

**Wei-wu-wei: Nondual action**  
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... at the still point, there the dance is, But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity, Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards, Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point, There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.

T. S. Eliot [\[1\]](#)

Wei-wu-wei, "the action of nonaction, " is the central paradox of Taoism and as a concept is second in importance only to the Tao itself, which incorporates it; Lao Tzu describes the action/nonaction of someone who has realized the Tao as wu-wei:

... Thus, the wise man deals with things through wu-wei and teaches through no-words. The ten thousand things flourish without interruption. They grow by themselves, and no one possesses them. (Chapter 2) [\[2\]](#)

The highest attainment is wu-wei and is purposeless (wei). (Chapter 38)

When wu-wei is done, nothing is left undone. (Chapter 48)

The other paradoxes of Taoism would seem to be derived from wu-wei, unless it is a coincidence that they are susceptible to expression in the same form: "the morality of no morality," "the knowledge of no knowledge," and so forth. As a paradox, wei-wu-wei is perhaps even more difficult to understand than the unconceptualizable Tao itself. In philosophy, discretion may be too much the better part of valor--this is apparently why Arthur Waley, in a long introduction to his translation of the Lao-tzu, discusses the concepts of Tao, te, ch'i, i, yin-yang, the five elements, and Taoist yoga, yet defines wu-wei only in an unedifying footnote to chapter 3 of the text: "non-activity', i.e. rule through te; ('virtue', 'power') acquired in trance." [\[3\]](#) But explanations of wei-wu-wei have otherwise not been lacking. In Part One I shall consider a number of such interpretations and argue that they are incomplete without the more radical

understanding of wu-wei as nondual action--that is, action in which there is no bifurcation between subject and object: no awareness of an agent that is believed to do the action as being distinct from an objective action that is done. This is not to claim that nondual action is the only meaning, of wei-wu-wei. It may be a mistake to assume that any one particular interpretation must be the meaning of wu-wei, for here we may have a case of what Wittgenstein called "family resemblances": Rather than any one characteristic being common to all instances, there are various overlapping characteristics. In Part Two I make comparisons with some recent analytic work in the philosophy of mind and argue that, contrary to first appearances, its conclusions are consistent with and even support the

## I

(1) The simplest interpretation of wei-wu-wei is that it means doing nothing, or as little as possible. This may be understood either politically or metaphysically/personally. The political interpretation sees wu-wei as "the main precept behind the Lao Tzu's conception of government as the minimum amount of external interference projected onto the individual from those in power combined with an environment most conducive to the individual's quest for personal fulfillment." [4] If one leaves the people alone and lets them get on with it, social problems will resolve themselves -- perhaps because political interference is more often the cause of such problems than their solution, as was certainly the case during the Warring States period. Such an interpretation of wu-wei is often part of a more general political interpretation of Taoism, which, it has been recognized, fits the Lao-tzu better than the Chuang-tzu. [5] This view of wu-wei is also consistent with the sole recorded reference to wu-wei by Confucius:

The Master said, "If anyone could be said to have affected proper order while remaining inactive (wu-wei), it was Shun. What was there for him to do? He simply made himself respectful and took up his position facing due south." [6]

By regulating his own conduct so that it reflects the moral order, the Confucian ruler sets a positive example and is thus able to influence his subordinates without coercing them. But this does not necessarily imply wu-wei toward the people generally. The emphasis in Confucianism is that the king reigns but does not rule. In the ideal administration, the ruler does not personally attend to matters of government but depends upon the charismatic influence of his virtue (te); there does not seem to be the further implication that the king's ministers do not need to act. The emphasis in Taoism shifts from this need for a personal example to an anarchism which allows all social and political organization to be consistent with the Tao. [7] The problem in either case is much the same. Despite the hopes of utopians and economic conservatives, neither is very practicable. Perhaps such government might work in an unthreatened traditional society, but I do not see how it could be successful in the cutthroat Warring States period nor, given its complexity and rapid transformation, in our contemporary interdependent world. Insofar as the

meaning of wu-wei is political nonaction, it seems to have little relevance for us today -- perhaps unfortunately, if the implication is that modern society cannot harmonize with the Tao.

The personal interpretation of wei-wu-wei as literally "doing nothing" does not fare much better, and in fact this view does not seem to have been very common. In his commentary on the Chuang-tzu, Kuo Hsiang criticized it: "Hearing the theory of wu wei, some people think that lying down is better than walking. These people are far wrong in understanding the ideas of Chuang Tzu." [8] Nevertheless, Fung Yu-lan, after quoting this, went on to add: "despite this criticism, it would seem that in their understanding of Chuang Tzu such people were not far wrong." [9] This probably reveals more about Fung than Chuang Tzu, but I think that Fung is not completely wrong. In fact, such a reading is consistent with the nondual interpretation, which I shall offer later, in that complete "not acting" requires eliminating the sense-of-self which is inclined to interfere. Noninterference is not really possible unless one has dissipated the fog of expectations and desires that keeps one from experiencing the world as it is in itself (Tao), and the judgment that "something must be done" is usually part of that fog. Josh Billings said he was an old man and had had lots of troubles -- most of which never happened. Many, perhaps most, of our problems originate in our own minds, in an anxiety which is projected outward into the environment.

What might be seen as a corollary of "doing nothing" is knowing when to stop. Chapter 77 of the Lao-tzu compares the course of nature to a bow: "That which is at the top is pulled down; that which is at the bottom is brought up. That which is overfull is reduced; that which is deficient is supplemented." Thus the man who abides in the Tao never wants to reach an extreme and, knowing the right time to stop, is free from danger (chapters 15 and 44). Nature, here including man, is a succession of alternations: when one extreme is reached a reversal occurs (chapter 40), as with such natural phenomena as day-night and summer-winter--which insight was later elaborated into the complexities of the Yin-Yang school.

(2) A more common interpretation of wei-wu-wei sees it as action which does not force but yields. Rather than being a version of doing nothing, this might be called "the action of passivity." Under the weight of a heavy snowfall, pine branches break off, but by bending, the willow can drop its burden and spring up again. Chuang Tzu gives the example of the intoxicated man who is not killed when he falls out of his carriage because he does not resist the fall. This would seem to be an argument for alcoholism, but no: "If such integrity of the spirit can be got from wine, how much greater must be the integrity that is got from Heaven." [10] So wu-wei is a recommendation to be soft and yielding, as Lao Tzu's favorite metaphor water. Often the character *joh*, [a] is translated as "weakness," [11] but "weakness" has unavoidably negative connotations which do not seem right in this context -- especially since *joh* is usually (but not always: for example, chapters 8 and 66) a means to conquer in the end. It is because water is the softest and most yielding thing that it is able to overcome the hard and strong.

An apparent corollary of this (parallel to the corollary mentioned earlier) is that a very slight action may be enough to have extraordinary results, if done at the right time. This is "contemplating the difficult with the easy, working on the great with the small" (chapter 63). In particular, one should deal with potentially big problems before they become big (chapter 64); the growth of the sapling is easy to affect, but not that of a mature tree. Both of these points seem undeniable, if limited, truisms; the challenge is knowing when and how to apply

(3) Probably the most common interpretation of wei-wu-wei is action that is natural. Creel quotes several examples:

The natural is sufficient. If one strives, he fails.  
Wang Pi [\[12\]](#)

(The Taoist saint) chooses this attitude in the conviction that only by so doing the 'natural' development of things will favour him.  
Duyvendak [\[13\]](#)

According to the theory of "having-no-activity", a man should restrict his activities to what is necessary and what is natural. "Necessary means necessary to the achievement of a certain purpose, and never over-doing. "Natural" means following one's Te with no arbitrary effort.  
Fung Yu-lan [\[14\]](#)

The problem with such explanations is that they do not explain very much. As Creel asks, how can we distinguish natural from unnatural action? The term is so pliable that it ends up meaning whatever one wants it to mean -- as all those who read the ingredients in "natural food" products know. Fung's use of "arbitrary" just pushes the question one step back -- how do we distinguish arbitrary from not arbitrary? And is not the passing of such dualistic judgments condemned in Taoist literature? [\[15\]](#) Wang Pi equates the natural with not striving, and others with not making willful effort, [\[16\]](#) but this, too, begs the question unless some criterion is offered for distinguishing willful from nonwillful action; otherwise we are left, like Fung, lying down. One suggested criterion is spontaneity, [\[17\]](#) but at best that can be only a necessary and not a sufficient condition: The anger I spontaneously feel when someone steps on my toe, or runs off with my wife, is not necessarily a case of wu-wei.

None of the preceding is a refutation of the view that wei-wu-wei is natural, nonwillful action, and so forth. The problem is rather that such descriptions do not in themselves go far enough; but allied with the proper criterion they may be valuable. In fact, the concept of nondual action that I shall offer can be seen as such a criterion. The root irruption of the natural order of things is

man's self-consciousness, and the return to Tao is conversely a realization of the ground of one's being -- including one's own consciousness. If consciousness of self is the ultimate source of unnatural action, then natural action must be that in which there is no such self-consciousness -- in which there is no awareness of the agent as being distinct from "his" act.

(4) The main problem with understanding wei-wu-wei is that it is a genuine paradox: the union of two contradictory concepts -- action ("...nothing remains undone") and nonaction ("nothing is done..."). The resolution of this paradox must somehow combine both concepts, but how this can be anything other than a contradiction in terms is difficult to understand. So it is not surprising that some scholars have concluded that it is an unresolvable contradiction. Creel, for example, decided that this greatest Taoist paradox was probably unintentional, due to the juxtaposition of two different aspects in early Taoism: an original "contemplative aspect" and a subsequent "purposive aspect." The first denotes "an attitude of genuine non-action, motivated by a lack of desire to participate in the struggle of human affairs," while the second is "a technique by means of which one who practices it may gain enhanced control over human affairs." [18] The former is merely passive (hence "nonaction"), the latter is an attempt to act in and reform the world ("action"), and, as Creel emphasizes, these are not only different but "logically and essentially they are incompatible." [19] Creel admits that this interpretation is not to be found within the Taoist texts themselves, and recognizes that this puts him in the awkward position of claiming that the Chuang-tzu (more contemplative) is earlier than the compilation of the Lao-tzu (more purposive). [20] What is worse, he must acknowledge that "we find 'contemplative' Taoism and 'purposive' Taoism lying cheek by jowl, and sometimes scrambled in a grand mixture, in the Lao Tzu and the Chuang Tzu," but he tries to justify this by saying that men are seldom wholly governed by logic. [21] I think that the problem is rather that, because Creel here is wholly governed by logic, he misses the fact that the paradox is resolved by a particular experience -- the realization of Tao -- which cannot be understood so logically. As with the Vedāntic realization of Brahman and the Buddhist attainment of nirvāṇa, this experience is nondual in the sense that there is no differentiation between subject and object, between self and world. The implication of this for action is that there is no longer any bifurcation between an agent, the self that is believed to do the action, and the objective action that is done. As usually understood, "action" requires an agent that is active; "nonaction" implies a subject that is passive, which does nothing and/or yields. The "action of non-action" occurs when there is no "I" to be either active or passive, which is an experience that can be expressed only paradoxically. The simpler interpretations of wu-wei as noninterference and yielding view not-acting as a kind of action; nondual action reverses this and sees nonaction -- that which does not change -- in the action.

That wei-wu-wei means nondual action is suggested in the Chuang-tzu, although not so much by the context of its references to wu-wei as by its description of another, very similar, paradox. In contrast to the twelve instances of wu-wei in the Lao-tzu, there are some fifty-six occurrences in the Chuang-tzu but only three of these occur in the seven "inner chapters." [22] It is significant that two of these clearly describe more than noninterference or yielding:

Now you have a large tree and are anxious about its uselessness. Why do you not plant it in the domain of non-existence, in a wide and barren wild? By its side you may wander in nonaction (wu-wei); under it you may sleep in happiness. [23]

Tao has reality and evidence, but no action (wu-wei) or form. [24]

Unconsciously they stroll beyond the dirty world and wander in the realm of nonaction (wu-wei). [25]

But more important is the paradox we find in chapter six, where Nu Chu teaches the Tao to Pu Liang I:

... Having disregarded his own existence, he (Pu Liang I) was enlightened ... gained vision of the One ... was able to transcend the distinction of past and present... was able to enter the realm where life and death are no more. Then, to him, the destruction of life did not mean death, nor the prolongation of life an addition to the duration of his existence. He would follow anything; he would receive anything. To him, everything was in destruction, everything was in construction. This is called tranquillity-in-disturbance. Tranquillity in disturbance means perfection. [26]

Here "tranquillity in disturbance" (or "Peace-in-Strife" [27]) cannot mean a lack of activity. Rather, there is a sense of unchanging peace in the midst of continual destruction-and-construction-that is, ceaseless transformation, which activity includes his own. This is possible only because Pu Liang I first "disregarded his own existence," hence the overcoming of the duality of self and nonself and "gaining vision of the One."

It is significant that one finds the same paradox in other Asian traditions which maintain the nonduality of subject and object. Not surprisingly, it is most common in Chinese Buddhism, where Taoist influence is to be expected. However, that wei-wu-wei is a paradoxical synthesis of nonaction in action is more clearly recognized in Buddhism. Seng Chao maintained in the Chao Lun that action and nonaction are not exclusive: Things in action are at the same time always in nonaction; things in nonaction are always in action. [28] This claim is expounded in the first chapter, "On the Immutability of Things," but the point is important enough to be repeated in chapter four, "Nirvana is Nameless": "Through non-action, movement is always quiescent. Through action, everything is acted upon, means that quiescence is always in motion." [29] One of the earliest Ch'an texts, the Hsin Hsin Ming of the third patriarch Seng-ts'an, states twice that the awakened mind transcends the duality of rest and nonrest, [30] echoing the argument of Nāgārjuna that both motion and rest are incomprehensible and hence unreal (śūnya). [31] Probably the best-known example, definitely not derived from Taoism, is found in a passage from the Bhagavadgītā which explicitly describes action which is yet no action:

He who in action sees inaction and action in inaction -- he is wise among men, he is a yogin, and he has accomplished all his work.

Having abandoned attachment to the fruit of works, ever content, without any kind of dependence, he does nothing though he is ever engaged in work. (IV, 18, 20) [\[32\]](#)

The Sanskrit word for action, *karma*, suggests an interpretation of these verses which sees them as recommending action that does not bring karmic results. In answer to the Buddhist and Yogic emphasis on withdrawal from the world of social obligation, the Gītā claims that action too may lead to Krishna because no *karma* accrues if an act is performed "without attachment to the fruit of action." This does not disagree with a nondual interpretation of these verses, but supplements it. Lao Tzu, Seng Chao, and the Gītā may be seen to be describing different aspects of the same experience of nondual action. The difference between the first two is in which half of the dualism of agent <--> action is eliminated. The Taoist wei-wu-wei is the denial of an objective action, that I perform some action. The Buddhist concept of anatta and the "no mind" of Ch'an emphasize the denial of an agent, that I perform some action. But to deny a subjective agent or to deny an objective action amounts to the same thing, since each half of the polarity is dependent upon the other. The importance of the Gītā passage is that it implies how this bifurcation occurs. The sense of dualism arises because action is done with reference to the fruit of action; that is, because an act is performed with some goal or aim in mind: I do an action in order to gain some particular result. The Gītā may be understood either more narrowly as proscribing selfish action in favor of work "for the maintenance of the world," or more broadly as showing the problem with all intentional action. The Buddhist concept of karman, which emphasizes intention, is another expression of the broader view: Although "good actions" may lead to pleasurable rebirth in the deva realm, that is still saṃsāra. One must act in such a way as to escape both good and bad karmic consequences. Both good and bad karmic acts originate from dualism: In the former case, the self manipulates the world for its own advantage; in the latter case, the self consciously works for the benefit of something or someone else. The only way to transcend the dualism of self and other is to act without intention -- that is, without attachment to a projected goal to be obtained from the action -- in which case the agent is the act. It is attachment to and identification with thought (that is, the projected goal) which gives rise to a sense of duality between the mind that intends and the body that is used to attain the intended result.

But how does the nonduality of agent and act resolve the paradox of "the action of nonaction"? One may accept the negation of a subject, in which case the action cannot be something "objective," yet there is still an action. The answer is that, when one completely becomes an action, one loses the sense that it is an action.

... For an action of the whole being does away with all partial actions and thus also with all sensations of action (which depend entirely on the limited nature of actions) -- and hence it comes to resemble passivity.

This is the activity of the human being who has become whole: it has been called not-

doing, for nothing particular, nothing partial is at work in man and thus nothing of him intrudes into the world. (Buber) [\[33\]](#)

As long as there is the sense of an agent distinct from the action, the act can be only "partial" and there is the sensation of action due to the relation between them. Only in nondual action can there be no sense of an ego-consciousness outside the action, for otherwise there is a perspective from which an act is observed to occur (or not occur). When one is the action, no residue of self-consciousness remains to observe that action objectively. The sense of wu-wei is that of a quiet center which does not change although activity constantly occurs, as in Chuang Tzu's "Tranquillity-in-Disturbance."

Such an action can be experienced as nondual only if it is complete and whole in itself. It must not be related to anything else, for such relating is an act of thought, which shows that there is thinking as well as acting and the action is only "partial." If the nondual act is complete in itself and does not refer to something else, it turns out to be meaningless: that is, it simply is what it is (tathatā). This pinpoints the problem with intention, since it is the reference to some goal to be derived from the act that gives the act meaning. In contrast, the dānapāramitā of Mahāyāna is generosity in which the giver, the gift, and the recipient are all realized to be empty (śūnya): "Here a Bodhisattva gives a gift, and he does not apprehend a self, a recipient, a gift; also no reward of his giving." [\[34\]](#) Such "giving Of no-giving" (as it might be termed) can be done "without leaning on something" because there is no intention tied to it. The best giving, like the best action generally, is "free from traces," in which case there is not even the sense that it is a gift.

Nondual action seems effortless because there is not the duality of one part of oneself pushing another part--in the case of physical activity, of an "I" which needs to exert itself in order to get the muscles to move. Rather, "I" am the muscles. This gives insight into a number of Zen koans such as the following:

Master Shogen said, "Why is it that a man of great strength cannot lift up his legs?"

And he also said, "We do not use the tongue to speak." (Or: "It is not the tongue that we speak With.") [\[35\]](#)

This amounts to a denial of the mind-body dualism. However, this is not materialism or behaviorism. Rather than negating the psyche, the implication is that the body itself is wholly psychic. The Prajñāpāramitā Heart Sūtra states that one who has realized the emptiness of all things acts freely because he is "without hindrance in the mind." Clearly this is one way in which mental events interfere with nondual action, by sometimes keeping one's physical actions from occurring naturally and spontaneously according to the situation. The nondual "psychic body," which knows how to react perfectly well by itself, suffers a kind of paralysis due to

psychological "hindrances." Asian martial arts usually include some meditation in their training in order to avoid this, so students can react spontaneously to attack without being paralyzed by fear and without needing to deliberate first.

However, the problem with dualistic action is not just "hindrance in the mind" but intention in general:

Cultivation is of no use for the attainment of Tao. The only thing that one can do is to be free from defilement. When one's mind is stained with thoughts of life and death, or deliberate action, that is defilement. The grasping of the Truth is the function of everyday-mindedness. Everyday-mindedness is free from intentional action, free from concepts of right and wrong, taking and giving, the finite and the infinite... All our daily activities -- walking, standing, sitting, lying down -- all response to situations, our dealing with circumstances as they arise: all this is Tao.

(Ma-tsu) [\[36\]](#)

Ordinary mind is the Tao [\[37\]](#) because, when they are free from intentional action, daily activities are realized to be nondual. This gives insight into how the "mindfulness of body" described in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sūtra, and Theravāda vipassana practice in general, might function: In the slow "walking meditation" of vipassana, for example, one "lets go" of all intentions by concentrating on the act of walking itself. This also explains why those Zen koans which ask "Why...?" never receive a straight answer. "Unmon said, 'The world is vast and wide like this. Why do we put on our seven-panel robe at the sound of the bell?'" [\[38\]](#) From a contemporary Zen master's commentary on this case:

... Some of you are familiar with the last line of the mealtime sutra, "We and this food and our eating are equally empty." If you can acknowledge this fact, you will realize that when you put on your robe, there is no reason or "why" in it... There is no reason for the "why" in anything! When we stand up, there is no reason "why". We just stand up! When we eat, we just eat without any reason "why". When we put on the kesa (seven-panel robe), we just put it on. Our life is a continuous just... just... just. [\[39\]](#)

This passage clarifies what "intentionless activity" means. From the usual perspective, it seems impossible to avoid intentions. We eat to satisfy our hunger, for example, and even taking a walk can be seen to have a purpose such as to relax. But the claim just presented is that even now actions of ours like dressing and eating are not purposive. "Intentionless activity" does not mean merely random and spontaneous action, but involves realizing the distinction between thought (the intention) and the action. The thought (for example, "time to eat") is whole and complete in itself; the act (eating) is also whole and complete in itself. It is when the two are not experienced wholly and discretely but only in relation to each other, the first as if "superimposed" upon the

second, that action seems intentional and therefore dualistic, and there is the sense of an agent/mind that uses the act/body for the sake of...

In answer to such stock questions as "Why did Bodhidharma come from the West?" Zen masters such as Ma-tsu, Huang Po, and Lin-chi were apt to strike the student or shout in his ear. If the Tao is nonintentional, everyday-mind, such responses were not evasive. They were answers to the question, demonstrations of "why" -- examples of nondual action, each of which is complete in itself.

One day the world-honoured one (Sakyamuni Buddha) ascended his seat. Manjusri struck the gavel and said, "Clearly behold the Dharma of the King of the Dharma; the Dharma of the King of the Dharma is 'just this.'" [\[40\]](#)

## II

Recent Western work in the philosophy of mind has developed the view that the continuity of consciousness is maintained not by memory, as the earlier empiricists believed, but by the stream of intentional action. Stuart Hampshire, for example, maintains this in *Thought and Action*:

British empiricists since Hume have tried, to their own dissatisfaction, to represent the continuity of a person's consciousness as some binding thread of memory running through the separate data of consciousness. But within the trajectory of an action, with its guiding intention, there is already a continuity through change, and, if it is true that a conscious person is necessarily engaged upon some action, however trivial, this known continuity is interrupted only by sleep and by other forms of unconsciousness... I do distinguish myself, as the inner core that is the source of directed effort, from all my passing states, and it is this sense of myself as the source of meaningful action that gives me the sense of my continuity from the present into the future. [\[41\]](#)

... a conscious mind is always and necessarily envisaging possibilities of action, of finding means towards ends, as a body is always and necessarily occupying a certain position. To be a conscious human being, and therefore a thinking being, is to have intentions and plans, to be trying to bring about a certain effect. We are therefore always actively following what is happening now as leading into what is to happen next. Because intentional action is ineliminable from our notion of experience, so also is temporal order. [\[42\]](#)

This seems to contradict what has been maintained in the first part of this article, but it need not. If we take the "conscious mind" of the second passage to mean "consciousness (or awareness) of self," then this view about the relation between "the sense of myself" and intentional action is consistent with what was claimed earlier. The only significant difference is

that, because Hampshire believes intentional action to be "ineliminable from our notion of experience," he does not envision the possibility of nondual action as a result of eliminating "the source of directed effort." If intentional action were eliminable, then the implication of Hampshire's position is that this would also eliminate the sense of self. Hampshire is wrong when he claims that "a conscious mind is always and necessarily envisaging possibilities of action, " for there is the counter-example of meditation -- an example very much to the point, since it is generally agreed to be a very important part, and perhaps the most important part, of the path for those who wish to experience nonduality. It maybe objected that in meditation, too, one has intentions and makes efforts to concentrate on something, but this is not the case in the deeper stages of meditation, for in samādhi the sense of self evaporates, and precisely because all effort and intention cease. Hampshire's account seems valid as an explanation of the usual dualistic way of understanding experience, but it does not amount to a critique of nonduality. On the contrary, if one accepts (as Hampshire certainly would not) a distinction between sense-of-self and nondual consciousness, and takes his view as referring to the former, then his account would agree with the first part of this article in explaining the difference between dualistic intentionality. Hampshire's position is even implied by this account of nondual action, for his is a description of why experience seems to be dualistic.

There is still a serious problem with Hampshire's account. His explanation of the continuity of consciousness as due to intentionality takes for granted what we usually cannot help but take for granted, some sort of causal relationship between intentions and actions. However, Hume pointed out, as a corollary to his critique of the causal relation, that no one can hope to understand how volition produces motion in our limbs: "That their motion follows the command of the will is a matter of common experience, like other natural events: but the power or energy by which this is effected, like that in other natural events, is unknown and inconceivable." [\[43\]](#) In other words, the relationship between intention and action, which normally we readily accept, is really incomprehensible. The implication of this is that intentionality -- the sense of myself as the source of meaningful action, to use Hampshire's words -- cannot provide my continuity through change, for that continuity between guiding intention and an action is itself philosophically inexplicable. One might be inclined to say that it is only consciousness which can bridge the gap; however, one then has not explained the continuity of consciousness but merely postulated it ad hoc to resolve the difficulty.

This is a problem for those who, like Hampshire, presuppose a dualistic account of experience and therefore must attribute some type of reality to "the sense of myself" -- thus reifying consciousness into a self, in effect. But having accepted Hume's critique, one cannot thereafter bring the self back in through the backdoor, as it were, as "continuity of consciousness." This inexplicable relation between intention and action is not a problem for the nondualist, who accepts that the consciousness of self is actually illusory and agrees that a fictive self has been postulated in order to bridge the "gap." The nondualist can accept this "gap" between thoughts

and action -- in fact he can deny any causal link -- and this is why all actions are always nondual, even when not realized as such.

Hampshire might try to bridge that gap between thought and action by agreeing on the one hand that the relation is incomprehensible yet asserting on the other that, as we experience in daily life, it is undeniable; as Hume said, "That their motion follows the command of the will is a matter of common experience..." But that this is undeniable is by no means true, as the history of the mind-body problem indicates. Nietzsche, for example, denies that intention is the cause of an event, and reverses Hume by extrapolating this denial of volition into a denial of the causal relation generally:

Critique of the concept "cause"... We have absolutely no experience of a cause; psychologically considered, we derive the entire concept from the subjective conviction that we are causes, namely, that the arm moves. But that is an error. We separate ourselves, the doers, from the deed, and we make use of this pattern everywhere -- we seek a doer for every event. What is it we have done? We have misunderstood the feeling of strength, tension, resistance, a muscular feeling that is already the beginning of the act, as the cause, or we have taken the will to do this or that for a cause because the action follows upon it-- ...

In summa: an event is neither effected nor does it effect. Cause is a capacity to produce effects that has been super-added to the events-- [\[44\]](#)

... Only because we have introduced subjects, "doers", into things does it appear that all events are the consequences of compulsion exerted upon subjects -- exerted by whom? again by a "doer". Cause and effect -- a dangerous concept as long as one thinks of something that causes and something upon which an effect is produced.

... When one has grasped that the "subject" is not something that creates effects, but only a fiction, much follows.

It is only after the model of the subject that we have invented the reality of things and projected them into the medley of sensations. If we no longer believe in the effective subject, then belief also disappears in effective things, in reciprocation, cause and effect between those phenomena that we call things... [\[45\]](#)

For Nietzsche, intention and the will in general are epiphenomena not amounting to the cause of an action. This denial of volition (by no means uncommon [\[46\]](#)) would seem to imply determinism, but the concept of nondual action suggests an alternative that escapes the usual dilemma of freedom or determinism. The classical statement of that problem is dualistic in presupposing a conscious subject whose actions either are completely determined by a causal

chain (the strongest causal influence reaps effect) or are free from a causal chain (or, rather, free from complete determination, since totally uncaused, random choice does not seem to provide freedom in any meaningful sense). Both alternatives assume the existence of a conscious self distinct from its actions and existent outside the causal chain -- although its actions may be totally determined by external causes. But if, as the nondualist maintains, there is no self, this does not imply complete determinism, for if there is no subject then there are also no "objective" causal factors. The deterministic view implies a self, helpless before causal influences which struggle among themselves to see which is strongest, rather like medieval knights competing to see who will win the hapless lady; but if there is no hapless consciousness here, the situation must be understood differently. If "liberty or freedom signifies properly the absence of opposition" (Hobbes [\[47\]](#)) then non-duality would seem rather to imply limitless freedom, since there is no "other" to be opposed. Elsewhere I have argued that the nondualist denial of self (as in Buddhism) is equivalent to asserting that there is only the Self (as in Vedānta). [\[48\]](#) We would normally infer that the former implies complete determinism, the latter absolute freedom. However, if the universe is a whole (Brahman, Tao, Vijñaptimātra, and so forth) and if, as Hua Yen Buddhism develops in its image of Indra's Net, each particular is not isolated but contains and manifests that whole, then whenever "I" act it is not "I" but the whole universe that "does" the action or rather is the action. If we accept that the universe is self-caused, then it acts freely whenever anything is done. Thus, from the nondualist perspective, complete determinism turns out to be equivalent to absolute freedom. [\[49\]](#)

## Notes

- [1.](#) From "Burnt Norton," in T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p. 191.
- [2.](#) This and the following passages from the Lao-tzu are from the translation by Chang Chung-yuan, in *Tao: A New Way of Thinking* (Harper and Row, 1975), with modifications by me; hereafter cited as Chang, Tao.
- [3.](#) Arthur Waley, *The Way and Its Power* (London: Alien and Unwin, 1968); hereafter cited as Waley, *The Way*. The definition given in Waley's translation of the Lun-yu is also not very illuminating: "wu-wei, the phrase applied by Taoists to the immobility of self-hypnosis" (*The Analects of Confucius* (London, 1936), p. 193).
- [4.](#) Roger T. Ames, "Wu-wei in 'The Art of Rulership' Chapter of Huai Nan Tzu," *Philosophy East and West* 31, no. 2 (April 1981): 196; hereafter cited as Ames, "Wu-wei."
- [5.](#) See *ibid.*, pp. 196-198, and Herlee G. Creel, *What Is Taoism?* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1970), pp. 44-47; hereafter cited as Creel, *Taoism*.

- [6.](#) I have borrowed Ames' translation, "Wu-wei," p. 194.
- [7.](#) Compare Ames, "Wu-wei," pp. 194, 197.
- [8.](#) Quoted in Creel, Taoism, p. 54.
- [9.](#) Fung Yu-lan, A Short History of Chinese Philosophy, p. 225, quoted by Creel, in Taoism, p. 54.
- [10.](#) Waley's translation, in The Way.
- [11.](#) For example, see Wing-tsit Chan's translation in The Way of Lao Tzu (Bobbs-Merrill, 1963, reprinted in A Source Book of Chinese Philosophy (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1963), pp. 139-176, chapters 36, 40, 52, 76, and 78.
- [12.](#) Creel, Taoism, quoting Lao-Tzu, shang. 2a (chap. 2).
- [13.](#) Ibid., quoting Duyvendak's Tao Te Ching, 10-11.
- [14.](#) Ibid., quoting Fung's A Short History of Chinese Philosophy, pp. 100-101.
- [15.](#) Ibid., p. 53.
- [16.](#) "The important phrase, wu-wei, thus means "not-having willful action" (Sung-peng Hsu, "Lao Tzu's Conception of Evil," Philosophy East and West 26, no. 3 (July 1976): 303).
- [17.](#) Ibid., p. 304: "it is important to note that 'spontaneity' is really the positive name for the negative expression of wu-wei."
- [18.](#) Creel, Taoism, p. 74. Creel first argued for this view in "On Two Aspects in Early Taoism" (1954) and repeated his position in "On the Origin of Wu-wei" (1965). Both are reprinted in What Is Taoism?
- [19.](#) Ibid., p. 45.
- [20.](#) Ibid., p. 46.
- [21.](#) Ibid., p. 45.
- [22.](#) Ibid., p. 54.

- [23.](#) Fung Yu-lan, trans., *Chuang Tzu*, with commentary by Kuo Hsiang (New York: Gordon Press, 1970), p. 40.
- [24.](#) *Ibid.*, p. 117.
- [25.](#) *Ibid.*, p. 125.
- [26.](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 119-120, with emphasis by me.
- [27.](#) Burton Watson, trans., *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), p. 83.
- [28.](#) See Chang Chung-yuan, *Creativity and Taoism* (New York: Julian Press, 1963), p.10.
- [29.](#) Chao Lun IV, 6:14b, quoted in Chang's *Tao*, p. 122.
- [30.](#) "When rest and no rest cease to be, then even oneness disappears" (From the translation in Philip Kapleau, *Zen: Dawn in the West* (New York: Anchor, 1980), see pp. 187-188).
- [31.](#) See the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, chap. 2.
- [32.](#) Radhakrishnan's translation, in Radhakrishnan and Moore, eds., *Source Book in Indian Philosophy* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 117.
- [33.](#) Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Waiter Kaufmann, 2d ed. (Edinburgh: T. T. Clark, 1970), p. 125. This page, which describes the I-Thou relationship as "at once... passive and active," shows the ambivalence of Buber's approach. In order to maintain that "I-Thou" is a relationship, he must

keep the relata distinct from each other and deny nonduality; but this passage, like many others, suggests nonduality.

- [34.](#) Edward Conze, trans. and ed., *Selected Sayings from the Perfection of Wisdom* (Boulder, Colorado: Prajna Press, 1978), p. 67.

[35.](#) Mumonkan, case 20.

[36.](#) Quoted in Chang Chung-yuan, *Original Teachings of Ch'an Buddhism* (New York: Vintage, 1971), p. 130.

[37.](#) Mumonkan, case 19.

[38.](#) Koun Yamada, *Gateless Gate* (Los Angeles, California: Center Publications, 1979), p. 86.

[39.](#) *Ibid.*, p. 88.

[40.](#) Cast 92 of *The Blue Cliff Record*, trans. Thomas Cleary and J. C. Cleary (Boulder, Colorado: Shambhala, 1977), p. 571. The experience of some Christian mystics led them to the same conclusion:

When [Jakob] Boehme is speaking of God's life as it is in himself he refers to it as "play"... Adam ought to have been content to play with nature in Paradise [Mysterium Magnum 16:10]. Adam fell when this play became serious business, that is when nature was made an end instead of a means. (Howard H. Brinton, *The Mystic Will* (New York: Macmillan, 1930), p. 218)

Meister Eckhart:

Do all you do, acting from the core of your soul, without a single "Why"... Thus, if you ask a genuine person, that is, one who acts from his heart: "Why are you doing that?" -- he will reply in the only possible way: "I do it because I do It!" [The just man] wants nothing, seeks nothing, and has no reason for doing anything. As God, having no motives, acts without them, so the just man acts without motives. As life lives on for its own sake, needing no reason for being, so the just man has no reason for doing what he does. (R. B. Blakney, trans., *Meister Eckhart* (New York: Harper and Row, 1941), pp. 127, 241)

[41.](#) Stuart Hampshire, *Thought and Action* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1960), p. 126.

[42.](#) *Ibid.*, p. 119.

[43.](#) David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Section 7, Part 1.

[44.](#) F. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Waiter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), no. 551, pp. 295-296. Nietzsche's emphasis.

[45.](#) *Ibid.*, no. 552, pp. 297-298.

[46.](#) "The greatest difficulty faced by every discussion of the Will is the simple fact that there is no other capacity of mind whose very existence has been so consistently doubted and refuted by so eminent a series of philosophers" (Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), Vol. 2, p. 4).

[47.](#) *Leviathan* II, 21.

[48.](#) "Enlightenment in Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta: Are Nirvana and Moksha the Same? " *International Philosophical Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (March 1982).

[49.](#) This has important implications for such completely deterministic systems as Spinoza's.

[a.](#) 弱.