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Trying Not to Try: The Art and Science of Spontaneity, by Edward Slingerland. Crown Publishers, 2014. 304pp. Hb, $26.00, ISBN-13: 9780770437619; Pb. $15.00, ISBN-13: 9780770437633.

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In *Trying Not to Try*, Edward Slingerland draws from ancient Chinese philosophy and the contemporary behavioral and brain sciences to explore the many facets of spontaneity, especially its benefits for human well being. In so doing, Slingerland not only recasts Confucianism and Daoism in a scientific light, showing how concepts such as *wu-wei* (effortless action) are akin to "flow," but also how the fast, intuitive, unconscious side of our mind can bring about *de* (powerful states of cognition). Besides providing a fascinating analysis of these concepts, Slingerland analyzes an ancient yet persistent philosophical conundrum, which can be summarized as follows: Ancient Chinese philosophy and modern science show that spontaneity is important for human well being insofar as it contributes to intuitive states of flowing consciousness (or what athletes today call "being in the zone") that are conducive to success and happiness. Hence, spontaneity is something we should strive for, but spontaneity is itself elusive and by definition without premeditation. So, if we are to strive for it, how do we do so, while still remaining spontaneous? In other words, "How does one try not to try?" (Slingerland, p. 9).

Discovering the answer to this conundrum is what makes Slingerland's book such a pleasure to read. He skillfully intertwines religion, science and ethics, weaving a tapestry of ideas and insights into a single book that is likely to intrigue religious scholars and scientists alike. And because it aims at instructing readers to appreciate and welcome spontaneity, it also promises to be personally rewarding. To illustrate, I wish to provide a very brief overview of Slingerland's analysis and thereby highlight some of the most remarkable points in his book.

The starting point for Slingerland's analysis is "an effortless, unselfconscious, but eminently cultured spontaneity," otherwise known as wu-wei (p. 25). Although Confucianists and Daoists couldn't agree on how to bring about wu-wei, both agreed that it was an end state for human beings since being it resulted in gracefulness and extreme effectiveness, as when a woodcarver masterfully does his work without ever sharpening his blade. In terms of cognitive science, Slingerland speculates that wu-wei is the product of what Daniel Kahneman calls System 1 thinking (fast, automatic, effortless, and most unconscious), which

sometimes overrides System 2 thinking (slow, deliberative, and conscious) when persons are fully absorbed in a complex activity. When this occurs, persons are often in an adaptive state of consciousness, drawing from a vast repertoire of implicit skills, habits, and perceptions to calmly and effortlessly complete a task (p. 36). According to Slingerland, then, achieving such a state of consciousness is, as Confucius and Laozi once observed, worth striving for.

However, before dealing with the conundrum of striving for wu-wei, Slingerland recognizes that wu-wei is likely to be an ancient and foreign concept for most of his readers, and thus he spends a good deal of time describing it in contemporary terms. For Slingerland wu-wei is "the short-term suspension of active self-monitoring" in which one's behavior flows with spontaneity, but also propriety, morality, and efficacy (p. 39). Slingerland explains that such flow had religious significance for Confucius and Laozi. For both believed that, while in the state of wu-wei, one had de or power that flowed from heaven—or, more appropriately, "the cosmos"—which allowed one to do the right thing, do it well, and feel "clean and happy" doing it (p. 43). Slingerland says it is akin to what Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi calls "flow" or what happens when we hit the "sweet spot" in an activity, whereby we naturally perform well without even thinking about it. It is easy to see why such a state is valuable, and in ancient times why it resonated with religious overtones. When people are "flowing" or "in the zone," such as athletes, they seem uncannily good at what they're doing, and often unstoppable. The same is true for entire communities. When people are in wu-wei together, there is social harmony—and this is why Confucius and Laozi valued it so much. For Confucius the key to experiencing wu-wei collectively was practicing rituals and sharing sacred moments together, which solidifies social connections and contributes to social solidarity (p. 52). For Laozi the key was "not doing" or "turning back" from desires and the hedonic treadmill of society (p. 94).

After delineating what wu-wei is, Slingerland then turns in more detail to how it can be achieved, and it is here that Slingerland offers a wonderful blend of philosophy, science, and ethics. Slingerland explains that for Confucius, the ideal way of achieving wu-wei was education since it was mainly through learning and consciously designed efforts, such as ritual and repetition, that one could shape the unconscious mind (p. 78). According to Slingerland, conscious efforts utilize virtual representations and language to provide what Daniel Dennett calls "scaffolding" or mental placeholders for the mind, making it easier to retain and even "embody" cultural wisdom, which eventually comes to feel effortless, natural and spontaneous. From a Confucianist standpoint, Slingerland claims that the collective wisdom of culture is worth embodying because it constitutes a "col-

lective mind" that is "a body of information passed down from generation to generation in a process that, in some important respects, resembles genetic evolution" (p. 61). Remarkably, Confucius seems to have recognized this during his own lifetime, and this why he advocated learning the wisdom of ancient sages.

Slingerland nevertheless contrasts Confucius' insights with those of Laozi, whose philosophy is also supported by contemporary science. Laozi thought that less learning—and even the unlearning and renouncement of culture—was the answer to achieving wu-wei. For much like modern social psychologists, Laozi seems to have recognized that learning, and priming through ritual and exposure to culture, often bias judgments. Moreover, there are surprising pitfalls in exercising mental control and following instruction, just as there are surprising benefits to being natural and acting without conscious effort. For instance, when we pursue our goals with too much conscious effort, we undermine ourselves. Likewise, in cases known as the "ironic effects of mental control," when we attempt to do one thing we end up doing the other, as when we try to force ourselves asleep and inadvertently keep ourselves awake (p. 97). Thus, Slingerland explains that Laozi (and later Zen Buddhists) parted ways with Confucius over wu-wei and advocated that people undo what they've learned to relax their conscious efforts, shedding the artificiality of culture and allowing for natural states of flowing consciousness.

Turning next to Confucius' and Laozi's legacies, Slingerland observes that followers of Confucius and Laozi, despite disagreeing about how to achieve wu-wei, agreed that the right kind of effort was necessary for it. For Confucius's greatest follower, Mencius, that meant overcoming chaotic and selfish emotions so that one's natural sense of empathy could have an effect on one's motivation for learned morality. Mencius's emphasis on allowing our natural empathy to express itself through our cultural acquired morals has received a great deal of support in moral psychology. From Giacomo Rizzolatti's mirror neurons to Antonio Damasio's somatic marker hypothesis, moral psychology shows that empathy is indeed the product of natural emotional processing centers in the brain, which are essential to moral judgment (p. 119). Furthermore, moral foundations theorist Jonathan Haidt echoes Mencius with his analogy of the rider (conscious mind) using education to control the elephant (embodied unconscious) to steer innate emotions toward moral action in cultural contexts (p. 128).

However, for Laozi's greatest follower, Zhuangzi, right effort meant removing the conscious mind or "cold cognition" altogether and letting wu-wei work on its own. "Translated in modern terms," Slingerland tells us, "Zhuangzi advocated that persons down-regulate their cold cognition so that their hot cognition can run the show" (p. 143). This meant letting *qi* (mental energy) flow by shutting

down the cognitive controls of the conscious mind like children often do, especially when playing, which is why they are more effective at divergent problem solving. Letting go in this way avoids what is colloquially referred to as "choking," as when an athlete overthinks and underperforms. To "let go," branches of East Asian Buddhists most directly influenced by Zhuangzi employed koans (illogical riddles) designed to assault learned and cold cognition to free natural and hot emotions, thus shocking one into a state of wu-wei. (p. 153). Hence, as Slingerland nicely explains, exercises such as koans make a good deal of sense in the Daoist tradition. For if we have wu-wei by nature, we just need to let it flow.

Having used scientific concepts to explore Confucius and Daoist traditions, Slingerland then confronts the paradox of ancient Chinese philosophy. "We are urged," Slingerland writes, "to get into a state that, by its very nature, seems unattainable through conscious striving. This is the paradox of wu-wei—the problem of how you can try not to try" (p. 168). Once we appreciate this conundrum we can begin to appreciate much of eastern philosophy, which is often mysterious if not confounding to westerners. After all, the goal is to achieve wu-wei and not to get distracted by the means toward wu-wei. For instance, when Rinzai explains that we're already awake and that we just need to realize it, he is moving us toward wu-wei without being preoccupied with the striving efforts of wu-wei (p. 169). Likewise, when Zen master Suzuki comments that there is "nothing special" about Zen practices, he is warning us not to get distracted by Zen, which is simply a vehicle to wu-wei (p.170). The flipside to this conundrum is the paradox of de or virtue—when we perform a virtuous act with the intention of being rewarded, our act is no longer virtuous (p. 173). This paradox is more familiar to other world religions than the paradox of wu-wei. We find in the Hind Bhagavad Gita, for instance, that adherents can attain the fruits of their desires only by being free of those desires and nonattached to the fruits of their actions. Like other world religions, the purpose of overcoming the paradox of virtue in ancient Confucianism and Daoism was to develop true virtue, and thus maximize cooperation within society.

To conclude his book, Slingerland connects wu-wei and de to exciting research on cooperation in the cognitive and behavioral sciences, as well as modern politics. By way of example, Confucius and Laozi advocated the development of shared virtues within a community because they saw that it would lead to social cooperation. However, like many social scientists today, they believed that only genuinely felt virtue as expressed in spontaneous action would bring about cooperation; for spontaneous acts undergirded by virtue are honest signals that are relatively hard, if not impossible, to fake (p. 181). Moreover, the expression of shared virtue brings about cooperation insofar as our naturally flowing and

embodied responses, if truly virtuous (whether learned or unlearned), tell people that we're trustworthy. Beyond this, Slingerland says that the paradoxes of wu-wei and de persist. After all, such "puzzles are not something that you solve, they are something that you learn how to live with" (p. 196).

All in all, Slingerland's well-written book is a fascinating text that sheds new light on Confucianism and Daoism. Because it focuses on ancient religion and contemporary science, it offers a remarkable analysis that will appeal to both religious scholars and scientists. Furthermore, given its emphasis on the values of spontaneity, it is likely to inspire readers interested in ethics and human well being.