis*, a fourth way one can approach Aristotle's theory of action with regard to Daoist spontaneity has come to be known as the practical syllogism, developed in *Nicomachean Ethics* and *On the Motion of Animals*. I have mentioned the process in vague terms above but will now make it explicit. Like a logical syllogism, the practical syllogism consists of a major premise (a general rule), a minor premise (a specific instance regarding the rule), and a conclusion that necessarily follows. The difference is that for the practical syllogism, the conclusion is not a proposition but an action. In a practical syllogism, the major premise consists of a general good, or end, and the minor premise of a specific means. Aristotle puts it in these terms: "the premises of action are of two kinds: of the good and of the possible" (*On the Motion of Animals*, 7). A significant point to note in Aristotle's description is that although he likens the action of children and animals to mechanical toys, he still refers to them as actions rather than motions, or movements—because they are voluntary (*ekousios*).

Action for Aristotle depends on the broad categories of intellect and desire. Intellect allows one to formulate the major and minor premises, and desire provides the impetus to turn thought into action. For a child or animal, the cognitive faculty that governs the formulation of the major premise is what Aristotle calls natural virtue, and the cognitive faculty that governs the minor premise is shrewdness (*deinotes*) (*Nicomachean Ethics* VI, 13). The actions of children and animals following the steps of the syllogism are voluntary in the sense that they involve cognition. Nevertheless, there is an automaticity to the actions of children and animals that corresponds more to a Daoist notion of spontaneity. Aristotle, describing the interior mechanics of an action, puts it in these terms:

[S]traightaway one [part] acts and the other responds. And on this account thinking that one ought to go and going are virtually simultaneous, unless there be something else to hinder action. . . . The simultaneity and speed are due to the natural correspondence of the active and the passive. (*On the Motion of Animals*, 8)

Further, he likens this notion of what may be called spontaneity to the orderliness of a polity:

And the animal organism must be conceived after the similitude of a well-governed commonwealth. When order is once established in it there is no more need of a separate monarch to preside over each several task. The individuals each play their assigned part as it is ordered, and one thing follows another in its accustomed order. (*On the Motion of Animals*, 10)

The parallels with Daoist descriptions of spontaneity are striking, but, of course, the guiding metaphor is still a mechanism that is started in motion externally and then continues to move on its own, with the separate parts acting in thoroughly predictable ways. Aristotle's understanding of orderliness, described here and elsewhere, is linear and force-mechanistic, with discrete parts directly causing movement of immediately adjacent parts, with wholes completely reducible to their parts.

Notice in the quotation above that Aristotle is not suggesting that a polity be modeled on nature but rather that the mechanical orderliness of natural causality within an animal can be likened to what one finds in the orderliness of a state. Again, nature is not a model for human behavior in Aristotle's view because of his emphasis on moral action. In an adult human, the correlates of a child's or animal's natural virtue and shrewdness are virtue (*arete*) and prudence (*phronesis*), both of which guide action with an eye to the good, which is determined by reason. The mystery that remained to be resolved in Aristotle was the final, distinguishing characteristic of humans, namely intention (*proairesis*), also translated as "deliberate choice." Voluntary (*ekousios*) actions, involving intellect and desire, are ascribed to children and animals, but deliberate choice is reserved for adult human beings alone. Does this mean that humans have the ability to escape the necessity of natural causality? Or is deliberate action just a more complicated case of simple voluntary actions that occur according to the laws of necessity? Or is there a middle ground? These are the questions that have defined the philosophy of action since Aristotle and that await a response in Aristotle's heirs.

#### *Aristotle's Heirs*

After Aristotle, any consideration of spontaneity in action must be understood in the free-will-versus-determinism debate, which effectively began about the time of Aristotle with the same theme of ascribing responsibility to actions that in a deterministic universe would appear to be unascrivable (see Lloyd 1996, chap. 5). The contention of many Atomists was that the *psyche* was continuous with the rest of the universe in obeying the laws of atomic interaction and that human behavior was therefore determined rather than free. Aristotle's younger contemporary Epicurus attempted an explanation to save morality from atomic determinism, an explanation that Lucretius later adopted, employing the term *libera voluntas*. Epicurus attributed the possibility of non-determined human choice to so-called "atomic swerve," an unlinking of atomic motion from determinism in the human *psyche* such that, depending on which commentators you read, either allows directly for non-determined (i.e., spontaneous) choices (Giusanni, Bailey) or for inborn traits to be freed up for modification through learning (Furley). In either case, a discontinuity is introduced between na-

ture and humans, and spontaneity becomes a characteristic intrinsic only to humans, in violation of, or as an exception to, all other natural laws.

Chrysippus and his Stoic school come on the heels of Epicurus, denying, again, any ontological discontinuity, returning to an Aristotelian account of deliberate action but without the deliberation. In the place of rational deliberation, the Stoics posit simple assent, which is determined by the person's upbringing and inborn character. The assent itself is similar to Daoist responsiveness in that it does not involve significant effort. The need for effort arises in *not* giving assent to attractive forces and instead thwarting them. This is possible, according to Chrysippus, because of specific personal characteristics, such as a good education and proper upbringing, that allow one to resist temptation. In this way, Chrysippus preserves determinism while allowing for blame to be ascribed to individuals on account of distinct dispositions to act. While one may claim that "Fate made me do it," fate in this sense is the accumulation of one's inner dispositions, and so while one may not be responsible on the grounds of moral voluntarism, the action itself is still ascribable to the person, and a different person under a similar circumstance may well act differently. Because it preserves the continuity of human nature and discounts the exceptional influence of discursive reason, Chrysippus' account is not incompatible with Daoist theory. The account does, however, place humans on a pedestal above animals by stating that while humans can perform moral actions by denying assent, animals cannot. This is understandable, since it is a moral theory, after all. Daoists such as Zhuangzi would be hesitant to entertain such moral considerations, as they tend to entail unintended consequences. Nevertheless, a Stoic spontaneity would appear to include major elements of Aristotle's *physis* and *hexis*, contributing further to a full and intriguing notion of Western spontaneity.

We can see the inception of what I call the Paradox of Spontaneity in the interpretations that Epicurus and Chrysippus give to natural human action. The Aristotelian internal teleology of natural objects, including humans, according to Chrysippus, allows us to say that all movement is spontaneous, that is, that there is no unmoved mover outside the natural order. For Epicurus, however, humans must remove themselves from the determinacy of nature and choose freely, thus spontaneously. This paradox—that movement is spontaneous as determined and spontaneous as free—persists even into present everyday speech (e.g., we may say that grass grows spontaneously, or that so-and-so spontaneously broke into song). Although the Greeks did not have an equivalent for "spontaneity" as a term of art, they clearly wrestled with this tension and were the foundation of all later thought on the subject.

For future reference, it may be helpful to distinguish Chrysippus' account of spontaneity as "determined spontaneity" and Epicurus' as "voluntary spontaneity." Voluntary spontaneity is understood as action that is decoupled from nature's spontaneity, initiating an entirely different order of action. It is spiritual, or at least mystical, and presupposes a radical mind/body dichotomy. Voluntary spontaneity becomes the preferred position in Western philosophy, and for those of more recent date who wish to erase the mind/body dichotomy while retaining free will, the goal becomes

how to make a fundamental moral distinction without predicating it on an even more fundamental ontological one—a gargantuan task.

As for the Daoists (and other Chinese, as well), who never presupposed a mind/body split to begin with, they do not have to face this problem. Terms such as “determined spontaneity” and “voluntary spontaneity” are non sequiturs in a Chinese context, where there is only natural spontaneity (including human spontaneity) and where deliberate choice is more of a hindrance than an advance up the ladder of being.

### *Julien Offray de La Mettrie*

When looking to the Modern period for notions of spontaneity relevant to a Daoist spontaneity, a target philosophy would, first, involve a human being conceived as a unified mind and body and, second, a human being conceived on an ontological continuum with animals and the rest of nature—in other words, a thorough materialism. This is not difficult to find, beginning perhaps with Hobbes. The most germane model, which goes back to Descartes, compared the human being to a machine, as Julien Offray de La Mettrie so succinctly put it in his work *L’Homme Machine* (La Mettrie and Thomson 1996). La Mettrie’s conception of the human machine dispenses with all notions of spirituality while positing a complex and subtle notion of a human being as deeply influenced by the immediate environment and so is worth examining briefly.

Although La Mettrie borrows Descartes’ metaphor of the machine for describing the motion of animals, his overall position is resolutely anti-Cartesian. As he extends the machine metaphor to human beings, he simultaneously jettisons all spirituality. Contrary to the positivist *zeitgeist* of the times, however, he does not claim to be able to explain everything about motion, nor does he attempt to. I submit that his aversion to spiritualism along with his theoretical caution allows him to refrain from making metaphysical inferences that had been taking philosophers down infinitely circuitous paths since Plato.

At first glance, it would seem that the machine metaphor that provides La Mettrie with many of his insights would also lead to a major flaw, namely that it would limit him to the determined/voluntarist paradigm, making his conception of spontaneity (*spontanés*) the determined variety, as a watch runs spontaneously. While he makes no explicit effort to escape this paradigm or offer an alternative, and while he explicitly embraces the mechanical model as exemplifying all sentient motion, he proposes a complexity and subtlety that go beyond the mere wind-up toy or timepiece. La Mettrie’s theory of action has three key features: (1) nature is uniform, and human beings are no exception; (2) matter moves of its own accord—we don’t know exactly why, but it seems to have something to do with its configuration; and (3) the mind<sup>17</sup> is physical, unitary, and sensitive (my terms). By “physical” I mean that La Mettrie rejects an immaterial source for cognition and action. By “unitary” I mean that La Mettrie rejects dualist claims of rational (immaterial) and affective (material) parts of the soul. This is not, of course, to say that it is a monad of some sort. Rather, it is a body-wide system of interconnected functions. By “sensitive” I mean that La Mettrie

emphasizes that sentience is the primary cognitive faculty and that all other cognitive faculties are derivative of it. Like the Daoists, he sees responsiveness as fundamental to movement:

[H]ow many excellent philosophers have shown that thought is but a faculty of feeling, and that the reasonable soul is but the feeling soul engaged in contemplating its ideas and in reasoning! This would be proved by the fact alone that when feeling is stifled, thought also is checked, for instance in apoplexy, in lethargy, in catalepsy, etc. For it is ridiculous to suggest that, during these stupors, the soul keeps on thinking, even though it does not remember the ideas that it has had. (La Mettrie and Thomson 1996, p. 139)

Three and a half centuries before neuroscientist Antonio Damasio claimed to demonstrate it scientifically,<sup>18</sup> La Mettrie had already posited the biological interconnections between thought and feeling, and further identified the phenomenon as not rare, as we are often led to believe, but common. And La Mettrie goes even further. In current neuroscience, there is still an emphasis on the mind as divisible into discrete functional units that cache out as more passive than active.<sup>19</sup> The difference between a behaviorist kind of stimulus-and-response model and a sensitivity-and-responsiveness<sup>20</sup> model is that under the latter model not only are circumstances in the environment drawing the sentient creature forward, but the sentient creature has its own active vectors of development and movement that draw relevant information from the environment and propel the organism forward.

La Mettrie provides us with a rich model of the unified body and mind interacting with the environment on an ontological continuum with the rest of nature, but beyond a short description of a violinist playing rapidly but accurately, he does not provide us with a concrete description of actual spontaneous human action that would compare to that in the *Zhuangzi's* skill episodes. For this, one must turn to the slightly younger and more theological Jean-Jacques Rousseau. On the one hand, Rousseau takes the familiar Cartesian position of the preeminence of humans due to reason and free will, while on the other he initiates several contrary lines of inquiry that if developed could lead him to a notion of spontaneity that offers an alternative to the determinism/voluntarism dichotomy.

### *Jean-Jacques Rousseau*

In his *Emile*, Rousseau borrows the voice of the Savoyard Priest to express his own opinion in regard to the then current debate on human determinism and free will (Hendel 1934, pp. 124 ff.). His “creed” delineates the following three fundamental and clear beliefs: (1) there is no real action without will; (2) that matter is in motion according to fixed laws implies intelligence; and (3) humans are animated by an immaterial substance. He makes it clear that these are beliefs rather than firm empirical fact because of his necessary reliance on introspection and intuitive understanding. Nevertheless, he confidently asserts that there are two kinds of motion in the world—that which is caused (“acquired”) and that which is “spontaneous” (*spontanéité*) or “voluntary.” With this equivalence explicitly drawn between spontaneity and free will, there is no room for doubt as to where Rousseau stands in regard to the Paradox

of Spontaneity. In fact, he later attempts to prove by explicit argument that humans have free will. This argument is worth outlining briefly, because it encapsulates the issues in his overall position.

Rousseau begins with a disjunction, on one side of which is a conditional: if there are any original impulses, they do not have antecedent causes. An original impulse is the initial boost that is needed to set matter in motion, whether at the beginning of time or from moment to moment in human consciousness. This impulse without antecedent causes is also his definition of “spontaneity.” The second disjunct of the opening proposition is that there is no such thing as an original impulse. In other words, he says that either there is spontaneity in the universe or there is not. Because he assumes from the start that there must have been an original impulse to account for the motion of matter, the second disjunct is false, making the first true, namely that there is spontaneity in the world. From this, he concludes that humans do have free will and therefore are animated by an immaterial substance. Of course, logic was never Rousseau’s strong suit, but the validity of the inference is not what gives this argument its importance for us. We are interested rather in his definition of spontaneity as an event without antecedent cause and his concern for human freedom. These figure prominently in the ambiguity that we find in Rousseau regarding spontaneity in human action.

Rousseau posits a radical discontinuity between humans and animals, and yet implications at several points in his essay point toward his recurring theme of the noble savage and the continuity of all nature, including humans. Rousseau uses the notion of causeless spontaneity to set humans off from nature, to set us outside the mechanistic order of the inanimate universe. Presupposing a Cartesian soul that has a connection to divinity, Rousseau places humans on a plane with God, declaring the natural capacity for free moral action to be the defining quality of humans that sets us off from animals. He calls the conscience “divine instinct” and says that without it, “I find nothing in myself to raise me above the beasts.” Like Father Zossima’s critique of the burden of free will (quoted at the beginning of this article), Rousseau finds that spontaneity has the potential to elevate humans but in practice often leads in the other direction. Rousseau’s critique cuts even deeper, however, for two other distinctively human traits—understanding and reason—which are, according to him, what lead humans astray. Here is where Rousseau begins to construct a bridge from human to animal behavior, despite his conflicting inclination.

From Rousseau’s interpretation of free will, it would seem obvious that animals, for him, would lack souls. And yet we find him saying, through the Savoyard priest, “You ask me if the motions of animals are spontaneous. I shall tell you that I know nothing about it, but analogy supports the affirmative” (Rousseau 1979, p. 272). Rousseau’s conflict between the superiority of humans over animals and human continuity with animals runs deep. I would even suggest that were it not for his Cartesian ontological presuppositions, he would reject inherent superiority and opt for continuity, *sans* divinity in animals. Rousseau appears to *want* to be Christian, however, and, with a flawlessly benevolent God at the helm of an otherwise mechanistic world, he requires free will to account for wickedness, and this leads him to say such

things as that the sensual body, with its insatiable temptations, is the source of all evil for a free soul that is otherwise untainted.<sup>21</sup> But if we set aside the overweening Christianity of Rousseau's thesis, we find in *Emile* a doctrine reminiscent of the natural man in his "Discourse on Inequality."<sup>22</sup>

Moving away from Rousseau momentarily, a new distinction must be made before continuing, namely identifying a third kind of spontaneity: "natural spontaneity." Natural spontaneity is the non-deliberate, self-active spontaneity of nature, considered to be outside the ontological determined/voluntary dichotomy. In that it is considered outside this dichotomy, it is a naive notion descriptive of the appearance of motions and actions and free of speculation regarding proximal paths of causation. Daoist spontaneity is a kind of natural spontaneity that is developed into what I describe below as aesthetic spontaneity. Natural spontaneity has at its core the ideals we find in the common folk populating Walt Whitman's poetry. The challenge that Whitman and Fyodor Dostoyevsky pose to philosophy of action is whether there is something that distinguishes humans from animals *in favor* of the animals. Although animals are lacking in degree the defining characteristics of humans, have they in some sense fared better for it psychologically—could it be that humans have traded off something significant for gains elsewhere?

One answer comes from the long Christian tradition and is given voice by Dostoyevsky's Father Zossima. His is the position that animals, like children, are to be valued for their innocence, their lack of culpability, their freedom from sin. What humans have lost, going back to the Garden of Eden, is their capacity for joy based in naïveté, in exchange for an advance in psychic freedom that more often than not entails dilemmas, frustration, suffering, and sin. The human advance is bemoaned not for its disadvantages, however, but rather for the failure on the part of the many who fall short of employing their God-given freedom benevolently, following the example of Jesus. The innocence of animals in this instance is still a deficiency, one that is irretrievable in adult humans and indicative of an underdeveloped state.

Whitman's appreciation of animals, although acknowledging the shortcomings of humans reminiscent of the Christian critique, appears to find something in animals beyond a deficiency of the burden concomitant with free will. It is true that Whitman's poetry is thoroughly humanistic and finds themes in the simple lives of common people, but what Whitman finds ennobling in people is continuous with what he finds ennobling in animals. He finds a seamlessness of life, an effortless zest, uncontrived motives that imbue experience with the radiance of simple joy. These people, in full possession of their wits, work tirelessly and in such a way that work is not labor. They put their imaginations into their activities. They make choices that conjoin the disparate events in their lives. They feel emotions that flow from lived experience. Within the confines of their individual circumstances, they live freely, without second thoughts for tradition or forced virtue. To put it in deceptively straightforward terms, they live like animals. This is not to say that they don't have hard choices to make, that they are automatons, that they lack emotional or intellectual depth, or that they are free from making wrong decisions. Their lives are as full of thorns as any life of existential angst or guilt-driven despondency. But the thorns

are somehow less obtrusive, less harmful, more given to be transformed into the fragrance of the flower. These people (idealized though they be) and animals have something that other people don't, and it is something that can be called natural spontaneity. This natural spontaneity is akin to the spontaneity that Daoists identify as a defining characteristic of the natural world and mark it as worthy of emulation. It is naturalness of action, free from egotism, overt intention, and discursive calculation.

If Rousseau is advocating natural spontaneity while simultaneously advocating voluntary spontaneity, which he appears to be doing by appealing to the "noble savage," he puts himself in a precarious position. Voluntary spontaneity is an unhinging of humans from nature, presupposing the positive qualities of the rational deliberation and moral responsibility that combine to produce ethical conduct. Natural spontaneity is the presupposition of a human/nature continuum, a recognition of the limits of rational deliberation, and a skeptical attitude toward staid moral conventions.

One can save Rousseau's position, however, by understanding voluntary spontaneity as a *feeling* of freedom rather than an ontological reality. Rousseau's priest posits voluntary spontaneity based on a phenomenological fact: "You will ask me again how I know that there are spontaneous motions. I shall tell you that I know it because I sense it. I want to move my arm, and I move it" (Rousseau 1979, p. 272). One needn't accept ontological free will to agree with Rousseau that, at the very least, we all have the *feeling* that our actions have something of the character that they could have been otherwise had we merely so chosen.

There is no conflict between natural spontaneity and the feeling of free will. One may appreciate natural spontaneity while also acknowledging the feeling of voluntary choice and ascribing that feeling to humans (and even animals). Thus, when the priest ascribes (voluntary) spontaneity to animals in contradiction to his belief that animals lack souls and therefore free will, Rousseau puts himself in a difficult spot.

For Rousseau, the two major shortcomings of human beings are passions that are overdeveloped (or developed in wrong directions) and reason that is misused. Both of these conditions are symptomatic of a corrupt civilization that has misdirected what were originally beneficent faculties. Echoing La Mettrie, Rousseau tells us that feelings (*sentiment*) and passions precede intelligence and understanding in normal human development and that in their natural state they are most reliable. They provide us with compassion and therefore the rudiments of morality, and they lead us to sociability, but only to the extent necessary for a simple, functional society. Rousseau is responding to Locke's notion of the blank slate of consciousness, pointing out that human beings have a self-evident contingent set of instincts that, as in animals, channel our behavior in trustworthy directions. Feelings and passions, for Rousseau, are not a matter of deliberation but are involuntary (*sentiment involontaire*). This last claim leads us in a new direction for understanding natural spontaneity.

For Rousseau, conscience is a feeling and as such is fundamentally free of interference by any so-called higher faculties, such as reason. His return to the natural state in regard to his elevation of the notion of instinct is another instance of the continuity he finds between humans and animals, even though the "divine instinct" is

what sets off humans as belonging to a moral realm that animal consciousness never broaches. Still, morality is only one dimension of human life, and it would follow that the feelings that guide other aspects of life would also be classified as instinctual. But how is this sort of automaticity compatible with free will? How can conscience be both instinctual and a guide to free action? How can it be both voluntary and involuntary? Rousseau gives us the answer when he says that all the concretions of civilization serve only to block the instincts. Hence, by peeling away the affectations and contrivances of civilization, one may return to pure feeling, which is always, for Rousseau, an appropriate guide. Is it voluntary? In the sense that the final choice, or power of veto (echoing the Stoics), always lies open, the answer is yes. Is it involuntary? In the sense that the options provided by feeling arise without effort, according to the matrix of feelings within one and as responses to external stimuli, the answer is also yes. This is Rousseau's way of reconciling determined and voluntary spontaneity. Because he is locked in the determinist/voluntarist paradigm, this would seem to be the best that he can do, but because he also accepts the prevailing theology, he can still go a step further.

Rousseau gives his most incisive discussion of spontaneous action in reference to God's intelligence, which does not need to reason:

Man is intelligent when he reasons, and the supreme intelligence does not need to reason. For it there are neither premises nor conclusions; there are not even propositions. It is purely intuitive; it sees equally everything which is and everything which can be. For it all truths are only a single idea, as all places are a single point, and all times a single moment. Human power acts by means; divine power acts by itself. (Rousseau 1979, p. 285)

Here is the pinnacle of right action, where consciousness expands from the self-limiting and self-involved perspective of the individual to encompass a wider and wider circle, until all space and all time lose their distinctions, when actions flow intuitively, without appeal to reason and without the hesitancy of deliberation, and the self dissolves into selflessness. Rousseau has now moved from voluntary spontaneity to natural spontaneity. He tells us that a good world requires on the part of humans feeling and intelligence, and he is careful to note that intelligence is distinct from reason. He does not give a clear indication of what constitutes intelligence, but it appears to be akin to common sense gleaned from experience. It works seamlessly with the promptings of feeling to yield actions that are in harmony with society. This is achieved by expanding one's perspective away from the self, with which reason is naturally preoccupied, toward the common good:

The good man orders himself in relation to the whole, and the wicked one orders the whole in relation to himself. The latter makes himself the center of all things; the former measures his radius and keeps to the circumference. Then he is ordered in relation to the common center, which is God, and in relation to all concentric circles, which are the creatures. (Rousseau 1979, p. 292)

The ideal of natural spontaneity in Rousseau begins to resemble a Daoist spontaneity in the expanding awareness that provides the stimulus for feelings that initiate ac-

tions automatically, mediated by commonsense intelligence, which is itself engendered through a constant awareness of the environment. Rousseau, by placing the ultimate spontaneity in God, presents an interpretive fork in the road for his readers: is worthwhile spontaneity out of reach, or can humans approximate the perspicuity and intuitive accuracy of divine action? Rousseau seems to provide the answer in his conception of human conscience as divine instinct. Strip the divine connection away, along with its moral overtones, and one is not far from Daoist spontaneity.<sup>23</sup>

### *William James*

William James inherits the traditional concern for moral action, along with the determinism/voluntarism dichotomy. His solution to the problem of human action in a determined world varies. In the "The Dilemma of Determinism," he argues for the existence of free will.<sup>24</sup> In his *Principles of Psychology*, he dons his scientist hat, taking a deterministic view of all phenomena and leaving the question of free will open (but not without giving a spirited defense of the feeling of free will). Although this is his least explicitly philosophical work, it contains a number of arguments and observations related to the conditions that allow for spontaneous action and other notions that will help further an understanding of spontaneity.<sup>25</sup>

James devotes an entire chapter to the will, in which he undertakes an examination of the composition of voluntary action. He offers as his contribution to the long history of this topic the proposition that voluntary action, that is, action resulting from free will (*if*, he says, it is indeed free), consists in marked effort.

James first distinguishes between primary and secondary functions of the human body, identifying "reflex, instinctive, and emotional movements [as] primary performances" (James 1983, p. 1099). He says that voluntary movements are secondary and then goes on to identify two kinds of voluntary action: ideo-motor action and action after deliberation. Ideo-motor action is essentially habituated action: "Wherever movement follows *unhesitatingly and immediately* the notion of it in the mind, we have ideo-motor action" (p. 1130). The person has a thought that a certain action will achieve a certain end, and instantly it happens, without any additional effort or *fiat*. These "*quasi-automatic*" (p. 1131) actions include walking, talking, eating, and playing piano. All actions would be this way, James says, absent any "conflicting notion in the mind" (p. 1132). When a conflicting notion does arise, it requires deliberation.

James goes on to describe deliberation minimally as the "*feeling of effort*" (James 1983, p. 1141). Up to this point, James' description of action has been reminiscent of Aristotle's practical syllogism. He now embarks on a theory reminiscent of Chrysippus' notion of assent, for which James chooses the term "consent" (p. 1172). What brings James even more in line with Aristotle and the Stoics, and further away from the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*, is his contention that the obstruction of ordinary impulses is inevitably caused by "rarer and more ideal" impulses (p. 1154). In other words, and explicitly *contra* Rousseau, he equates volitional action with morally principled action. James does not mention the ontological position of humans vis-à-vis animals, but he appears to resemble Rousseau in his physicalist position of

continuity and his volitional position of discontinuity. How he handles the notion of effort is the deciding factor.

The effort involved in deliberation, the effort that defines volition, is an effort of attention, the difficulty of “getting the idea of the wise action to stay before our mind at all” (James 1983, p. 1167). One may notice the use of the word “wise” and that James goes on to characterize attention to an idea as reasoned deliberation such that he confirms the age-old dichotomy of reason and will versus irrational impulse. The mind and body, despite his otherwise thorough empiricism, turn out to be separate realms:

[T]hinking exists as a special kind of immaterial process alongside of the material processes of the world. It is certain . . . that only by *postulating* such thinking do we make things currently intelligible. (James 1983, p. 1174)

The justification for the claim of a mental/physical dichotomy is pragmatic, and, like Rousseau, James appears to *want* human beings to be special, a step above other creatures, a step closer to the divine. When it comes to connecting the mental to the physical, intelligibility loses its attraction, and James professes ignorance. He says that in addition to the effort of attention, one further thing is required, namely consent: “*express consent to the reality of what is attended to* is often an additional and quite distinct phenomenon involved” (James 1983, p. 1172). Strangely, this directly contradicts earlier statements that identify attention with consent, for instance:

The idea to be consented to must be kept from flickering and going out. It must be held steadily before the mind until it *fills* the mind. Such filling of the mind by an idea, with its congruous associates, *is* consent to the idea and the fact that it represents. (James 1983, p. 1169)

On the one hand, James identifies volition with reasoned deliberation and on the other he identifies it with mere attention, suggesting that rational deliberation is nothing more than attention. In contrast to the rest of the book, where examples from the scientific literature abound, his only example here is of the alcoholic who stymies the impulse to drink by holding his attention on the disadvantages of drinking. This is an anemic notion of reason, and James’ failure, or reluctance, to elaborate indicates a persistent conflict, alluded to above, between humans as inherently moral and humans as something less.

James picks out attention as the proper candidate for volition because he notices that attention to an idea is the most salient instance of our decoupling from nature. The pause between impulse and action is the space for reason, the effort of thought, the opening for moral consideration. It is what separates the human being from the animal and mechanical.

The conflict in James between viewing humans as continuous and discontinuous with nature manifests strongly in his treatment of attention. Not only does he associate it, as above, with voluntary action, but one of his most valuable insights is his association of attention with effortlessness: “Though the spontaneous drift of thought

is all the other way, the attention must be kept strained on that one object until at last it *grows*, so as to maintain itself before the mind with ease" (James 1983, p. 1168). In this passage, there are two senses of spontaneity. The first is the mechanistic flow of the thought process that is the converse of free will; it is what free will chooses from or in spite of. The second sense of spontaneity comes at the end of the passage. What does it mean for a thought to be at first strained for and then maintained before the mind with ease? As suggested above, when James speaks of free will, he presupposes a distinct moral element. With this notion of ease, however, James introduces an aesthetic side,<sup>26</sup> and this is the side that is most congenial to the notion of natural spontaneity, a notion for which we can find supporting elements earlier in the book, where he is less conflicted in his treatment of the subject. James' major contribution to a notion of spontaneity in the West lies here.

The flow of movement that James mentions, the spontaneous drift of thoughts, is characteristic of consciousness, he says. Rather than proceeding from rational inference to rational inference, which is the way we like to think that our brains work in everyday life, James points out that our minds are a constant jumble of thoughts and feelings, none identical to the previous and only rarely following one another in anything like a purely rational way. This stream of consciousness is a reaction to external sensations and the continual linking of relations internal to the mind. We experience the world viscerally, and the world shapes us (James 1983, p. 228). Many of our thought processes are feelings rather than discursive thoughts (ibid.). James never denies the importance of rationality, but, like La Mettrie now, he does not underestimate the role of nonrational cognizing that happens of its own accord. Feelings for James are epistemic; they are a way of knowing the relations of the world.

James does not, however, link the value of spontaneous feelings with the overt effort of free will (except in the passage above about ease). Again, the effort of free will is ethical at bottom and is working against the non-ethical stream of consciousness and against the flow of habitual actions. Daoist spontaneity, however, works *with* the stream of consciousness and *with* the flow of (some) habitual actions.

This aesthetic/ethical tension in James is, as might be expected, most apparent in his chapter on habit. In this chapter, James notes that all creatures are "bundles of habits" (James 1983, p. 109). Not only are our actions habitual, our thoughts and feelings are as well. Our nervous systems seem to be grooved out by repetitive use. The result is that "habit simplifies the movements required to achieve a given result, makes them more accurate and diminishes fatigue" (James 1983, p. 117). Habit from this perspective, James notes, is indispensable to normal human activity. Most of our thoughts, feelings, and actions are habitual. James characterizes nature as movement according to habit (p. 109) and then suggests that what is occurring in animals and humans is essentially the same, but with more variability in humans.

In examples of juggling and piano playing, James discusses the enormous range and complexity of movements that cultivated habit can achieve (through much effort) and then maintain with very little effort. As psychologists still do today (Grier et al. 2003, pp. 349–359; Kahneman 1973), he equates effort with attention and a

decrease in effort with a decrease in attention. Because all kinds of habituated action are equally free of attention for James, two virtuoso pianists playing the same tune would play it equally mindlessly. There is a kind of spontaneity within habituated action, however, that not only can harness attention but can do so effortlessly, as exemplified in the Daoist skill episodes; I call this fourth kind of spontaneity *aesthetic spontaneity*.

Aesthetic spontaneity can be characterized as effortlessly sustained unself-conscious attention to a habituated domain of activity.<sup>27</sup> So when James, as above, draws a line between mechanical activity on the one hand and voluntary activity on the other, he leaves aesthetic spontaneity completely out of the picture. In his passage on the strain and ease of attention quoted above, he seems to be saying that the straining of attention is the process of habituation, and the ease is the functioning of the fully formed habit. This brings him to the threshold of aesthetic spontaneity, but we still do not see that although a habitual activity requires comparatively less strain, to perform one well still requires sustained attention, which, as we shall see below, is not necessarily effortful.

James' theory of attention is well-developed and worth rehearsing. He identifies six different kinds of attention, which I represent with the schematic in figure 1. Attention to objects of sense is called "sensorial attention" by James. Represented objects are mental objects, and attention to these James calls "intellectual attention." The first and fourth are instinctive varieties of attention and are to be distinguished from the second and fifth, respectively, as instinct is distinct from habit. Derived attention is created through all the various experiences of enculturation. It is not that we are attentive to certain instincts and habits, but that our attention is diverted to interests that we take either through instinct or through habit. James is also proposing that sometimes our attention is diverted purely through effort on our part, and this would be the third and sixth kinds of attention. But James says that in reality attention cannot be held for more than a second at a time and that attention sustained is really attention renewed.

With this in mind, James embarks on a brief analysis of sustained attention, and it is important to note that, here, James does not speak separately of sensorial and intellectual attention but considers them simultaneously.

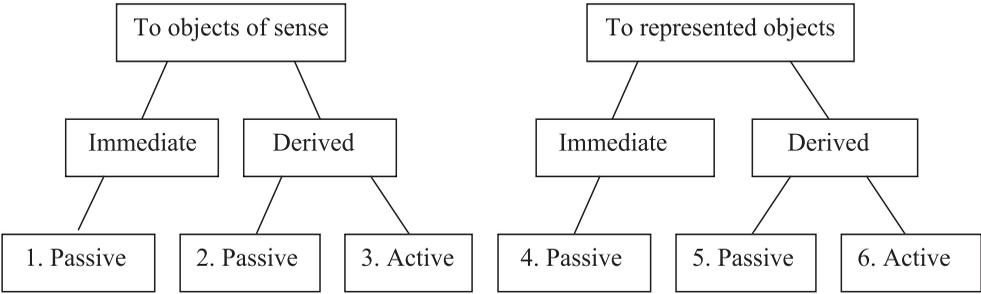


Figure 1 Attention in James

Attention is sustained in an object, he says, when it is taken up for consideration and then considered again and again from different aspects and in different regards, with thoughts and feelings branching out to various related objects and coming back again. The notion of sustained attention is where we can see James flirting with the idea of unifying the aesthetic and the ethical. He speaks of both the genius and the moralist as cultivating and relying on sustained attention. He says:

The longer one does attend to a topic the more mastery of it one has. And the faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character, and will. (James 1983, p. 401)

Here we have both the aesthetic (mastery) and the ethical. The question now is whether the sustaining of attention can itself be habituated. If we can do something by effort many times, then presumably it carves out grooves in our nervous system (as James might say) and allows us to continue doing it with relative ease. So sustaining attention in a particular activity many times should allow us to cultivate the ability to sustain attention with little effort in the future, in the activity in question and possibly even in other activities. Effort should become ease, and will should turn into spontaneity. A child acts with impulsiveness, but a cultivated artist (or moralist) should act with spontaneity, attending to both the big picture of an activity and to the details, with stamina and ease.

In James' chapter on reasoning, he highlights the vast chasm between the rational powers separating humans and animals. Unfortunately, he does not consider these differences in light of attention. In the relatively circumscribed world of animals, we can see that although they cannot cultivate numerous and varied activities as we can, in one sense they do not need to. The reason we must cultivate sustained attention is that our minds are constantly jumping from one topic to another. James calls animals slaves to routine, but one may ask whether this is another way of saying that they live their lives in grooves of sustained attention, rarely being misled by greed, pride, or envy.

In James' chapter on the consciousness of self, we begin to see a move from superiority to humility, not humans vis-à-vis animals but vis-à-vis other human beings. First, James mentions that all accretions in life tend to bolster the ego and thereby burden oneself with the need for protection and self-defense. By ridding oneself of accretions, he says, one frees oneself from worry. Then, like Rousseau, James notes that the narrow, selfish, egoistic person is the one who sustains this inveterate self, who is concerned with the narrow interests of the self, while sympathetic people expand outward, such that "the outline of their self often gets uncertain enough, but for this the spread of its content more than atones" (James 1983, p. 298). James conceives of this outward expansion of the self in ethical terms, but there is room in his psychology to subsume this ethical characterization under a broader aesthetic category such that it could occur within the domain of spontaneity. James does not attempt such a subsumption, however, and so, for a spontaneity that explicitly encompasses aesthetics, one must turn to Schiller.

### *Friedrich Schiller*

Now that I have broached the topic of aesthetic spontaneity, I will move back a century to Friedrich Schiller, who offers what I find to be the most complete description we have of aesthetic spontaneity in the West. Schiller wrote several tracts on aesthetics, but he tackles the topic of the aesthetics of action specifically, and trenchantly, in an extended essay called “On Grace and Dignity” (*Ueber Anmuth und Würde*) (Curran, Fricker, and Schiller 2005).

Like Rousseau, whom Schiller admired greatly, Schiller accepts the Cartesian paradigm and struggles with human/animal continuity, a theme that goes all the way back to an early essay called “On the Connection between the Animal and the Spiritual in Man.” In this early work, Schiller draws a clear distinction between humans and other animals on spiritual grounds—namely that humans alone have souls, providing them with reason and morality—while also detailing the inherent sensate nature of humans that is not only coincident between humans and other animals but a necessary foundation for our higher powers: “all of [one’s] spiritual capacities grow out of motive powers of sense” (Schiller 1905, p. 411). This necessity of the corporeal is reminiscent of Plato’s stepladder of beauty recognition in the *Symposium*, and Schiller’s characterization of the mutual interaction of the “animal” and “mental” hearkens back to La Mettrie: “Hence arises a fundamental law of mixed natures, which, being reduced to its primary divisions, runs thus: the activities of the body correspond to the activities of the mind” (Schiller 1905, p. 418). Schiller’s full acceptance of the biological nature of human beings distinguishes his later works. The unity of body and mind allows Schiller to entertain action not only as a result of the will but as an event in the world. This leads him to explore the notion of grace in action.

At the time Schiller wrote his “On Grace and Dignity,” Kant’s third *Critique* was only a few years old, and Schiller was so impressed with Kant’s architectonic that he adopted it almost entirely. One item he did not accept was Kant’s devaluation of the sensate with regard to moral action. Whereas Kant’s understanding of moral action is limited to the intellectual, Schiller attempts to introduce the sensate realm as well.<sup>28</sup> And as pointed out above, Schiller fully accepts the notion of a soul, on which Kant (in his *Critiques*) was consistently chary.<sup>29</sup> In Schiller, then, we have an interesting mix of La Mettrie, Rousseau, and Kant, which yields a subtlety of description in regard to action unprecedented in Western theory.

Toward the beginning of “On Grace and Dignity,” Schiller defines grace as beauty of movement that is “outside nature in the realm of freedom” (Curran, Fricker, and Schiller 2005, p. 125), evidencing immediately his establishment of a necessary/contingent dichotomy,<sup>30</sup> with nature being the source and model of everything that is necessary. We can conceive of nature in this sense as akin to determined spontaneity as discussed above. On the contingent side is the will, akin to voluntary spontaneity. Within this far-ranging dichotomy, he begins to explain human action. On the side of necessity fall such things as breathing, beauty of frame, and the sensate. On the side of contingency fall such things as singing, human morality, and grace. Grace, he says, is restricted to the human realm because it is closely associated with the moral.

Having established this dichotomy, which he exploits throughout, Schiller says that two kinds of human action also fall into this dichotomy, willful (or deliberate) action and sympathetic action (stemming from emotion). A notion of mind/body unity is rather obviously not present at this point, but Schiller begins to establish such a unity by bringing grace away from the contingent to the necessary, submitting that one must distinguish two kinds of sympathetic actions. On the one hand are actions obviously beyond our control—instinctive actions—and on the other are actions that arise from emotion, which belongs to the realm of necessity but is not entirely separate from the realm of freedom. When an action is executed willfully, he says, one does not willfully control every muscular movement. Rather the willfulness is merely an initiating; the action is actually carried out sympathetically, and *how* it is executed depends on one's entire person—one's moral character.

Schiller adopts Kant's understanding of dignity as the quality ascribed to one who makes a difficult moral choice through sheer force of will. In opposition to this, Schiller posits his notion of grace, which is the modality of the moral action as determined by one's moral character, which is beyond the scope of the will. "Grace," he says, "must always be natural, in other words, instinctive (or it must at least appear to be so)" (Curran, Fricker, and Schiller 2005, p. 137).<sup>31</sup> He continues farther on, "Although grace must be or appear to be instinctive, we still only look for it in movements that depend on the will" (p. 139). This is the paradoxical side of grace, that it is the involuntary part of the voluntary. How is one to make sense of the valorization of the involuntary? Schiller uses a political analogy, echoing Aristotle and the *Laozi*:

When a monarchic state is run in such a way that, although everything proceeds in accordance with the will of one person, the individual citizen can still persuade himself that he is living according to his own lights and simply following his inclinations, one calls this a liberal government. However, one would be very hesitant to give it this name if *either* the ruler imposed his will against the citizen's inclinations or the citizen imposed his inclinations against the will of the ruler; since, in the first instance, the government would not be *liberal*, and in the second it would not be a *government*. (Curran, Fricker, and Schiller 2005, pp. 145–146)

In this analogy, the people are essentially becoming correct *of* themselves, in a fashion reminiscent of Daoist spontaneity. This may be difficult to see through the language of willfulness, but Schiller is saying that the actions of the people spontaneously dovetail with what the ruler would have them do. Applying this to graceful action in individuals, one's sympathetic actions stemming from sentiment spontaneously dovetail with actions that would be executed voluntarily. What makes graceful action possible, then, is not anything that a person overtly performs but rather what the will allows (not commands). In dignified action, according to Schiller, the will forces itself against all inclination. In graceful action, the will abdicates in favor of one's personal constitution, allowing freedom to the moral sentiments that flow from it. In this way, will and inclination are unified in what we may call aesthetic spontaneity, for this, according to Schiller, is the manifestation of true beauty.

According to Schiller, neither is graceful action automatic in a mechanical sense nor does it require overt effort. In other words, it is characterized by a middle ground that I identified above as ease:

The general feeling alone among humans makes *ease* into the main characteristic of grace, and where effort is required, *ease* can never be the outcome. It is also clear that, on the other hand, nature ought never to use force against the mind if a beautiful, moral expression is to occur, for wherever nature *reigns* alone, humanity disappears. (Curran, Fricker, and Schiller 2005, p. 146)

According to my analysis of Daoist spontaneity above, ease is one prong of fluency; the other is responsiveness. Since sentiment is the driving power behind sympathetic action for Schiller, it is not difficult to see how responsiveness could be attributed to his notion of graceful action, even though he does not bring it up explicitly. And on the wholeness side, the abdication of the forcefulness of the will is obviously a kind of shedding. So of the four characteristics of Daoist spontaneity described above, Schiller appears, at least implicitly, to include three of them in his theory of graceful action. The missing characteristic is collection, which is in no way precluded in his theory but lacks even implicit articulation.

Having divided human nature into the sensate and the voluntary, Schiller unites it in graceful action. He says that there are three possibilities in accounting for action, only two of which are normally considered, namely reason taking priority over the sensate, and the sensate taking priority over reason. In the third option, that embodied in graceful action, “the impulses of the sensuous settle into harmony with the rules of the rational and human beings are at one with themselves” (Curran, Fricker, and Schiller 2005, p. 147). This unity makes it appear at first as if reason and impulse are on an even footing for Schiller, but Schiller reveals repeatedly a more Rousseauian bent—that appeal to reason in cases of moral ambiguity is a sundering of the unity of the person, that this unity consists in the will’s letting nature take priority:

The simple inquiry of reason is an encroachment on nature, which is an accomplished judge in its own matters, and does not wish to see its statements subjected to outside authority. An act of will that places the concerns of the faculty of desire before the ethical tribunal is, in truth, *unnatural*, because it makes what is necessary into something arbitrary and leaves the decision up to the laws of reason in a matter where only nature’s laws can speak. (Curran, Fricker, and Schiller 2005, p. 157)

When willed action is unnecessary, when reason and impulse are already in accord, that is the highest state. Such a beautiful soul “can leave affect to guide the will without hesitation and is never in danger of standing in contradiction of its decisions” (Curran, Fricker, and Schiller 2005, p. 157). This passage, and others around it, bear a remarkable similarity to Confucian spontaneity as expressed in *Analects* 2:4, “At seventy, I was able to follow whatever my heart desired without transgressing.” Equally remarkable is the priority that Schiller gives to emotion and the superlative rank that he gives to the beauty of graceful action. The key, as implied in Aristotle and the Stoics, is the moral sentiment that springs from one’s character.

I mentioned the possibility of equating Schiller's notion of sentiment with the Daoist notion of responsiveness. While Schiller's understanding of emotion coincides in some way with the Daoist notion of sensitivity and responsiveness, like Rousseau he extends his theory of spontaneity into the theological. The preeminent emotion for Schiller, as for all Christians, is love, which he identifies as the only "free emotion" (Curran, Fricker, and Schiller 2005, p. 166). So toward the end of the essay, emotion—this particular emotion, which appeared at first to fall in the mundane realm of necessity—is elevated to the realm of freedom, which finds its source in the divine. Just as Rousseau finally resolved his determined/voluntary conflict in divine spontaneity, so does Schiller appeal to the superhuman:

Love . . . flows forth from the seat of freedom, from our divine nature. . . . it is *absolute greatness* itself, . . . the legislator himself, the *God* in us, who plays with his own image in the world of senses. (Curran, Fricker, and Schiller 2005, p. 166)

Rousseau's and Schiller's final appeal to God as the source of spontaneity is not surprising. When one begins with a determined/voluntary ontological dichotomy that prioritizes the immaterial, there is really no other direction in which to go. Still, Rousseau strives to bridge the ontological gap, and Schiller does a remarkable job with the resources available.

### *Conclusion*

I have attempted in this article to delineate a clear notion of Daoist natural movement as a kind of spontaneity and then explore the Western tradition for a similar notion that may be rehabilitated for contemporary use. Even though the metaphysics of the two divergent traditions have consistently clashed in the attempt, we have managed to see some interesting parallels. At the very least, the notion of spontaneity in Daoism and similar notions in the West have been clarified. On the ontological level, there is determined spontaneity and voluntary spontaneity. On a descriptive level, I have distinguished a simple, naive, natural spontaneity, and a more cultivated aesthetic spontaneity. These two kinds of spontaneity cross over between Daoism and the West, the former lauded by Western philosophers of a romantic persuasion beginning with Rousseau, and the latter developed only by Schiller with his notion of grace. We also found many more partial parallels in the tradition, from *physis* and the practical syllogism of Aristotle to the examination of attention in James.

What are the advantages of rehabilitating this archaic and little-used term? The hope is that, through comparison with an alien tradition, many of our own presuppositions and unannounced rationales will be brought more clearly into consciousness. In this way, we can formulate our theories with an eye to incorporating the most advanced knowledge and understanding from current philosophy and allied fields while also being cautious about filtering out incompatible inherited notions that may unwittingly be smuggled in.

The comparison of Western spontaneity with Daoist spontaneity demonstrates the need to move philosophy of action closer to a monistic materialism that adheres

to currently accepted scientific theories and to be cautious about inherited notions contrary to them, such as a monadic self whose essential characteristic is rationality.

Such an exploration would not be complete without an example of how the foundation given above for a revitalized notion of spontaneity may contribute to current philosophy of action. Assuming that the notions of natural and aesthetic spontaneity above cohere with current physics, biology, and psychology, a comprehensive and up-to-date theory of action should possess the following features.

1. It should embrace the physical nature of human beings as a basis for action theory. Aristotle was the first philosopher to speculate widely about human-animal continuity. The Stoics, Rousseau, Schiller, and James accepted it as fundamental to their theories, and there is no good reason to think otherwise today.

2. It should embrace human beings as unexceptional parts of a uniform nature. Any theory that posits an action/movement distinction predicated on an ontologically founded notion of free will must ascribe willed actions that are unhinged from nature to an agent equally unhinged from nature. As unhinged from nature, it must be either miraculous or immaterial, violating number 1 above. This was the major limitation of the Western theories that have been analyzed in this article.

3. It should embrace the agent as a system. Traditional theories of volition posit a linear path of causality terminating at one end in an immaterial source of action. Systems have multiple and interactive pathways of causality and cannot be reduced to a single focal point as the cause of all that follows. Numerous states of mind contribute to movements, with no distinct line separating conscious/unconscious, attentive/inattentive, intentional/unintentional, and purposive/nonpurposive. To propose a distinct dividing line between any of these pairs is to presuppose a monadic agent.

4. It should embrace action/movement as complex. The linearity of traditional theories of volition terminate at the other end in simple actions; for example, I raise my hand. Actions, however, are fantastically complex, involving input, interior models, planning, feedback, nerve efference, efference copies, memory, et cetera, along with complicated cell biology, biochemistry, and mechanics. Any theory that insists on treating action as simple on the basis, for instance, that one chooses to raise one's hand rather than choosing to make an efference copy of raising one's hand is working only at the phenomenal level and must remain there. Such a theory involves the phenomenal self, phenomenal action, and phenomenal causation, but nothing more.

5. It should embrace the automation of movement. Virtually all actions involve habituated movement. Aristotle was the first to develop a theory of habit, and it figured prominently among the Stoics, James, and Schiller. Traditional theories of volition have a difficult time accounting for habitual action because it is difficult to pin down which parts of an action are habitual and which are volitional.

6. It should take sensitivity and responsiveness as the model for action. Traditional theories of volition that place the agent outside nature envision it as a purely active force. Psychological theories that favor a stimulus-response model of behavior envision the agent as a passive actor. The sensitivity-and-responsiveness model takes the agent as open to particular kinds of stimuli based on personal history as well as

genetic and phylogenetic characteristics. These factors are linked also to repertoires of response, with the linkages being complex and variable.

7. It should accept aesthetics as prior to ethics. The previous principles imply that movement is not a matter of simple willing. Developmentally, an action must be practiced and habituated before it can be executed in a well-timed and accurate manner. Whether an action is executed appropriate to one's intentions is ultimately a matter of aesthetic judgment regarding timing, proportion, speed, force, accuracy, et cetera. Action mastery—whether one *can* do it—must precede consideration of whether one *should* do it. The ability to perform an action is almost always taken for granted by action theorists. There are many plausible scenarios, however, in which the actual ability to perform an action may be a factor, such as addicts attempting behavior contrary to their addiction, or even people of surly character attempting to be polite. By recognizing behavior as repertoires of actions that exist within a sensitivity-and-responsiveness framework, one begins to grasp that not all people are capable of the same type of actions all the time. Ask why the five-foot-tall woman didn't help by getting the wine glasses down from the top shelf. Ask why the alcoholic didn't help by opening the wine. Ask why the shy companion didn't contribute a toast during the festivities. Ask why the non-English-speaking visitor didn't engage in polite conversation. Ask why the hostess didn't show a stiff upper lip when approached about her recently deceased son. If, ethically, each of these agents failed to do the polite thing at the appropriate time, we should look not to their rationally determined values but to the entire set of conditions, both internal and external, for answers. Aristotle, the Stoics, James, and Schiller were correct that character influences action. But if Aristotle was correct that character is one variety of habituated behavior, then there should be a broader category to explore. What exactly this broader category is, how it influences actions, and how it can be developed are questions a new approach to philosophy of action might profitably take up.

8. It should involve ethical training. Traditional philosophies of action that prioritize the voluntary inevitably prioritize reason as the basis for ethical action. If an ethical agent is more than an immaterial cognizer, however, then many more factors than reason should contribute to ethical behavior. In addition to training in practical reasoning, it may also help to train children in other things relevant to ethical action, such as sensitivity, compassion, leadership ability, and civic understanding. What these attributes are exactly, how they contribute to action, and how they may be cultivated are worth investigating.

Let me offer one example of how the considerations above may shed light on traditional approaches by briefly examining Harry Frankfurt's well-known "The Problem of Action" (Frankfurt 1997). This article is less traditional than many others in that it explicitly adopts features 2 and 3 above: embrace human beings as unexceptional parts of a uniform nature and embrace the agent as a system. Frankfurt proposes that an adequate definition of action be any purposive movement that is under the agent's guidance. He explains that agency is not monadic (my term) but systemic (p. 47) and that humans are not exceptional in their ability to act—virtually all animals are capable of actions (pp. 51 ff.).

Working from the eight features of a comprehensive and up-to-date philosophy of action above, one recognizes three immediate problems with Frankfurt's position. (1) Frankfurt does not explore the implications of systemic agency on the action/movement distinction, leaving him with apparently unanswerable questions. For instance, if an agent is systemic, and movements must be under the system's guidance in order to be considered genuine actions and not merely movements, how much of the system must contribute to the movement in order for it to qualify as action? Is it a numerical decision—does 90 percent of the system have to be involved, or 51 percent? Is it an anatomical decision—must the brain, or a certain part of it be involved? It would appear that such distinctions can only be stipulated, but Frankfurt seems to be attempting to identify a natural distinction between action and movement, not an arbitrary stipulation. (2) Frankfurt defines "guidance" as being subject to adjustments (p. 47), but what are the criteria for an action being subject to adjustments? Frankfurt says that it is a mistake to think of action as a movement that could have been otherwise, but he seems to be making the same proposal only in different terms. Do actions *actually* have to be adjusted or must they just be open to potential adjustment? How could one determine whether or not an unadjusted action had been open to adjustment? (3) Frankfurt cheerfully attributes actions to nonhuman animals, without ever wondering why the action/movement distinction was ever proposed in the first place. As explained above, the original purpose was to attribute responsibility. If action is the distinguishing mark of responsible movement, Frankfurt's theory would extend moral responsibility to arthropods.

The purpose of putting forth these objections is not to attack Frankfurt's theory as such but to demonstrate that even a position in contemporary philosophy of action that is close to current physics, biology, and psychology is still vulnerable to multiple attacks, and the reason lies not in the theory itself but in the presupposition that there is a natural distinction to be found between action and movement. Historically, when this distinction was first proposed, the dualist metaphysics allowed an immaterial source of willed action as distinct from instinctual movement. Now that dualism is out of favor, why do we still cling to its progeny? If all we want to do is attribute responsibility, we can put our heads together and stipulate useful criteria. There is no natural method waiting to be divined through logical inference.

Using early Chinese Daoism as a resource, the rehabilitation of spontaneity prompts us to consider the role of the eight criteria above in our current theories of action.

## Notes

- 1 – This dichotomy is evident, for instance, in the still common distinction between action and motion, the first of which is, by definition, voluntary, while the second is, also by definition, not voluntary. No such distinction can be drawn in Chinese thought. The distinction, itself, although widely used, is open to criticism. After all, free will is conceptually parasitic on a notion of strict de-

terminism, which has fallen into disrepute (Hacking 1990). In addition, free will fundamentally implies a parallel realm of acausality. The free-will-versus-determinism distinction somehow remains current in philosophical debates even though, fundamentally, neither notion coheres well with current ideas in the physical sciences. Ian Hacking, for instance, notes, “The most decisive conceptual event of twentieth century physics has been the discovery that the world is not deterministic” (p. 1). For early Chinese philosophy, there was a very pronounced idea of discernable patterning across the natural (including human) world, but this regularity was not equivalent to strict determinism.

- 2 – Where action is distinguished from motion, or movement, I use “motion” and “movement” interchangeably. However, as indicated in the previous note, the action/movement distinction is fundamentally problematic. Therefore, unless I am analyzing a particular theory in which a clear distinction matters, I do not reserve the term “action” for humans or other sentient beings.
- 3 – Lloyd and Sivin (2002) interpret *ziran* as follows: “something that exists or is the case [*ran*] without something else causing it [*zi*]” (p. 200).
- 4 – Jane Geaney (2002) offers a number of scholarly sources attesting to a cosmological organicism during this period. Mark Edward Lewis (2006) details understandings of the fluid boundaries between the human body and the cosmos that imply a broadly presupposed metaphysics characterized by dynamism.
- 5 – See Schwartz 1985 for an excellent introduction to the widespread importance of *qi* underlying the cosmic order in early China.
- 6 – “Cognitive-affectivity” is a single term that I use for referring to all of the macro-level processes of the nervous system. Western speculators have traditionally drawn a sharp distinction between thought and feeling. The Chinese traditionally ascribed all such processes to the heart, with no presupposed dichotomy.
- 7 – One may legitimately question why for occurrences of *zi* I limit myself to the Inner Chapters of the *Zhuangzi* but don’t adhere to the same limit with regard to skill episodes. The reason is that the spontaneity described in the skill episodes that fall outside the Inner Chapters (traditionally ascribed to Zhuangzi) describes a kind of spontaneity that is demonstrably Daoist. As Graham says, “Although it is not easy to offer a definition of Taoism, thinkers classed as philosophical Taoists do share one basic insight—that, while all other things move spontaneously on the course proper to them, [most people have] stunted and maimed [their] spontaneous aptitude” (Zhuangzi 1981, p. 6).
- 8 – Making a foray into twentieth-century philosophical topics, Graham attempted to use the notion of Daoist spontaneity as a way to bridge the is-ought gap (Graham 1985). He did not, however, attempt a conceptual taxonomy of spontaneity in action.
- 9 – I risk the vagueness of this term because the Daoists, in addition to referring to the obvious notions of attention and awareness, employ terms such as *shen*

神 and *qi*, which in this context can be covered by the English “energy” in its subjective sense—for example, “I have a lot of energy today.”

- 10 – I encourage the reader to peruse the *Zhuangzi* episodes under discussion. Examples of collection and shedding can easily be found throughout and are adduced explicitly in this article under the Fluency heading.
- 11 – The term “agent,” with its voluntarist connotations, is, of course, problematic, but I can find no better alternative. I use it here, naively, with no implied Aristotelian ontology.
- 12 – *Gan* 感 is a numismatic term (Bruya 2001, Bruya 2007). Like a coin, it consists of two opposites together. *Gan* can mean both *to arouse* and *to be sensitive to arousal*, depending on its use.
- 13 – Of course, I am not denying that on a practical level the Chinese individuated things. The issue is ontological—what were things composed of at the most basic level? While dominant Western theories held to atoms and souls, the dominant Chinese theories held to a fluid *qi*. Thus, the claim is not that the mechanics of a jujube falling from a tree in early China would be interpreted differently from the mechanics of an olive falling from a tree in ancient Greece. Rather, the claim is that at the most fundamental level, movement (and change) is understood as the confluence of objects with fluid boundaries in China, as opposed to externally propelled discrete essentialized objects in Greece. I refer the reader to Lloyd and Sivin’s (2002) comparisons of Chinese and Greek science, where they say “the fundamental concepts in play in China and in Greece were strikingly dissimilar” (p. 241) and detail the Greek focus on elements and naturalistic causes and explanations and the Chinese focus on organismic dynamics.
- 14 – The criticism that unprecedented situations will necessarily stymie the agent does not hold because humans have the ability to extrapolate. The most effective tennis player is the one who is not only most skilled through practice but also most flexible in adjusting to unforeseen circumstances on the tennis court. Creativity that manifests as flexibility within a domain of action is considered necessary for success. Responsiveness as dependence is not a hindrance but a facilitation. Suppose the oar of a rowboat, for instance, suddenly gains complete consciousness and wishes to act as the ideal oar purely by volition, without responding to anything else, and, most of all, without depending on the resistance of water. Just as the oar cannot be an oar without pushing against water, a human being, according to Daoists, cannot be a human being without responding to circumstances.
- 15 – It is popular among sinologists today to avoid referring to conceptions across time periods, even across authors of the same time period, for fear that one is “essentializing” the concept and thereby missing significant, subtle differences. Of course, it is important to be cautious in this way. We must not, however,

throw out the baby with the bathwater. If there are significant general differences between Chinese philosophy and Western philosophy that persist over time, it behooves us to point them out and build them into our theories. A *qi* cosmology in whatever manifestations it took among individual thinkers and across periods in Chinese history is distinctively Chinese and has no close correlate in post-Socratic Western philosophy. Therefore, when I refer to “*qi* cosmology” in Chinese philosophy in general terms, I am not implying that there was one standard conception accepted by all Chinese philosophers for all time. Rather, I am stating the fairly obvious, namely that the notion of *qi*, along with important physical/metaphysical implications, was widespread and influential. It is rather like saying that the notion of God was common in Western philosophy. Despite there being an almost infinite variety of interpretations of God, the statement still stands. Likewise, although there are an almost infinite variety of shades of blue, I can still refer to the color blue without specifying a particular shade. One can make sense of it and utilize it in general comparisons and descriptions. Of course, when analyzing a philosophical concept in detail within an era or for an individual thinker, even for a specific period of an individual thinker, one would want to specify as much as possible within context.

16 – A major point in this article is the importance of taking automaticity into account with regard to the philosophy of action, and the *Zhuangzi* skill episodes help make this point. I would be remiss, however, if I did not also clarify that for the Daoists habit and spontaneity are separate—neither does spontaneity require habituated action nor does habit necessarily imply spontaneity. The Daoist accounts often feature actions or activities that one would recognize as habituated skills, such as swimming, carving, and catching cicadas with a pole, but not all of them do, such as the fighting cock who wins by its bearing alone, the innkeeper’s concubine who attracts through selflessness, and the ultimate person who achieves by tending toward the inchoate. In the episodes involving skill, skill is either paradoxically denied outright or is downplayed in favor of the elements just mentioned.

17 – La Mettrie’s term is, confusingly, *âme*, “soul.” There is nothing spiritual about his meaning, however, and so the best term in English is “mind,” or, perhaps, a neologism, such as “cognitive-affective system.” Most striking is that the meaning apparent in his use (specifically with reference to the brain and nerves) seems to overlap closely with our term “nervous system,” but to say that the nervous system is physical, unitary, and sensitive is, for us today, stating the obvious.

18 – Damasio’s claim is as follows:

But now I had before my eyes the coolest, least emotional, intelligent human being one might imagine, and yet his practical reason was so impaired that it produced, in the wanderings of daily life, a succession of mistakes, a perpetual violation of what would be considered socially appropriate and personally advantageous. He had had an

entirely healthy mind until a neurological disease ravaged a specific sector of his brain and, from one day to the next, caused this profound defect in decision making. The instruments usually considered necessary and sufficient for rational behavior were intact in him. He had the requisite knowledge, attention, and memory; his language was flawless; he could perform calculations; he could tackle the logic of an abstract problem. There was only one significant accompaniment to his decision-making failure: a marked alteration of the ability to experience feelings. Flawed reason and impaired feelings stood out together as the consequences of a specific brain lesion, and this correlation suggested to me that feeling was an integral component of the machinery of reason. Two decades of clinical and experimental work with a large number of neurological patients have allowed me to replicate this observation many times, and to turn a clue into a testable hypothesis. (Damasio 1994, pp. xi–xii)

- 19 – This situation is changing, but slowly. See, for instance, Brian Bruya, “Introduction: Toward a Theory of Attention that Includes Effortless Attention and Action,” and “Apertures, Draw, and Syntax: Remodeling Attention,” in Bruya 2010.
- 20 – Parts of this Daoist model are merely nascent in La Mettrie, but there are strong suggestions.
- 21 – The similarity to a Daoist reduction of desires is worth noting, but the Daoists do not blame it on the body in contradistinction to a spirit.
- 22 – “As [the human] becomes sociable and [inevitably] a slave, he becomes weak, timid, and servile; his soft and effeminate manner of living completely exhausts both his [innate] strength and courage” (Rousseau, Ritter, and Bondanella 1988, p. 14); “Bereft of understanding and liberty, [animals] cannot recognize [natural] law, but since they share to some extent in our nature by virtue of the sensibility with which they are endowed, it will be thought that they must also participate in natural right, and that man is bound by some kind of duty towards them” (ibid., p. 7); “Every animal has ideas because he has senses; it even combines its ideas up to a certain point, and, in this regard, man differs from beasts only in degree” (ibid., p. 15).
- 23 – I have been maintaining that the Daoists eschew morality. This is true insofar as morality was viewed by the Daoists as originating in flawed social conventions. Daoist spontaneity does not, however, equate with moral relativity. The *Laozi*, after all, is a handbook on how to govern in a way that allows all people to thrive. The Daoists believed, instead, that the emphasis on morality was practically counterproductive. Better to empty oneself of extraneous desires and respond to events spontaneously than to act from the necessarily limiting desire to do good. The Confucians took the ethical side of spontaneity further than the Daoists did, and the Neo-Confucians took a position strikingly similar to that of Rousseau’s concentric circles (Bruya 2001).
- 24 – This argument relies on the claim that determinism is simply too unappealing to be the only option and involves a confusion between what it means for future events to be determined and what it means for future determined events to be actually known.

- 25 – In my depictions of James’ empirical descriptions, “spontaneity” refers to natural spontaneity rather than voluntary or determined spontaneity.
- 26 – By “aesthetic” with reference to spontaneity, I mean pertaining to mastery of a skill.
- 27 – For current theories of effortless attention, see “Apertures, Draw, and Syntax,” in Bruya 2010.
- 28 – He adopts a similar strategy with regard to beauty, in his “On the Beautiful” (Ellis 1969).
- 29 – It is interesting to note that in Kant’s pre-critical period, his position was closer to Schiller’s, accepting the soul and acknowledging an “embodied cognition” (Carpenter 1998).
- 30 – For the German *zufäll*, I prefer “contingent” over “accidental.”
- 31 – Schiller allows for the appearance of grace in cases such as the theater, while at the same time frowning on moral artifice.

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