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Spontaneous thought and early Chinese ideas of ‘non-action’ and ‘emotion’

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ABSTRACT

The early Chinese idea of *non-action* refers not to spontaneity, as has been argued, but to a relation between agency and spontaneity. Non-action needs to be seen in connection with the idea of *emotion*, which refers to the spontaneity involved. The debates surrounding non-action and emotion can be profitably compared to discussions of spontaneous thought in modern cognitive science. Early Chinese approaches supplement modern ideas by focusing on feelings rather than thought and by being more relational and ecological, seeing agency and spontaneity as parallel processes in constant interaction rather than mutually exclusive categories. Furthermore, emotions represent an inner counterpart to the external changes in our physical and social environment, pointing to a close connection between the nature within us and outside us. On a larger scale, therefore, non-action denotes a relation between deliberate action and the given internal and external situation within which such action takes place.

KEYWORDS

Non-action; emotion;
agency; spontaneity;
spontaneous thought;
ecology of mind

When we are awake, thoughts, feelings, and images often pass through the mind of their own accord. This phenomenon, referred to as spontaneous thought, has recently been eagerly debated within neuroscience, cognitive psychology, and philosophy of mind (Fox & Christoff, 2018). Are these mental activities just cognitive noise, or do they have positive functions for memory, planning, creativity, empathy, self-insight, and consciousness? How is such non-deliberate activity related to our sense of self, which is often seen as the abode of will and agency?

Though seldom acknowledged by cognitive scientists, related issues have been discussed for more than two millennia within contemplative traditions across the Eurasian continent. Their views of spontaneous thought have ranged from demonic interference to divine grace, or just an aspect of human nature. (Eifring, 2015, 2018)

In early China, such debates began to emerge in the fourth and third centuries BCE. The terminology varies, but for simplicity we will refer to them as discussions of ‘non-action’ and ‘emotion,’ which are rough translations of the Chinese terms *wú-wéi* 無為 and *qíng* 情. In this context, non-action implies a way of relating to situations and circumstances with naturalness rather than attempts to conquer and control (Graham, 1989; Slingerland, 2003, 2014), while emotion refers to feelings, desires and impulses

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that are inborn, spontaneous and spring from human nature (Bruya, 2001; Eifring, 2004; Graham, 1990; Hansen, 1995; Middendorf, 2008). These early debates took place within traditions of moral or contemplative self-cultivation in what we now call Confucianism and Daoism. The debates continued to develop in the course of Chinese history as well as in other East Asian contexts, and both *wú-wéi* and *qíng* acquired new semantic nuances when they were used as translations of various Buddhist concepts (see Digital Dictionary of Buddhism: <http://www.buddhism-dict.net/cgi-bin/xpr-ddb.pl?q=無爲> and <http://www.buddhism-dict.net/cgi-bin/xpr-ddb.pl?q=情>).

In this article, we shall focus on the formative phase of these debates in the late Warring States period, i.e. the last century or so before the unification of China in 221 BCE. We shall look into some as yet unresolved issues regarding the early Chinese debates and discuss their relevance for the modern scientific and philosophical interest in spontaneous thought.

The issues

There are several issues involved in this set of concepts, some of them only involving the early Chinese pair and their interpretations, others in addition having more direct implications for the modern debates.

First, since both non-action and emotion are at least partly about how we relate to spontaneous impulses, we shall argue that they should be seen in connection with each other as well as with the modern concept of spontaneous thought. These connections have not been fully analyzed in the past. Doing this may help to clarify the implications of the concepts and explain why most or all early Chinese traditions have seen non-action as an ideal, while the attitude toward emotion has been much more ambivalent. Since modern debates on spontaneous thought focus on cognition, the early Chinese focus on emotion may bring a counterweight to a Western over-emphasis on pure thought rather than feeling.

Moreover, modern sinologists have often seen non-action as involving a paradox ('trying not to try,' being deliberately spontaneous), and at least one scholar, Edward Slingerland (2003, 2014) has seen this paradox as a central driving force behind the development of early Chinese thought. This article will instead argue that the discussions surrounding non-action involve no real paradox, but rather argue for bringing agency and spontaneity into a particular kind of relation. The weighting of agency vs. spontaneity varies from one thinker to another, but also within one and the same thinker according to different circumstances. In all cases, the ideal is not a unilateral emphasis on spontaneity, as is often implied, but a harmonious relation between agency and spontaneity. In this context, the term agency is associated with the subject's choice, volition, intentionality, and deliberateness, while spontaneity describes activity that emerges and proceeds of its own accord, without the subject's deliberate intention, initiative, or interference.

This relational view plays into the modern scientific and philosophical discussion of spontaneous thought. While many scientists treat spontaneous thought as a neatly delineated phenomenon, taking up a specific amount of time (e.g. 46.9%, Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010) in our waking life, others have pointed to the close interaction between spontaneous and agentic thought, the two often occurring

simultaneously and influencing one another (Andrews-Hanna, Irving, Fox, Spreng, & Christoff, 2018). This latter view fits more easily with a relational view of spontaneous thought and points toward an ecology of mind that sees agency and spontaneity not as discrete entities, but as constantly interacting processes with fuzzy and gradient borderlines.

This notion of an ecology of mind also fits well with the fact that non-action is about our relation to nature as it appears both within us (including emotion) and outside us. This relation between internal and external nature has very rarely been a focus in the modern debate on spontaneous thought (though see Bratman, Hamilton, Hahn, Daily, & Gross, 2015). Spontaneous thought is a natural phenomenon in the sense that it is engendered in ways that largely lie beyond our control and agency. As with the nature outside us, however, it is malleable and subject to influence from our social environment and our personal attitudes and actions. We can choose to give it free rein, or restrain, modify or transform it, with wide-reaching consequences for our sense of meaning and identity.

Thus, early Chinese discussions of non-action alert us to the fact that spontaneous thought is more tightly integrated within larger webs of internal and external influences than usually acknowledged, including its continuous two-way interaction with agentive thought and its responsiveness to the social and natural environment.

Cognitive science and contemplative traditions

Spontaneous thought (including emotions and images) became a hot topic within cognitive science only around the turn of the 21st century, when the brain's 'default mode network' was discovered by Shulman et al. (1997) and Raichle et al. (2001) and, subsequently, linked to 'mind wandering' by Mason et al. (2007). The default mode network is typically activated when the mind wanders away from on-going tasks (Fox, Spreng, Ellamil, Andrews-Hanna, & Christoff, 2015) or spontaneously engages in random thinking during rest (Andrews-Hanna, Reidler, Huang, Randy, & Buckner, 2010), i.e. when the networks that support external attention are inactive (Fox et al., 2015; Mazoyer et al., 2001).

These discoveries sparked an enormous interest in the phenomenon. That interest has partly been linked to self-cultivation practices, in particular mindfulness meditation (Fox et al., 2014), which is often assumed to reduce mind wandering and default mode network activity, but also nondirective meditation (Eifring, 2019; Travis et al., 2010; Travis & Shear, 2010; Xu et al., 2014), which has been shown to intensify some types of healthy mind wandering and default mode network activity.

There has also been a development of the idea of what spontaneous thought is. The typical image has been of distraction: we focus on doing something, but the mind wanders away in another direction and we forget to do what we were trying to. In the more serious cases, our ability to focus is negatively influenced, and if the thoughts that bring us away from our focus are negative and repetitive, we easily end up with brooding and rumination, sometimes leading to serious depression (Hoffmann, Banzha, Kanske, Bermppohl, & Singer, 2016; Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010).

Gradually, a much more nuanced image of spontaneous thought has begun to emerge. Spontaneous thought is not always distractive and destructive, but often helps us process the past and anticipate the future, understand ourselves and empathize with others, as well as think and act creatively (Andrews-Hanna, 2012; McMillan, Kaufman, & Singer, 2013;

Smallwood & Andrews-Hanna, 2013). Furthermore, some researchers have shown how spontaneous thought occurs simultaneously with agentive thought and interacts with it, influencing and being influenced by it (Andrews-Hanna et al., 2018).

The strength of the research on the default mode network lies in its use of neuroimaging techniques to provide objective and culture-independent information on *brain* activity. However, the evidence these technologies provide concerning actual *mental* activity is indirect and ultimately relies on subjective self-reports. Even the basic assumption that spontaneous thought is linked to default mode network activation depends on the combination of neuroimaging and self-reports. Self-reports tend to be influenced by personal expectations, cultural prejudice, and a mind-set that is shaped by the values and discourses of late modernity.

Thus, modern-day self-reports may be fruitfully supplemented by historical sources that provide alternative viewpoints from which to conceptualize and think about spontaneous thought, with mind-sets that have not been shaped by modernity. While these sources are no more objective than the self-reports engendered in modern laboratories, embroiled as they often are in prescriptive language, religious doctrine, and abstract philosophical speculation, they describe in surprising detail the coming and going of thoughts that are often seen as a challenge, though sometimes also as a help, to the soteriological goals of contemplatives in various pre-modern cultures.

The comparison between traditional and contemporary perspectives on spontaneous thought is largely absent from the scholarly literature. Apart from some attempts at seeing individual traditions in light of contemporary neuroscience (Thompson, 2015; Tsakiridis, 2010), the study of spontaneous thought is typically considered to have started with the founding father of modern psychology, William James, and his notion of 'stream of consciousness' in the 1890s. The link to traditional ideas is mostly not mentioned, and premodern historical material usually receives short shrift.

The accounts of spontaneous thought in contemplative traditions approach similar issues, but from quite different and potentially supplementary angles. They are, of course, by no means exact parallels to the modern discourse and should also not be understood as imperfect versions of it. On the contrary, the conceptual schemes within which these traditions understand spontaneous thought are interesting precisely because they differ from modern ways of thinking. For instance, both the fourth-century Christian contemplative Evagrius Ponticus and the sixth-century Buddhist monk Tiāntāi Zhiyī 天台智顓 tend to see uninvited thoughts during prayer or meditation as representing demons, thus highlighting the human tendency to externalize spontaneous thought (Casiday, 2006; Gundersen, 2017). In general, Chinese Buddhism uses one and the same term, *niàn* 念, to refer to both mindfulness, which is seen as an ideal, and spontaneous thoughts, which are often seen as disturbances, while some contemplatives use this ambiguity to argue for accepting the spontaneous coming and going of thoughts. The philosophical and practice-oriented tradition associated with the Yoga Sūtra focuses on stilling the mind in order to reach a realm beyond everyday consciousness, but it also explores in fascinating detail the various states of mind that occur more or less spontaneously along the way.

It is far from obvious that modern debates on spontaneous thought have any direct parallels in early China. Neither non-action nor emotion corresponds with any degree of accuracy to the modern terms spontaneous thought and mind wandering. However, there

are still sufficiently many overlaps for a comparison to be of interest. As already suggested, the early Chinese discourses on non-action and emotion have in common with the modern discourse on spontaneous thought and mind wandering the fact that they deal with how man relates to spontaneity—to the given, natural basis that is part of his mind.

The sources

The sources we are going to explore are all texts that may be placed in the last hundred years or so of the Warring States period. They include texts from what we now call the Confucian tradition and the Daoist tradition. In the Confucian tradition, the material includes the transmitted texts purportedly representing the thoughts of Mencius 孟子 (372–289 BCE) and Xúnzǐ 荀子 (d. 238 BCE), and in addition the *Human Nature Comes from Destiny* 性自命出, an anonymous text discovered in the 1990s in a tomb that was closed around 300 BCE. In the Daoist tradition, the material includes the ‘Inner Chapters’ 內篇 of the *Zhuāngzǐ* 莊子 (traditionally attributed to Zhuāngzǐ 莊子, 370–287 BCE, though see Klein, 2011, for an alternative view) and the anonymous text called *Inward Training* 內業, which survived as one of the 76 (originally 86) predominantly Legalist chapters of the collection called *Guānzǐ* 管子. In the following, my translations are in large part based on the translations in Bloom (2009), Hutton (2014), Cook (2012), Graham (1989), and Roth (1999), though I have diverged from the latter whenever I disagree with them or find that the present context requires a change of wording.

These texts are all typical of the period’s increased interest in man’s inner life and subjectivity, in this respect differing both from earlier periods (e.g. Confucius’s *Analects* 論語 and Mòzǐ 墨子) and from contemporaneous texts with a predominantly social, administrative, or political interest (e.g. parts of *Hánfēizǐ* 韓非子). To various degrees, they also represent a more systematic and less fragmented writing style, with longer stretches of argumentative prose (or, in parts of the corpus, poetry) than earlier texts, though later editorial work makes it difficult to be certain about their original form. These texts can also be argued to be based upon a more systematic and comprehensive world-view than earlier texts (Graham, 1989; Middendorf, 2008; Slingerland, 2003, 2014; Virág, 2017).

The texts referred to as Daoist are most clearly contemplative, involving a spiritual form of self-cultivation relating to transcendent elements, not least ‘the Way’ (*dào* 道), which here refers to a power at the basis of the entire cosmos. The Confucian texts are more clearly centered on human and social interests, in particular morality or ethics, and in this context the Way mostly refers to a moral or ethical way of life, sometimes even *any* method or way of life. However, the Confucian texts also contain elements that point in the direction of a contemplative and transcendent orientation, with terms that are more often associated with Daoism than Confucianism. For instance, Mencius boasts that he is good at nurturing his ‘flood-like energy’ 浩然之氣 and that ‘by preserving your mind and nurturing your nature, you serve Heaven’ 存其心，養其性，所以事天也 (*Mencius* 7a). Even the alleged anti-religious text *Xúnzǐ* espouses the ideals of ‘emptiness’ 虛, ‘unity’ 壹 and ‘stillness’ 靜, which may be seen as transcending the ‘storing’ 臧, ‘duality’ 兩, and ‘movement’ 動 of our everyday consciousness (cf. Kline & Tiwald, 2014). The most obviously secular of the Confucian texts is *Human Nature Comes from Destiny*, though even this text famously argues that ‘Human nature comes from destiny, and destiny descends from Heaven’ 性自命出，命自天降.

Non-action

I shall argue here that the idea of non-action refers to a relation between *deliberate action* and the *given situation* within which the action takes place. It refers to a mode of action that seeks to adapt itself to the flow of the given situation rather than going against it. While the striving and effort of a goal-oriented mind seeks to control the situation and arrive at a fixed result, non-action accepts and relates to the constant mutability of any given situation.

This given situation may be either external or internal, with porous borderlines between the two. In the latter case, it includes the various spontaneous impulses that occupy the mind at any given moment, in early Chinese thought typically referred to as emotions:

Whether the given situation is external or internal, it tends to be seen as representing the unfolding of the deeper movements of the transcendent reality of the Way. Thus, non-action is ultimately a relation between deliberate action and the Way:

In [Figure 1](#), the Way is only implicitly present, while in [Figure 2](#), it is explicitly so, while the phenomenal realities of the given situation are implicit.

When we focus on the internal part of the relation, non-action may be construed as a relation between human agency on the one hand and spontaneity on the other, as in [Figure 3](#):

This is where the overlap with modern debates about spontaneous thought is most obvious.

The translation of *wú-wéi* 無為 as ‘non-action’ is often argued to be misleading, since the expression does not refer to a lack of action but rather a particular way of acting or a particular frame of mind within which one acts (Nylan, 2016, pp. 98, 108n). While this is true, only ‘non-action’ or the even more concrete ‘doing nothing’ (Graham, 1989) can render the literal meaning of the expression. Furthermore, only such literal translations can render the intended paradox in expressions such as 為無為 ‘to practice non-action,’ 無為而無不為 ‘to do nothing but leave nothing undone,’ 無為為之 ‘to act without



Figure 1. Non-action involves a relation between deliberate action and given situation, the latter including both external conditions and internal emotions.



Figure 2. Non-action also involves a relation between deliberate action and the transcendental reality of the Way.



Figure 3. In the internal sphere, non-action involves a relation between agency (deliberate action) and spontaneity (emotions).

action,’ and 無爲之業 ‘the business of doing nothing.’¹ Whether looking at the Chinese term or its English translation, we must simply remember that it is *not* to be understood literally. Interestingly, a similar paradox famously appears in the *Bhagavad Gītā* (chapter 4; Johnson, 1994, p. 20):

He who sees action in non-action, non-action in action, is wise among men ... That man who depends upon nothing, who has given up attachment to the results of action, is perpetually satisfied, and even though engaged in action he does nothing whatsoever.

karmaṇy akarma yaḥ paśyed akarmaṇi ca karma yaḥ sa buddhimān manuṣyeṣu ... tyaktvā karma-phalāsaṅgam nitya-tṛpto nirāśrayaḥ karmaṇy abhipravṛtto ‘pi naiva kiñcit karoti saḥ

Again, the crucial distinction lies in the mental frame within which the action takes place, not whether one physically acts or not.

Anyway, non-action refers not only to the specific lexical item *wú-wéi* but also to related concepts or notions. We largely follow Slingerland’s (2003) view that certain metaphors are indicative of the presence of the relevant ideas. One of these metaphors, that of ‘following’ (從, 因, 依, 順) a stream, most obviously reflects the relation between deliberate action and given situation, since the movement of the stream happens of its own accord, while following this movement, or at least not going against it, is a deliberate choice. The same goes for the metaphorical use of verbs for ‘roaming’ (逍遙, 彷徨, 遊), which also implies agency on the part of the subject. Other metaphors, however, remind us that non-action is also characterized by the mental state that underlies or accompanies such deliberate action, viz., the metaphors of being ‘at ease’ (安, 簡, 舒, 靜, 息, 舍, 休) with things as they are, of ‘fitting’ (宜, 合, 和, 當, 適, 配) with the circumstances, and of ‘forgetting’ (忘, 失, 遺, 喪, 不知) oneself, in the last case minimizing though hardly obliterating the importance of the agentive self.

Non-action and spontaneity

It is precisely in the interplay between ‘action’ and ‘non-action,’ ‘doing something’ and ‘doing nothing,’ that the ideas surrounding non-action have a message for our current debates on spontaneous thought and mind wandering. Non-action does not simply refer to spontaneity, but to a way of relating to whatever is spontaneously there, whether in the mind or in the surroundings. This corresponds to some modern studies about the interplay between agentive and spontaneous thought, and to the ecological perspective on the interplay between external and internal elements, between nature out there and the nature inside us. In general, the early Chinese ideas are more nuanced than the common discourse on spontaneous thought within modern cognitive science. In the way it brings in the acting subject, it is also more advanced than the often one-sided focus on the environment in modern notions of ecology.

Slingerland (2003, p. 7) defines non-action as ‘an ability to move through the world and human society in a manner that is completely spontaneous and yet still fully in harmony with ... the *Dao* 道 ...’ and ‘a state of personal harmony in which actions flow freely and instantly from one’s spontaneous inclinations.’ This idea of complete spontaneity is particularly widespread in discussions of Daoism, and it is often related to the notion of *zì-rán* 自然 ‘thus by itself’ (often translated as ‘nature’ or ‘natural(ly)'). Thus,

Graham (1981, pp. 6–8, 135–142; 1989, pp. 186–194, 232–234) writes extensively on the spontaneity of *Zhuāngzǐ* and discusses the notion of non-action (in his translation, ‘doing nothing’) of the other great Daoist work *Lǎozǐ* 老子 in a chapter called ‘The Art of Ruling by Spontaneity.’

However, non-action does not simply equal spontaneity. As Slingerland and Graham are well aware, even the paragon of non-action, the Cook Dīng 庖丁 in *Zhuāngzǐ* 3:2 sometimes needs to slow down and carefully consider how to proceed in the otherwise impressively free and easy slaughter of an ox:

Whenever I come to something intricate, I see where it will be hard to handle and cautiously prepare myself, my gaze settles on it, action slows down for it, and with only a slight movement of the chopper, the tangle has already been unraveled, like clod crumbling to the ground.

每至於族，吾見其難為，怵然為戒，視為止，行為遲。動刀甚微，謦然已解，如土委地。

Hence, the main point is not to act in a completely spontaneous way, without consideration or deliberation. The main point is to respond to reality as it is, to the given situation, rather than distorting one’s view of it and responses to it by *excessive* thought, analysis, self-interest, and effort. In this sense, Cook Dīng shows clearly that non-action is neither to do nothing nor to refrain from all consideration, deliberation, or preparation, not to speak of acting with complete spontaneity. It rather implies to find a harmonious relation between one’s deliberate, agentive action on the one hand and the givens of one’s inner spontaneity and outer circumstances on the other.

In the ‘Outer Chapters’ 外篇 of the *Zhuāngzǐ*, probably written by *Zhuāngzǐ*’s disciples, a number of other craftsmen and practitioners all have similar challenges: the carver Qīng 梓慶, the wheelwright Biān 輪扁, the fighting-cock trainer Jìxìngzǐ 紀渚子, the carpenter Chuí 工倕, a forger of buckles 捶鉤者, a ferryman 津人, a painter 畫者, a hunchback catching cicadas 痾僂者承蜩, as well as swimmers 游者 and divers 没人. None of them just follow their spontaneous whims. On the contrary, many of them do quite a lot of preparation and even in the moment actively modify the way they relate to the given situation. For instance, the wheelwright Biān carefully controls the speed of his chisel: ‘Not too slow and not too fast, I feel it in the hand and respond with the mind’ 不徐不疾，得之於手而應於心. Graham (1981, p. 6) is of course right that this kind of dexterity comes not from ‘weighing the arguments for different alternatives’ or similar cognitive approaches, but from a ‘trained hand’ that reacts ‘with a confidence and precision impossible to anyone who is applying rules and thinking out moves.’ However, this does not mean that there is no room for agency, and that all action inevitably springs from the given situation with complete spontaneity. There is almost always an agent whose intuitive perception of the given situation forms the basis for action—feeling it in the hand and responding with the mind.

Zhuāngzǐ does not tell us to ‘be’ spontaneous or natural, but to ‘follow’ 因 or ‘go with’ 順 ‘things as they are of their own accord’ (*zì-rán*), as we saw in the metaphors for non-action discussed above. In other words, this is not primarily about spontaneity but about a relation between agency and spontaneity. It involves both an agent/actor and something that is being acted upon. In the other metaphor for non-action mentioned above,

‘roaming,’ there is movement (agency) and a place within which one moves (spontaneity).

The grammatical objects of the verbs expressing agency fall nicely into the categories outlined in [Figures 1 and 2](#) above. They may refer to external things or their changes (as in ‘follows its original way’ 因其固然 and ‘fit with things’ 與物有宜), or they may refer to the mind (as in ‘let the mind wander’ 遊心/游心). They may also refer to a transcendent realm that is larger than the individual and lies at the bottom of all nature (as in ‘accords with the heavenly principle’ 依乎天理, cf. Slingerland, 2003, p. 8; Brindley, *ms.*). In all cases, there is a relation between an agentive self and a spontaneous or given reality that needs to be related to. In both Confucian and Daoist texts, the point is to harmonize the relation between agency and spontaneity, between one’s actions and the given inner or outer circumstances.

In a few very special and admittedly quite problematic cases, agency and spontaneity appear to merge into one. One such example may be the selfless state of Zìqí of Nánguō 南郭子綦, who is said to have entered a trance (嗒焉) and to have lost himself (吾喪我), apparently to align himself with the ‘pipes of Heaven’ 天籟 (*Zhuāngzǐ*, 2:1). Another possible example is Confucius’s disciple Yán Huí 顏回, who is said to ‘sit and forget’ 坐忘 in a way that makes him ‘let organs and members drop away, dismiss eyesight and hearing, part from the body and expel knowledge, and go along with the universal thoroughfare’ 墮肢體，黜聰明，離形去知，同於大通 (*Zhuāngzǐ* 6:9). In both cases, the state attained is the result of meditative exercises that lead to a complete identification with a transcendent realm (‘the pipes of Heaven’ or ‘the universal thoroughfare’), beyond anything human or individual, more or less corresponding to the Way.

In most cases, however, non-action does not presuppose such a unity, only a kind of harmony in which deliberate action or thought is not allowed to harm the actor or thinker and not allowed to distort one’s views of reality. Non-action is not about spontaneity as such, but about the relation between agency and spontaneity, or between action and the given context of the action.

No paradox

Both Graham and Slingerland make much of the so-called paradox that the ‘spontaneity’ of non-action is something that one should aim for, despite the fact that this kind of goal orientation is the opposite of non-action. The paradox seems to be highlighted by the use of the seemingly contradictory expressions mentioned above: to practice non-action, to do nothing but leave nothing undone, to act without action, and the business of doing nothing. Slingerland even suggests that this paradox—the fact that such ideas will always leave behind loose threads—has been a driving force behind the development of Chinese thought. What one thinker could not solve is picked up by another, whose thought however leaves behind other loose threads for yet other thinkers to pick up.

One of Slingerland’s examples is *Mencius*’s use of agricultural metaphors to describe the organic nourishing he sees as an important element of self-cultivation. According to Slingerland, *Mencius* himself highlights loose threads in his argument by combining his agricultural metaphors of careful cultivation with, on the one hand, wild nature metaphors that point to the unstoppable force of a spontaneous moral impulse and, on the other hand, much more effortful and less organic artisan metaphors that point to the need to

use power and exertion. However, as Slingerland (2003, p. 27, p. 36) is well aware, the use of contradictory metaphors does not necessarily reflect a real paradox. It is not necessarily a paradox that in some cases, one's impulses must be carefully nurtured, while in other cases they will burst forth spontaneously like a torrential force, and in yet other cases the effort and accuracy involved in dealing with them can be compared to a carpenter's use of tools and a musician's use of pitch-pipes. In other words, it is not a paradox that the relationship between agentive and spontaneous forces varies with the circumstances. It is true that different thinkers conceive of this relation in different ways, but not necessarily because other ways of thinking are paradoxical.

Similarly, the use of contradictory expressions does not necessarily indicate that there are real paradoxes involved. On the contrary, the juxtaposition of terms referring to action (爲) and non-action (無爲) should rather be seen as referring to the fact that the idea of non-action actually involves a balance between agency (action) and spontaneity (no action), and that the best way of acting is one that seeks to minimize the interference with the spontaneous forces surrounding one's action. With one possible exception in the archeological material from Guōdiàn 郭店 (Slingerland, 2008, pp. 248ff.), none of the thinkers discussed by Slingerland recognized non-action as involving a paradox, though they did fight amongst themselves over the proper emphasis on agency vs. spontaneity.

Daoist non-action

So far, much of our discussion of non-action has drawn on examples from the Inner Chapters of the *Zhuāngzǐ*, with one or two excursions into the probably somewhat later Outer Chapters and a few references to *Mencius*. However, while non-action is often seen as a Daoist ideal, Slingerland finds expressions of this ideal in most early Chinese texts, whether Daoist or Confucian, including texts that do not use the term itself. Only the Mohist tradition espouses ideas that, according to Slingerland, 'in effect constitute a rejection of wu wei' (2003, p. 128). Before we go on, therefore, we shall briefly point to the presence both of the term and the ideas behind it in the various parts of our source material, starting with Daoism.

First, while the early Daoist text *Lǎozǐ* has not been included in our source material, this is partly because it presents even more serious dating problems than any of the other texts, and partly because it has little to say about our second concern, emotion. There is reason to believe, however, that *Lǎozǐ* is the earliest text to develop and explore in any detail the term *wú-wéi*, as well as its counterpart *zì-rán* 自然 'thus by itself; natural'. The received version of the text is quite brief, only 5284 characters, but contains no less than 11 occurrences of the term *wú-wéi* and five occurrences of the term *zì-rán*. That these are not late insertions is attested by the fact that many of the occurrences of *wú-wéi* and *zì-rán* are also found in the early bamboo fragments from Guōdiàn (c. 300 BCE or earlier) and the somewhat later silk fragments from Mǎwángduī 馬王堆 (second century BCE or earlier), including a sentence linking *zì-rán* to the absence of (exerted) action:

Thus he helps all things proceed of their own accord, and does not dare to act.

以輔萬物之自然，而不敢爲。(Lǎozǐ 64) ²

In the *Lǎozǐ*, the notion of non-action is repeatedly linked to its opposite, as in ‘to act with non-action’ 爲無爲 and ‘to do nothing and leave nothing undone’ 無爲而無不爲, each of which occurs twice in the received text, confirming that non-action is not in fact a lack of action but rather a way of performing it, hence involving not only spontaneity but also agency. Furthermore, while we would expect no action to lead to either no result or a bad result, the text points to ‘the positive effects of non-action’ 無爲之益: ‘there is nothing that is not brought in order’ 無不治, ‘no defeat’ 無敗, ‘no loss’ 無失, and when rulership is practiced according to the principles of non-action, ‘the people are transformed of their own accord’ 民自化.

The even much briefer Daoist text *Inward Training* (1565 characters) contains neither *wú-wéi* nor *zì-rán*, but frequently uses the adverb *zì* 自 (literally, ‘self’) to indicate that spiritually desirable states or processes come into being ‘of their own accord,’ with no effort expended. The verbs that follow *zì* include: ‘infuse’ 充, ‘fill up’ 盈, ‘generate’ 生, ‘develop’ 成, ‘arrive’ 至, ‘come’ 來, ‘return’ 歸, and ‘become stable’ 定, all used in a positive sense to indicate the inner generation of various longed-for properties, such as ‘harmony’ 和, ‘essence’ 精, ‘fortune’ 福, and ‘the Way’ 道. The text also explicitly states that force will not help, but this does not mean that there is nothing one can do:

Therefore, this vital energy cannot be halted by force, yet can be secured by inner power.

是故此氣也, 不可止以力, 而可安以德。(Roth, 1999, p. 49)

Thus, although the terms *wú-wéi* and *zì-rán* are not present in this text, the issue of non-action is. We shall return to other examples in our discussion of emotion and spontaneity below.

Confucian non-action

Turning to the Confucian text material, *Mencius* resembles *Inward Training* in not using the terms *wú-wéi* (in the present meaning) and *zì-rán*, but still clearly advocating a frame of mind and mode of action that comes close to what we have called non-action. By insisting that ‘human nature is good’ 性善, and that we are all born with the ‘tips’ or ‘beginnings’ (*duān* 端) of moral qualities, he argues against those who want to instill morality from the outside. In contrast to its frequent English translations ‘root,’ ‘bud,’ and ‘sprout,’ the Chinese term *duān* itself has no biological connotations. However, these biological metaphors fit well with the agricultural imagery often favored by *Mencius*: In order to develop the inborn feeling of ‘com-miseration’ 惻隱之心 into the higher moral quality of ‘benevolence’ 仁, we need to cultivate it the way a good farmer would cultivate his field, by tending to it without the use of force. In the same way, ‘righteousness’ 義 grows organically from our sense of ‘shame’ 羞惡之心, ‘propriety’ 禮 from basic ‘modesty and complaisance’ 辭讓之心, and ‘wisdom’ 智 from feelings of ‘approval and disapproval’ 是非之心. We should not try to assist their growth the way a stupid farmer from the state of Sòng tried to help the sprouts in his field to grow, by pulling at them until they withered. This is a clear argument for non-action, for letting things grow organically and develop of their own accord. Again, however, non-action does not simply mean no action, since those who ‘abandon things’ 舍之 and ‘forget’ 忘 to tend to them are just as bad as ‘those who

do not weed their sprouts' 不耕耘者。Moreover, to develop true morality, 'one has to work on it' 必有事焉。Hence, although potentially moral feelings are already present in the given condition of mankind, deliberate (though not excessive) action is necessary for these feelings to grow into genuine moral qualities. Once again, non-action resides in the relation between agency and spontaneity, in a mode of action that allows organic growth to take place unhindered.

The other great Confucian text *Xúnzǐ* is most famous for advocating the opposite of *Mencius's* point of view: human nature is bad 性惡, and morality has to be instilled from the outside through education, the way an artisan needs to force his material with external tools to achieve their desired form. The Way is an external standard, just like the various measuring tools of an artisan. In *Xúnzǐ*, for something to be 'thus-by-itself' 自然 is no longer a positive thing, but rather means that it needs to be worked upon in order to become aligned with the moral compass provided by teachings and tradition. However, *Xúnzǐ* is also known to be full of complexity, and there is a tension between the need to 'work on things' 事, 'produce by artifice' 偽, 'evaluate' 慮, and 'select' 擇 on the one hand and the more spontaneously oriented 'responding to change' 應變 and *wú-wéi* on the other. In contrast to *Mencius*, *Xúnzǐ* (21:11) is explicit in its advocacy of non-action:

Thus, the benevolent person carries out the Way without striving [*wú wéi*], and the sage carries out the Way without forcing himself [*wú qiǎng*].

故仁者之行道也，無爲也；聖人之行道也，無彊也。

In *Xúnzǐ's* (28:5) words, Confucius himself advocates the virtue of water by pointing to the principle of non-action:

Water provides for all living beings with non-action—this resembles virtue.

夫水遍與諸生而無爲也，似德。

The seeming contradiction between the strict and the liberal aspects of *Xúnzǐ's* thought is best understood as a contrast between man before and after a harsh regime of self-cultivation. Only after having been through a long and arduous period of training may he hope to arrive at the stage where he can cease to strive and respond to change with naturalness, the stage of the perfected person:

For the perfected person, what forcing oneself, what steeling oneself, what precariousness is there?

至人也，何彊？何忍？何危？ (21:11)

If this is right, the seeming contradiction in the text is resolved.

With *Human Nature Comes from Destiny*, the interpretational difficulties are much greater than for any of the received texts. The resolution to some of these difficulties has direct consequences for whether or not the text has a notion of non-action. The text contains two instances of 毋爲, in which 毋 is a near-equivalent to *wú* 無 'not to have; should not have,' and 爲 is usually read as a variant of *wéi* 爲 'to make; to do' in which the addition of the heart radical 心 is believed to signal a psychological interpretation: 'to make or do with mental force or effort, or with an ulterior motive.' A related

interpretation of 爲 is as 偽 偽 ‘artifice; acting for a motive’ (Cook, 2012, pp. 727, 735, 743, 746). Under both interpretations, the meaning of 毋爲 comes close to that of non-action or what is rendered as 無爲 無爲 in other texts. Similar considerations apply to the opposite expression 有爲 有爲 ‘(exerted or goal-oriented) action’, as in the following example:

In one’s search for the (true) mind, if there is (exerted) action, one will not attain it. This shows that people cannot do it with (exerted) action.

求其心, 有爲也, 弗得之矣。人之不能以爲也可知也。(slips 37–38)

Again a slightly different reading takes 爲 to represent 偽 偽 ‘artifice,’ but the basic idea remains the same, that self-cultivation must follow man’s natural inclinations rather than being produced by effort or artifice to achieve some ulterior motive. Another passage makes it equally clear that effort or artifice is counterproductive:

When there is (exerted) action, one becomes secretive; when secretive, one becomes deceptive; when deceptive, no one will form ties with him.

偽斯隱矣, 隱斯詐矣, 詐斯莫與之結矣。(slips 48–49)

There are many questions surrounding the details of this passage, including the reading of the characters here rendered as 隱 ‘secretive’ and 詐 ‘deceptive.’ In our context, the most important issue is the interpretation of 爲 (in which the heart radical is written as 忄 instead of 心), which is once again usually read as a psychological variant of 爲 ‘to make or do with mental force or effort, or with an ulterior motive’ or as 偽 ‘artifice; acting for a motive.’ Once more, this may be read as an explicit argument for non-action. Note, however, that there are also other instances of 有爲 有爲 that fit less easily into a non-action framework. In one case, 有爲 有爲 is said to constitute ‘tradition’ 故, which clearly has positive rather than negative connotations in this text. In another case, poetry is said to be ‘created with a purpose (or through effort)’ 有爲爲之, which again is certainly said in a positive sense, and which some scholars have read as an attack on the idea of non-action (Cook, 2012, pp. 709f., note 94). Furthermore, it is clear that *Human Nature Comes from Destiny* suggests that human nature in itself has no fixed direction or orientation and is therefore in need of external input in the form of education. However, it is equally clear that this form of education needs to tap into and draw on the spontaneous impulses already present in man in order to be effective. Music, the text argues, is the most effective form of education, precisely because it most comprehensively activates these impulses and thereby transforms the person from within (Brindley, 2006; Slingerland, 2008).

Emotion

In the following, we shall turn to the issue of emotion in the sources under scrutiny. Much has been made of the historical development of the term 情 情 and the fact that in early sources it apparently does *not* mean emotion, but this is not an issue we will pursue in any detail here (cf. Eifring, 2004; Graham, 1990; Hansen, 1995; Harbsmeier, 2004; Middendorf, 2008; Puett, 2004; Virág, 2017). Instead we shall discuss various

notions of emotion, irrespective of the precise terminology used, whether single words such as *qíng* or longer phrases.

In most of the texts under scrutiny here, the term *qíng* is hardly used in the sense of ‘emotion’ at all, the only relatively clear exceptions being *Human Nature Comes from Destiny* and *Xúnzǐ* (Puett, 2004). The term itself has a number of different meanings, most of them clearly related, and when the meaning ‘emotion’ gradually emerges, some of these meanings still continue to vibrate along, suggesting that emotions are *genuine* and that they belong to *human nature*.

In the majority of texts, the most common way of referring to emotions as a general category is to create lists of individual emotions, mostly arranged as collocations of antonym (or sometimes [near-]synonym) pairs. One of these lists remains even in Modern Chinese as a fixed four-character expression: *xǐ nù āi lè* 喜怒哀樂 ‘joy and anger, sadness and pleasure.’ In our early Chinese corpus, there is much more variation, and the modern four-character expression often occurs within larger collocations, as in the following list, which occurs twice in *Xúnzǐ* (17:4; 22:2):

likes and dislikes, joy and anger, sadness and pleasure

好惡喜怒哀樂

Many of these lists go beyond the narrow notion of emotions:

persuasions and reasons, joy and anger, sadness and pleasure, love and hate, and desire

說故喜怒哀樂愛惡欲 (*Xúnzǐ* 22:5)

joy and anger, sadness and pleasure, anticipation and regret, fickleness and fixedness, vehemence and indolence, eagerness and tardiness

喜怒哀樂, 慮嘆變熱, 姚佚啟態 (*Zhuāngzǐ* 2:2)

In general, *xǐ nù* 喜怒 is the single most frequently occurring combination in such lists. In the following list, which for some reason is called a list of *qì* 氣 ‘energies’ rather than *qíng* 情, the antonym pair *xǐ nù* is combined with the synonym pair *āi bēi* 哀悲:

joy and anger, sadness and sorrow

喜怒哀悲 (*Human Nature Comes from Destiny*, slip 2)

Quite often, *xǐ nù* is used as a simple two-character phrase (*Zhuāngzǐ* 2:6, 6:1; *Xúnzǐ* 19:13; *Xúnzǐ* 20:4, 20:6), or in the negated four-character phrase *bù xǐ bú nù* 不喜不怒 ‘not joyful and not angry’ (*Inward Training*, Roth, 1999, p. 87), in all cases usually referring to emotions in general rather than to these two specific emotions. It also often occurs in other combinations, in particular in *Inward Training*:

worry and pleasure, joy and anger, desire and profit-seeking

憂樂喜怒欲利 (Roth, 1999, p. 51)

joy and anger, accepting and rejecting

喜怒取予 (Roth, 1999, p. 59)

joy and anger, worry and anxiety

喜怒憂患 (Roth, 1999, p. 89)

worried or sorrowful, joyful or angry

憂悲喜怒 (Roth, 1999, p. 95)

Other two-character phrases include the antonym pairs *āi lè* 哀樂 'sadness and pleasure' (*Zhuāngzǐ* 3:5, 4:3, 6:5; *Human Nature Comes from Destiny*, slips 29, 43) and *hào wù* 好惡 'likes and dislikes' (*Zhuāngzǐ* 5:6; *Human Nature Comes from Destiny*, slip 4) and the synonym pairs *xǐ lè* 喜樂 'joy and pleasure' (*Xúnzǐ* 19:32), *ài yù* 愛慾 'love and desire' (*Inward Training*, Roth, 1999, p. 95), and *yōu huàn* 憂患 'worry and anxiety' (*Human Nature Comes from Destiny*, slip 62). The antonym pairs usually refer to emotions in general, while the synonym pairs tend to refer to either only positive or only negative emotions. Even four-character expressions may have much narrower meanings, as in *zhūi lì xún jù* 惴慄恟懼 'frightened and all in a tremble' (*Zhuāngzǐ* 2:11), in which all four characters refer to fear.

Emotion as spontaneity

I have argued above that non-action represents a relation between deliberate action and given situation or, internally, between agency and spontaneity. I have also suggested that emotion is part of the given situation or spontaneity involved (see [Figure 1](#) above). However, our text material never makes this connection quite explicit. The connection between emotion on the one hand and the given situation or spontaneity part of non-action on the other, therefore, will have to be argued for.

One aspect of the given situations within which deliberate action takes place is their lack of constancy; they are subject to incessant transformations, and that is one major reason why action cannot follow a fixed route but needs to rely on a continuous sensitivity toward the ever-changing environment. In most cases, the changes that characterize reality are illustrated by external—physical or social—phenomena, as in the following example from *Zhuāngzǐ* 5:4:

Death and life, survival and ruin, success and failure, poverty and riches, competence and incompetence, slander and praise, hunger and thirst, cold and heat, these are the mutations of affairs, the course of destiny. They alternate before us day and night, and knowledge cannot measure back to where they began.

死生存亡，窮達貧富，賢與不肖，毀譽、饑渴、寒暑，是事之變，命之行也；日夜相代乎前，而知不能規乎其始者也。

However, these changes may just as well be internal, in which case emotions play a central role:

Joy and anger, sadness and pleasure; anticipation and regret, fickleness and fixedness; vehemence and indolence, eagerness and tardiness—they are like music coming out of emptiness and condensing into mushrooms; they alternate before us day and night, and no one knows from where they spring.

喜怒哀樂，慮嘆變熱，姚佚啟態；樂出虛，蒸成菌。日夜相代乎前，而莫知其所萌。(Zhuāngzǐ 2:2)

While the first four-character phrase has become a standard expression for emotions, the two following four-character phrases are less standard, but also refer to emotions or related

mental states. The psychological phenomena included in these three phrases clearly belong to the same ever-changing world as the external phenomena of the previous citation. Both sets of phenomena are said to 'alternate before us day and night,' and in both cases our knowledge is unable to trace their origins, which probably are implied to lie in the transcendent Way. This parallelism suggests that emotions are part of the 'given situation' within which we act, though the action (or non-action) itself is not mentioned here.

A similar striking parallel between the external and internal aspects of a given situation is found in *Inward Training*:

Spring and autumn, winter and summer are the seasons of the heavens; mountains and hills, rivers and valleys are the resources of the earth; joy and anger, accepting and rejecting underlie the schemes of human beings.

春秋冬夏, 天之時也, 山陵川谷, 地之材也, 喜怒取予, 人之謀也。(Roth, 1999, p. 59)

Here a single sentence that begins with the changes of the seasons ends with various emotions and inner predilections, making the parallel even more explicit than in *Zhuāngzǐ*. Furthermore, this sentence is immediately followed by a conclusion concerning non-action:

Therefore, the sage alters with the seasons but doesn't transform, shifts with things but doesn't change places with them.

是故聖人與時變而不化, 從物而不移。(Roth, 1999, p. 59)

Although the term *wú-wéi* is not used, the ideal of following the natural changes in the world without losing one's basic direction more or less amounts to a definition of non-action. The combination of this sentence with the previous one therefore makes it quite explicit that the ideal way of acting with non-action is to follow both the changes in the external environment and the variations in inner feelings and temperament. More or less the same conclusion may be drawn from the following excerpt from a rhyming passage in *Xúnzǐ*, which again juxtaposes external and internal aspects of the given situation within which one acts:

It [i.e. ritual] underlies the harmony of Heaven and Earth, the brilliance of the sun and the moon, the sequence of the four seasons, the movements of the stars above, the flowing of the great rivers, the thriving of the myriad things, the moderation of love and hate, the suitability of joy and anger, the obedience of those below, the enlightenment of those above, orderliness amidst all changes. Without it, there is only loss.

天地以合, 日月以明, 四時以序, 星辰以行, 江河以流, 萬物以昌, 好惡以節, 喜怒以當, 以爲下則順, 以爲上則明, 萬變不亂, 貳之則喪也。(Xúnzǐ 19:13)

A comparison of these text excerpts also sheds light on the many lists of emotions presented in the previous section. These lists are not always used just for simple enumeration, but often point to the constant changes involved. Emotions are simply internal variants of the kind of metamorphosis that is also present in the external—physical or social—world. This is particularly obvious in the juxtaposition of antonyms, which clearly point to the endless ups and downs of our emotional life. Sometimes, the juxtaposition of antonyms may also be read as an indication of the relativity of all

dichotomies, whether external or internal, pointing toward a kind of meta-level unity beyond the apparent contrasts.

A quite different example in which the 'given situation' of non-action includes both external and internal elements is *Mencius's* use of agricultural metaphors to describe the cultivation of moral feelings. The external elements are the fields and mountains that need to be tended to, but without excessive force or interference, lest their own natural tendency to organically replenish their nourishment is lost. The internal elements include emotions such as commiseration, shame, complaisance, approval and disapproval, and the sense of being unable to bear the sight of pain or injustice. One might object that metaphors should not be read literally, and that *Mencius's* non-action is only concerned with (internal) self-cultivation, not with (external) agriculture. However, the comparison certainly implies a connection between the two, in this case used to argue that what we all know is the best way of doing agriculture is actually also the preferable way of self-cultivation. *Mencius's* idea of non-action differs from that of other thinkers in its emphasis on the identification and subsequent expansion of particular emotions. The identification of the feelings may be an act of will, but its expansion is at least sometimes supposed to happen almost by reflex, 'like a fire beginning to burn or a spring finding an outlet' 若火之始然, 泉之始達 (*Mencius* 2a:6).

Without bringing in the parallel between internal and external elements, *Xúnzǐ* makes clear that one's relation to emotions is a central aspect of the development of the non-action practiced by the sage. The emotions of ordinary people need to be brought under control, since they threaten to bring conflict, disruption, and violence:

If people obey their nature and follow their emotions, they are sure to come to struggle and contention, turn to rejecting social divisions and disrupting order, and end up becoming violent.

從人之性, 順人之情, 必出於爭奪, 合於犯分亂理, 而歸於暴。(*Xúnzǐ* 23:1)

The sage, however, can give free rein to his emotions and meet them with an attitude of non-action:

The sage follows his desires and embraces all his emotions, and the things dependent on these simply turn out well-ordered.

聖人縱其欲, 兼其情, 而制焉者理矣。(*Xúnzǐ* 21:11)

Because his emotions have been transformed in accordance with the Way, the sage is able to relate to them without interference. In the text that follows, this is explicitly related to the expression *wú-wéi* 無爲, in this specific context best translated as 'without striving.'

Finally, *Human Nature Comes from Destiny* makes a direct contrast between *wéi* (or *wěi*) 爲 'to make or do with mental force or effort, or with an ulterior motive; artifice' and *qíng* 情 'emotions; sincerity':

In all men, effort or artifice is to be deplored.

凡人爲爲可惡也。(slip 48)

In all men, emotion or sincerity is to be delighted in.

凡人情爲可悅也。(slip 50)

Non-action, then, would imply a positive relation to emotions, since they are the opposite of effort and artifice.

In all our sources, therefore, there are reasonably clear indications that emotions do indeed belong to the given situation or spontaneity involved in the notion of non-action. While the concept of *qíng* and the various lists of emotional and other internal states come quite close to modern notions of spontaneous thought and mind wandering, they differ from the modern discourse in two important respects. First, their primary focus is on feelings rather than thoughts. Second, both the Daoist material and some of the Confucian texts are explicit in seeing internal emotions in parallel with changes in the external environment. Thus, the early Chinese discourse on emotion supplements the modern Western discourse on spontaneous thought and mind wandering by tilting the emphasis from cognition toward emotion and by seeing human psychology and the physical and social environment as two aspects of the same basic reality.

Ambivalence toward emotions

While non-action is seen as a positive ideal across the divide between Daoism and Confucianism, the attitude toward emotions is much more ambiguous and ambivalent. In this respect, it is reminiscent of the attitude toward spontaneous thought and mind wandering in modern cognitive science. In parts of the modern debate, spontaneous thought and mind wandering are seen as destructive elements that make us lose our focus and efficiency, enter into useless fantasies, come away from here-and-now realities, and succumb to grousing and rumination that may eventually lead to clinical depression. 'A wandering mind is an unhappy mind,' as the title of one famous article puts it (Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010).

A superficially similar viewpoint is even more dramatically expressed in *Inward Training*, which holds that 'worry and grief generate illness, and when illness reaches a distressing degree, you die' 憂鬱生疾, 疾困乃死 (Roth, 1999, p. 85). In most cases, however, the concerns expressed in the early Chinese discourse differ from the modern debate. In the conventional image, Confucians are concerned that emotions may have a negative influence on social morality, so that people 'come to struggle and contention, turn to rejecting social divisions and disrupting order, and end up becoming violent' (*Xúnzǐ*, see above), while Daoists tend to be concerned that emotions may disturb one's contemplative practice: 'the reason for the loss (of one's vital force) is inevitably joy and anger, worry and anxiety' 所以失之必以喜怒憂患 (Roth, 1999, p. 89). While the contrast between Confucian and Daoist concerns may be less sharp than often assumed, it remains true that both social morality and contemplative concerns are largely absent from the modern discourse, once again highlighting how the early Chinese debate may supplement our current discussions.

We have already seen that one line of thought holds that while emotions may be problematic for most of us, they are not so for people who have already attained the frame of mind associated with non-action. People of spiritual attainment can freely 'follow their desires and embrace all their emotions' (*Xúnzǐ*, see above), reflecting Confucius's famous statement that 'at seventy, I could follow what my heart desired,

without transgressing what was right' 七十而從心所欲, 不踰矩 (*Analects*, 2:4). The idea seems to be that the self-cultivation process leading to non-action transforms one's emotions and takes away the dangerous edge they have at the outset. According to *Zhuāngzǐ*, non-action transforms the emotional make-up of a person, so that 'sadness and pleasure cannot find a way in' 哀樂不能入 (*Zhuāngzǐ* 3:5, 6:5) and the person 'does not by his likings and dislikings do any inward harm to himself' 不以好惡內傷其身 (*Zhuāngzǐ* 5:6).

Before we have attained this superior frame of mind, however, we are sometimes urged to eliminate emotions and desires, as when *Inward Training* tells us to 'cast off worry, pleasure, joy, anger, desire, and profit-seeking' 去憂樂喜怒欲利 (Roth, 1999, p. 51), to 'cast off worry' 去憂 (p. 89), to 'still all love and desire' 愛慾靜之 (p. 95), to 'stop anger' 止怒 (p. 89), and to 'restrict' (or 'regulate') 節 our 'desires' 欲 (pp. 87, 97) and 'pleasure' 樂 (p. 89). In the same vein, *Mencius* argues for 'reducing one's desires' 寡欲 (7b), and *Zhuāngzǐ* agrees that 'where lusts and desires are deep, the springs of the Heavenly are shallow' 其耆欲深者, 其天機淺 (*Zhuāngzǐ* 6:1). In most of the texts, it is not clear how we should go about eliminating or reducing emotions and desires. However, *Inward Training* makes it clear that the basic principle of non-action should be observed: 'Do not pull it, do not push it' 勿引勿推 (Roth, 1999, p. 95). Somewhat surprisingly, one part of this presumably Daoist text advocates typical Confucian practices as the best antidote to negative emotions:

To stop anger, nothing is better than poetry, to cast off worry, nothing is better than music.

止怒莫若詩, 去憂莫若樂。(p. 89)

The text goes on arguing for 'rites' 禮, 'reverence' 敬, and 'stillness' 靜, and for 'returning to one's nature' 反其性, all of which reflects typical Confucian concerns.

However, neither the modern debate on spontaneous thought nor the early Chinese debate on emotions is exclusively negative. Neuroscientists are increasingly often followed by psychologists when they argue that spontaneous thought would not have survived the process of natural selection if it did not have adaptive value. A large number of possible functions have been suggested: processing of past memories, planning and evaluation of future scenarios, introspection and empathy, creativity and the shifting of perspective, etc. As we have already seen, the early Chinese debate also has a largely positive view of emotion, and not only for those who are spiritually enlightened: First, both Daoists and Confucians see our emotional fluctuations as an internal counterpart to changes in our physical and social environment that need to be met with acceptance, not force. Second, *Mencius* argues that certain emotions are the beginnings of moral virtue and need to be identified and extended, not reduced or eliminated. Third, *Human Nature Comes from Destiny* argues strongly for the positive function of emotions in Confucian self-cultivation, since 'the Way begins with the emotions' 道始於情 (slip 3), 'propriety arises from the emotions' 禮作於情 (slip 18), and 'if one does something with (true) emotion, then even if one transgresses, this is not to be deplored' 苟以其情, 雖過不惡 (slip 50), since emotions are a sign of sincerity and thus the opposite of 'effort and artifice' 僞. Finally, while *Xúnzǐ* argues that disaster will result if one follows one's emotions, it also goes against those who argue for the reduction of emotions or desires:

All those who say that good order depends on the elimination of desires are people who lack the means to guide desire and cannot handle the mere having of desires. All those who say good order depends on the lessening of desires are people who lack the means to regulate desire and cannot handle abundance of desires.

凡語治而待去欲者，無以道欲而困於有欲者也。凡語治而待寡欲者，無以節欲而困於多欲者也。(22:14)

It is not *having* emotions and desires that is the problem, but the ability to *cope* with them—guiding them and regulating them. Such guiding and regulating are not primarily something that is done to the emotions or desires themselves, but consist in a selection process that decides which emotions or desires should be allowed to result in action:

Human nature's liking and disliking, joy and anger, sadness and pleasure are called the 'emotions'. When there is a certain emotion and the mind makes a choice on its behalf, this is called 'reflection'. When the mind reflects and one's ability acts on it, this is called 'artifice'.

性之好、惡、喜、怒、哀、樂謂之情。情然而心爲之擇謂之慮。心慮而能爲之動謂之爲。(22:2)

Eventually, *Xúnzǐ's* ideal is to let spontaneous impulses co-occur with another, transcendent part of the mind, the one involving emptiness, unity, and stillness:

心何以知？曰：虛壹而靜。心未嘗不臧也，然而有所謂虛；心未嘗不兩也，然而有所謂壹；心未嘗不動也，然而有所謂靜。……不以所已臧害所將受謂之虛。……不以夫一害此一謂之壹。……不以夢劇亂知謂之靜。

How does the mind know [the Way]? I say: Through emptiness, unity, and stillness. The mind is always storing something, yet, there is what is called being 'empty'. The mind is always divided, yet, there is what is called being 'unified'. The mind is always moving, yet, there is what is called being 'still' ... Not to let what one is already storing harm what one is about to receive is called being 'empty' ... Not to let one thing harm another is called being 'unified' ... Not to let fantasies and clamor disturb one's awareness is called being 'still.' (21:8)

In *Xúnzǐ*, therefore, the transcendent mind can cooccur with worldly thoughts and feelings, and there is no need to get rid of the one in order to attain the other.

While Chinese tradition and Western modernity share the ambivalence with which the spontaneous activity of the mind is met, only one of the Chinese texts under scrutiny, *Inward Training*, contains explicit injunctions to actively stop, eliminate, silence or restrict emotions. As we have seen, the text is particularly concerned with the toxic effects of negative emotions such as anger, sadness, worry, and anxiety, though even positive emotions such as joy and pleasure and, in particular, love and desire are sometimes considered harmful. However, the text emphasizes the gentleness with which emotions need to be met, without pulling and pushing. Moreover, other parts of the text seem to argue, like *Zhuāngzǐ* and *Xúnzǐ*, that our emotional fluctuations are just as natural as the changes in our physical and social environment, suggesting that they need to be accepted as they are, not met with force, effort, or suppression.

Both *Inward Training* and the other texts we have discussed are concerned with the question of how to relate to emotions with a mind that does not unnecessarily interfere with them, but at the same time does not let them harm us physically, psychologically, or spiritually. Like the ups and downs of our external environment, our emotions constitute

a challenge to the cultivation of non-action, since they make it difficult to maintain a harmonious relation between agency and spontaneity. Other scholars of early Chinese thought have, to our knowledge, never discussed this connection between non-action and emotion. Though our various source texts provide different solutions to the dilemma involved, most of them agree that the process of self-cultivation involves a transformation of our emotions. In some sources, most notably *Inward Training*, the outcome is a reduction in emotional intensity. In other sources, most notably *Xúnzǐ*, the emotions remain but they no longer have a harmful effect on us. The *Zhuāngzǐ* may be read as vacillating between these two viewpoints. The *Mencius* singles out certain emotions as a basis for higher moral virtues and seeks to identify them and then expand their reach, while *Human Nature Comes from Destiny* sees all true and sincere emotions as a basis for the cultivation of higher moral virtues and, eventually, the Way.

Steps to an ecology of mind

When Gregory Bateson (1987) first used the term ‘ecology of mind,’ it mostly referred to the relation between different ideas and between ideas and their bodily basis. While the interest in their bodily basis was intended to break with the traditional Western focus on reason, Bateson’s concern with ideas also represents a continuation of that focus. In most of the early Chinese debates on non-action and emotion, intellectual ideas play a limited role. Their focus on emotion may bring a counterweight not only to the traditional Western focus on reason, but also to Bateson’s focus on ideas, as well as to the focus on cognition within modern debates on spontaneous thought.

The relational view underlying the early Chinese debates on non-action and emotion may also be seen as a counterweight to an overemphasis on distinctions at the expense of relations, connections, and gradient transitions within modern scientific and philosophical approaches to the human mind. Spontaneous thought (or even emotion) is not a neatly delineated phenomenon that takes up a specific amount of measurable time in our waking life, but stands in a continuous relation with agentive thought, in which the two often co-occur and influence one another, with porous borderlines. Sometimes, spontaneous thought (or emotion) rules the ground more or less alone, but much of the time it is present in the periphery even when the mind has a deliberate focus. Some recent developments within the cognitive science of spontaneous thought point in the same direction.

As we have seen, the early Chinese concept of non-action is about our relation to nature as it appears both within us (emotion) and outside us (our physical and social environment). This may be seen as a counterweight not only to the frequently condemned Western blindness to the importance of the environment, but also to alienated and alienating features of modern-day environmentalism, which sometimes treat the environment as something detached from man. We have seen how our emotional fluctuations are mentioned as a parallel to the changes in our physical and social environment in both Daoist and Confucian texts, suggesting that both our inner and outer worlds need to be met with the same accepting attitude. We have also seen how one text, *Mencius*, compares the cultivation of human nature to the cultivation of sprouts in a field, or grass on a mountain, suggesting once again that all need to be tended in the same way. Finally, *Mencius’s* view of human nature as good and his frequent use of agricultural analogies contrast with *Xúnzǐ’s* view of human nature as bad and his

frequent use of much more violent artisan imagery. *Xúnzǐ* argues that man has a natural right (or at least ability) to dominate the natural world:

Water and fire have energy but are without life. Grasses and trees have life but are without awareness. Birds and beasts have awareness but are without righteousness. Humans have energy and life and awareness, and moreover they have righteousness. And so they are the most precious things under Heaven. In strength they cannot compare with oxen, and in running they cannot compare with horses, but oxen and horses are used by them.

水火有氣而無生，草木有生而無知，禽獸有知而無義，人有氣、有生、有知，亦且有義，故最爲天下貴也。力不若牛，走不若馬，而牛馬爲用。(Xúnzǐ 9:19)

While this aspect of *Xúnzǐ* is not exactly ecological in its orientation, the contrast between his approach and that of *Mencius* brings out clearly the connection between man's relation to himself and to the environment. This relation between internal and external nature has very rarely been a focus in the modern debate on spontaneous thought, though see Bratman et al. (2015).

Thus, early Chinese discussions of non-action and emotion alert us to the fact that spontaneous thought belongs within an ecosystem in which it is more tightly integrated within larger webs of internal and external influences than usually assumed, including its continuous two-way interaction with agentive thought and its responsiveness to the social and natural environment.

Notes

1. Only 'the business of non-action' 無爲之業 is found in our corpus, in *Zhuāngzǐ* 6:6. Its precise interpretation is uncertain, yè 業 being variously rendered as 事業 'work; business' (Huáng, Lǐ, & Dài, 1985, p. 117), 'lore' (Graham, 1981, p. 90), 始 'beginning' (Wáng, 1994, p. 255), and 境地 'state; realm' (Chén, 1984, p. 218). Only the first of these interpretations produces a paradox. For a more speculative interpretation of *wú-wéi* as 'make action disappear', see Gassmann (2000).
2. This is the transmitted version. The manuscript versions are: 是故聖人能專萬物之自然，而弗能爲。(Guōdiàn Lǎozǐ A) 是以能輔萬物之自然，而弗敢爲。(Guōdiàn Lǎozǐ C) 能輔萬物之自然，而弗敢爲。(Mǎwángduī Lǎozǐ B).

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