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KNOWING THROUGH THE BODY: THE *DAODEJING* AND DEWEY

I. INTRODUCTION

In this article, I examine several connections between the notions of *wu-wei* and “naturalness” (*ziran*) as discussed in the *Daodejing*, and the American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey’s notion of “know-how” as embodied skill. Though Dewey and the *Daodejing* differ in the overall orientation of their respective discussions—*wu-wei* is ultimately an ethical-religious concept, whereas Dewey’s know-how is part of his discussion of habit and bodily intelligence—both offer suggestively consonant noncognitivist models of bodily action. Put differently, both elucidate a form of nonrepresentational action as our primary way of inhabiting and engaging with the world; in doing so, both stress the epistemic priority of practical over propositional knowledge. This article is primarily concerned with exploring the philosophical significance of this shared emphasis and how it might be applied to a consideration of moral action. In it, I argue that both the *Daodejing* and Dewey rightly highlight the foundational status of spontaneous action within our everyday moral experiences. This suggests that moral excellence is not simply equivalent to the accumulation of moral principles or reasons. Beyond this, it involves in no small measure the cultivation of various bodily, perceptual, and attentional skills that enable us to enact our moral excellence spontaneously and appropriately, very often without the intervention of principled reasoning.

I begin with a discussion of the pragmatic structure of *wu-wei*. I investigate how this pragmatic structure is related to the core ethical-religious virtue of “naturalness” (*ziran*). I then examine Dewey’s body-based conception of “know-how,” as well as his claim that practical habits (i.e., “know-how”) underwrite propositional cognition, or “knowing-that.” Next, I establish several key connections between *wu-wei* and know-how. I do this by arguing that these notions together provide a model of what I term the “ethos of expertise”: An affective

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or felt skill-based expertise that enables us to expertly negotiate various skill domains within our daily life without invoking representational mentality—including, importantly, situations calling for moral action. I conclude by employing both *wu-wei* and know-how to sketch, in very general terms, a view of spontaneous moral action that utilizes shared insights drawn from both the *Daodejing* and Dewey.

II. THE PRAGMATIC STRUCTURE OF *WU-WEI*

Classical Chinese thought was predominantly practical in its orientation. Early Chinese thinkers were not especially concerned with a theoretical consideration of the nature of human value and conduct. Rather, their emphasis was on the question of how human value and proper conduct becomes embodied in particular forms of situated activity. The term “conduct,” with its definitional nuance of “comportment” or “specific forms of behavior,” encompasses the moral significance of various forms of intersubjective relations and social contexts that early Chinese thinkers were concerned with addressing. “Conduct” is perhaps therefore more appropriate here than is its morally neutral counterpart “action,” since the primary focus of early Chinese thinkers was a consideration of how to develop virtuous patterns of interpersonal relations.¹ At the center of these discussions was the notion of *wu-wei*.

The term “*wu-wei*” is translated literally as “in the absence of/without doing.” It is variously rendered “doing nothing,” “no action,” “non-action,” or (less happily) “acting without acting.” While all of these renderings are perhaps individually inadequate, they collectively suggest different ways of capturing what proves to be a deceptively complex phenomenon. To begin simply, *wu-wei* refers to spontaneous, situationally appropriate, skillful action. This is action that radiates effortlessly from the acting agent. Put differently, *wu-wei* is what is often referred to as “skill-knowledge”: An embodied and engaged form of activity consisting of the “mastery of a set of practices that restructure both one’s perceptions and values.”²

Beyond this practical significance, however, *wu-wei* serves as an ethical or religious ideal. It refers to the state of existence or mode of activity of the Daoist sage: One who has realized perfect experiential unity with the world and universe as a dynamic expression of the Dao and can therefore relate effortlessly to the people and things of the world. It is only through this reorientation from a microcosmic (or self-centered) perspective to the macrocosmic awareness of a normative cosmic order that one can truly embody the Dao in all action contexts. This skill-knowledge enables the sage to engage with the

world “naturally,” that is, in a nondisruptive manner. The main feature of naturalness is a spontaneously graceful efficacy, a continual ability to act in ways appropriate to changing situations. The sage moves in and through the world with an effortless expertise. In chapter 30 of the *Daodejing*, we find that this effortless expertise “is called getting the right results without forcing them.”³ However, the first reference to how *wu-wei* is embodied in the skillfulness of the sage comes in chapter 2:

... sages keep to service that does not entail coercion (*wu-wei*) and disseminate teachings that go beyond what can be said.

In all that happens, the sage develops things but does not initiate them,
They act on behalf of things but do not lay claim to any of them,
They see things through to fruition but do not take credit for them.⁴

Wu-wei is thus activity that is neither conditioned by ingrained habits nor preceded by principled reasoning or axiomatic “teachings” that “can be said,” that is, formalized and subsequently passed on. *Wu-wei* cannot be exhaustively adequately articulated in propositional form. It is an intuitive, body-based wisdom that allows us to smoothly negotiate the changing features of human existence. Chapter 29 of the *Daodejing* offers a short sketch of the external form of *wu-wei* and how it is articulated in different contexts:

One who desires to take the world and act upon it,
I see that it cannot be done
The world is a spirit vessel
Which cannot be acted upon
One who acts on it fails
One who holds on to it loses . . .
... therefore the sage gets rid of over-doing.⁵

Later, in chapter 63, we find the following imperative:

Do things noncoercively (*wuwei*),
Be non-interfering in going about your business (*wushi*),
And savor the flavor of the unadulterated in what you eat.

Treat the small as great
And the few as many

... it is because the sages never try to do great things
That they are indeed able to be great.⁶

Both of these characterizations of *wu-wei* portray the effortless manner through which the sage smoothly negotiates the world. This is accomplished by “yielding” to situational givens and responding accordingly. Acting in a “non-interfering” manner is contrasted with a continual imposing of self-directed concerns upon the world in an

attempt to refashion it into a more egocentrically satisfying form. As the self for Daoism is ultimately a function of its various relationships with the world and other people, the sage is simply the individual who genuinely recognizes this fact and acts in a way to ensure that these relations remain smooth and unperturbed. Observed from the outside, the activities of the sage appear to others as spontaneously dynamic and natural, wholly devoid of agitation and artificiality while perfectly coordinated with the situation to which they are responding. Some specific examples will prove illustrative. We might think of the world-class swimmer gliding seamlessly through the water, their every gesture and expression of precision and muscular economy. Or we might imagine how the seasoned teacher appears to her students as she develops her material through the deft use of concrete images and anecdotes, responding directly to difficult questions while effortlessly exhibiting confidence in the classroom and command of the material. The swimmer and the teacher each exhibit different expressions of mastery within their respective skill domains.

However, by focusing solely on the external form of *wu-wei*, we potentially overlook the more subtle dimension of *wu-wei* that is arguably its defining feature. Edward Slingerland points to this crucial experiential feature of *wu-wei* when he notes that *wu-wei* does not refer exclusively to the extrinsic form of the action itself but, beyond this, to the inner phenomenology of the agent as she performs the action. According to Slingerland, *wu-wei* “describes a state of personal harmony in which actions flow freely and instantly . . . perfectly accord with the dictates of the situation at hand.”⁷ *Wu-wei* is a phenomenological description. It designates the agent’s inclinations and motives, their inner mental states (or as we shall see, conspicuous lack thereof) in the moment of spontaneous action-as-performed. In other words, it refers to a mode of bodily action lacking representational mentality of any sort—what Dewey calls “thoughtless action.”

Of course, the *Daodejing* does not offer a detailed phenomenology *wu-wei*. But this emphasis is made apparent through a close reading of a number of key chapters. To look at one of them, I quote the whole of chapter 48:

In studying, there is daily increase,
While in learning of way-making, there is a daily decrease:
One loses and again loses
To the point that one does everything noncoercively.
One does things noncoercively
And yet nothing goes undone.

In wanting to rule the world
Be always non-interfering in going about its business
For in being interfering
You make yourself unworthy of ruling the world.

Against the Confucian ideal of “studying” and “daily [ritualistic] increase,” the Daoist sage realizes the creative possibilities of each new situation by “losing, and again losing” pre-established patterns of behavior. Via the embodied practice of *wu-wei*, the skilled swimmer noncoercively “rules” the pool by coordinating her strokes with the flow of the water through a deep ecological sensitivity—a *felt* of union body and environment. She does not continually appeal to memorized coaching principles prior to each stroke but rather “loses” these principles in her spontaneous bodily performance. Similarly, the skilled instructor develops a lesson plan but, ever flexible, quickly abandons it while responding to unanticipated questions from students that suddenly open up new avenues for creative instruction. She does not refuse to answer questions that deviate from the day’s plan but rather adapts to the needs of her students. Again, the important point is that these skilled actions are not anticipated before the performance. Rather, they reflect the sage’s deep somatic attunement: An attentional openness and readiness-to-respond that enables the sage to react in a way that does not appeal to formally represented “conditions of satisfaction”⁸ governing subsequent action. The nonrepresentational phenomenology of *wu-wei* allows the agent to respond in a wholly spontaneous, flexible, and selfless manner.

Moreover, this phenomenological aspect of *wu-wei* houses its ethical significance. The ethical significance of the concept of *wu-wei* is in fact its most important component. For *wu-wei* is not merely an integral part of a more elaborate Daoist theory of mind and action. Rather, it is first and foremost a mode of relating to the world that enables us to live ethically and effortlessly with one another by harmonizing with the natural rhythms of the Way. Precisely how the ethical significance of *wu-wei* emerges from its nonrepresentational phenomenological structure will be discussed in more depth below. However, as a prelude to this later discussion, we can note at this point that *wu-wei* is the mode of action by which we come to embody the virtue of “naturalness” (*zinran*).⁹ Chapter 64 tells us that:

... because the sages do things noncoercively
They do not ruin them.
And because they do not try to control things
They do not lose them.¹⁰

By relating to the people and things of the world “naturally,” we encourage the free expression of their uniqueness and particularity. We allow them to meet us in their double-aspect of (1) unique individuality, as well as (2) their respective place in the heavenly order. To return to a point made earlier, the “natural” conduct of the sage expresses an ability to act with a fine-grained microscopic skill that simultaneously maintains a macroscopic sensitivity. This effortless

balancing of microscopic skill with macroscopic sensitivity—which I refer to as an “ethos of expertise”—will be discussed in some depth below. I set it aside for the time being.¹¹

III. DEWEY ON ACTION AND “KNOW-HOW” VS. “KNOWING-THAT”

I now discuss Dewey’s distinction between two forms of knowing: Practical and propositional, or what he refers to as “knowing-how” as opposed to “knowing-that.” According to Dewey, knowing-that is a kind of knowledge that “involves reflection and conscious appreciation.”¹² Put differently, knowing-that is a form of propositional or representational knowledge—a species of reflective thinking. Reflective thinking for Dewey is the “active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends.”¹³ Therefore, I might be said to know *that* Montana borders Canada—despite my failure to have personally visited either—by studying reliable maps or a listening to the reports of those who have been to one or both of these locales, etc.

However, Dewey argues that the bulk of everyday human conduct invokes knowledge of a different sort. He claims that the majority of our waking life is animated by an experiential or embodied learning that is activated prior to, or without the invocation of, reflective thinking. This sort of knowledge is a prereflective coping or skill-knowledge that enables us to navigate our world with a high degree of expert interaction. Importantly for Dewey, it does not entail propositional or representational content. Of this primitive form of knowledge—primitive in the sense that prereflective know-how ontologically and epistemically precedes reflective knowing-that—Dewey writes:

We may, indeed, be said to *know how* by means of our habits. . . . We walk and read aloud, we get off and on street cars, we dress and undress, and do a thousand useful acts without thinking about them. We know something, namely, how to do them.¹⁴

Know-how for Dewey is therefore a *bodily habit*, a species of “thoughtless action.”¹⁵ The many thousands of “useful acts” making up our daily activities are concrete examples of “thoughtless action.” These bodily habits structure our basic relation with the world as embodied, situated agents. And they are largely operative without deliberative knowing-that. According to Dewey, then, cognitive or reflective “‘knowing’ as systematic inquiry can be properly understood only when we realize its *function* within the larger context of experience”¹⁶—the bulk of which is constituted by “thoughtless” bodily habits.

So what are habits, exactly? Dewey's answer takes him into a consideration of not only action but social and cultural ontology as well. His technical use of "habit" encompasses individual action—but then expands to include the narratives, symbols, and practices, among other things, that comprise our cultural heritage. Because of this, an extended consideration of "habit" is beyond our present concern. Briefly, however, we can note that for Dewey habits are "positive agencies."¹⁷ Construed as a private behavioral system, habits are the coping mechanisms that emerge as a function of the organic interaction between the situated body and its lived environment. These coping mechanisms are a species of bodily action, Dewey insists, because they are "too definitely adapted to an environment to survey or analyze it," and they thus have no need to "stop to think, observe, or remember."¹⁸ These latter activities (thinking, observing, and remembering) are rather functions of a cognitive assessment of an environment that imports "reflection and conscious appreciation." Habits, conversely, secure "prompt and exact adjustment to the environment"¹⁹ without relying on propositions or prescriptions. We might refer back to the example of the world-class swimmer or the expert teacher in the last section for concrete examples of how skillful habits secure a seamless, continually evolving adjustment between the agent and their environment. Dewey sharpens his claim about the noncognitive nature of bodily habits when he writes that, "Immediate, seemingly instinctive, feeling of the direction and end of various lines of behavior is in reality the feeling of habits working below direct consciousness."²⁰ The essential connection between bodily habits and "feeling" is important. We will return to it in a moment.

Like Daoism's critique of Confucian ritualism, Dewey's formulation of know-how as bodily habit and its central position in his theory of action is in this way meant to challenge what he calls "the great vice of philosophy"—which he identifies as "an arbitrary intellectualism."²¹ Dewey understands "intellectualism" to be "the theory that all experience is a mode of knowing, and that all subject matter, all nature, is, in principle, to be reduced and transformed till it is defined in terms identical with the characteristics presented by refined objects of science as such."²² But Dewey insists that this cognitivist assumption is contrary to the primary facts of our embodied coping. For the environments we encounter through our bodily habits are now encountered as "refined objects of science as such," abstracted out of the practical contexts that imbue them with meaning. Rather, they are fundamentally disclosed as things "to be treated, used, acted upon and with, enjoyed and endured, even more than things to be known."²³ They light up with affordances: possibilities for action and interaction.²⁴ By disclosing themselves to us in this manner, things in the

world are engaged with as “things *had* before they are things cognized.”²⁵

Before looking more carefully at the phenomenological structure of how the world is “had” in this sense, however, it is important to clarify what is philosophically at stake in this discussion. Dewey’s critique of intellectualism underscores the fact that he does not simply offer his distinction between knowing-that and know-how as a contemporary version of the classical *theōria/práxis* bifurcation, where the former (consisting of a detached consideration of propositions or principles) is thought to both precede and govern the latter. The cognitively biased picture of all skillful performance as necessarily involving the invocation of anterior rules prescriptions or principles is part of Dewey’s definition of “intellectualism.” It is what Gilbert Ryle, while discussing his own formulation of practical know-how, similarly refers to as the “intellectualist legend.”²⁶ Dewey and Ryle both argue against this intellectualist legend by claiming that theory is actually derivative of practice. With his robust (i.e., socially and culturally situated) conception of habit, Dewey in particular insists that most of our life practices are enacted without falling back onto “a bit of theory” (as Ryle puts it). Know-how cannot be assimilated to knowing-that without compromising the spontaneous and autonomous nature of the former. The phenomenology of our everyday coping reveals that practical action antecedently *founds* as well as *shapes* subsequent theory (knowing-that, or reflective thinking). The majority of our dealings with the world consist of the activation of coping mechanisms enacted without having to involve an explicit plan or reflective activity.

The intellectualism that is the target of Dewey’s criticisms thus artificially severs the organic relation between the body—or “the brain and nervous system” which are “primarily organs of action-undergoing”²⁷—and its practical connection to its affordance-laden environment. Dewey continues: “When intellectual experience and its material are taken to be primary, the cord that binds experience and nature is cut.”²⁸ Once this cord between experience and the world is severed, we are immediately faced with the skeptical difficulties that plague the intellectualist position. Shaun Gallagher and Anthony J. Marcel similarly point to the distorting consequences of this “severing tendency” when they claim that:

When faced with a range of question about the self (questions pertaining to identity, experience of self, nature of self, so forth) most theorists approach the topic in a manner that is abstract or detached from behavior and/or action normally embedded in contextualized situations. When, for example, philosophers employ reflective introspection in order to search for the unity of consciousness or “the self”

as an element of consciousness, they choose a framework for their investigation that is not equivalent to the framework within which people normally act.²⁹

By arguing for know-how as a fundamental bodily knowing—in other words, by examining the self through the framework of contextualized action—Dewey claims to have excavated the level of experience in which bodily habits establish a sophisticated bedrock structure of coordinated “action-undergoings” with the world—and in doing so, to have thus circumvented the skepticism inherent in a Cartesian severing of mind and world. The self in contextualized action is disclosed as always already locked in a primordial embrace with its environment. Bedrock bodily habits bind the self of contextualized action to its environment via this somatic skillfulness. And the question of how we can come to know an external world is circumvented. For the very posing of the question is only possible for an agent already embedded within and interacting with the very world whose existence she purports to question. Therefore, it becomes apparent, according to Dewey, that, “Unless there is a breach of historic and natural continuity, cognitive experiences must originate within that of a noncognitive sort.”³⁰ Experiences “of a noncognitive sort” are precisely those thoughtless bodily habits Dewey insists underwrite our basic way of inhabiting the world. Higher forms of reflective activity ultimately rest on, and indeed emerge from, “thoughtless” bodily action. In the next section, I want to analyze this contention more carefully and bring *wu-wei* back into the discussion.

IV. DEWEY, DAOISM, AND THE ETHOS OF EXPERTISE

To reiterate points made above: For Dewey, know-how is a form of nonrepresentational bodily intelligence that progressively emerges from various interactions with our lived environments. On a personal behavioral level, this coping involves a bodily sensitivity—that is, an openness or “susceptibility to the useful or harmful in surroundings” that, with increased experience and familiarity, “becomes premonitory; an occasion of eventual consequences”³¹ based upon specific possibilities of action that present themselves within different situations.

Again, Dewey insists that know-how, as a noncognitive sensitivity, is not a matter of representational thought. It is, rather, a feeling of contextual familiarity that opens up possibilities for further action. Put differently, know-how is the ethos of expertise or feeling of “at home-ness” that allows our skilled coping to operate beneath reflective consciousness. Dewey writes:

The sailor is intellectually at home on the sea, the hunter in the forest, the painter in his studio, the man of science in his laboratory. These commonplaces are universally recognized in their concrete; but their significance is obscured and their truth denied in the current general theory of mind.³²

Dewey's use of "intellectual" to describe the at-home-ness of the sailor, hunter, painter, and man of science is potentially misleading. Reinforcing his characterization of the noncognitive nature of know-how, Dewey continues by claiming that know-how is a kind of knowledge that "lives in the muscles, not in consciousness."³³ Clearly, then, he is pointing to a very specific level of experience that is operative prior to reflective analysis. At this bedrock layer of bodily coping, the body *has* its lived environment via an ethos of expertise. At home in particular situations, the body is prereflectively aware of itself as the possessor of certain capacities for action, and simultaneously of certain salient features of the body's environment as affording possible responses in virtue of these capacities for action.

The body is therefore prereflectively aware of its environment as a space where it may act in a host of situationally appropriate ways. But these possibilities are not formally expressible—at least in any exhaustive way. Nor are they grasped propositionally. Again, they are *felt* affordances that disclose themselves within an ethos of expertise coupling bodily habits and world. As Dewey describes it, then, bodily know-how exhibits a form of intentionality or goal-directedness that (1) marks it as genuine knowledge of both self (as agent) and world (as arena for the agent's action), but which (2) differentiates it from propositional or representational knowledge.

Similarly, as we have seen above, the view of the *Daodejing* is that "naturalness"—the core value of Daoist ethics, realized through an effortless relating to the people and things in the world (*wu-wei*)—emerges from a kind of ethos of expertise. Via the perpetual practice of *wu-wei*, the sage embodies the Way in all action contexts. She expresses the ultimate form of skill-knowledge: Namely, manifesting an expertise of living that allows her to develop and express her humanity to the fullest degree, and to encourage the same capacities in others by serving as an example for them. Therefore, the sage's ethos of expertise is generalized from particular environments (the sailor on the sea, the painter in her studio, the teacher in her classroom) to encompass the entire world. The sage is "naturally" at home in all situations she encounters and can respond to situational demands in a spontaneous and appropriate manner.

Of the place of "naturalness" within the overall structure of the *Daodejing*, Xiaogan Liu remarks:

Looking at the frequency with which various concepts are used, we see that *Laozi* often discusses *wuwei* and Dao (“the Way”); from that we can conclude that these concepts are central to the book’s argument. Nonetheless, the core value that actually informs this argument is “naturalness.”³⁴

According to the text, naturalness is the basic feature of the Way. Chapter 25:

The Way is great; heaven is great, earth is great; and the king is also great.
 Within this realm there are four things that are great, and the king counts as one.
 People model themselves on earth,
 Earth on heaven,
 Heaven on the Way,
 And the Way on naturalness.³⁵

Important to note here is the fact that “people” and “the Way” bookend the spectrum of “the four things” mentioned in this passage. By conforming to the basic principle of the Way—in other words, by exhibiting a perpetual naturalness—human beings can exert a causal efficacy that has a cosmological resonance. For the naturalness exhibited by the sage realizes an order or harmony not only on a personal behavioral level but on a more encompassing social level as well. The sage naturally creates harmony wherever she goes, with whomever she meets. As a dynamic embodiment of the Way, the sage is an exemplar of naturalness—and others look to emulate her ways. Thus, diverse social institutions arise from the communal existence of multiple sages, and naturalness becomes a core feature of these local social ontologies. Eventually, these natural societies expand and grow and, ideally, come to encompass the earth. Once this is accomplished, the earth as a whole is in accordance with the ultimate order which exists beyond “the ten thousand things” of this world: the will of Heaven. Harmony is reached on both a microcosmic and macrocosmic scale. And so the whole of creation becomes a dynamic expression of the naturalness of the Way. The individual sage in this manner also exhibits a simultaneous microcosmic/macrocosmic expertise. She realizes naturalness on a microcosmic (personal behavior) level while at the same time exerting a macrocosmic efficacy (affecting her local social ontology and its place in the cosmic order) through the effortless expertise of her personal behavioral practices.

Clearly there is a profound religious and cosmological dimension present in the Daoist formulation of *wu-wei* and naturalness that is absent from Dewey’s discussion of know-how. And this religious dimension must be acknowledged if we are to appreciate the full significance of these notions. However, we must also not overlook the

fact the religious efficacy of naturalness is first realized on a personal behavioral level via *wu-wei*—at the prereflective level of our bodily habits, to use Dewey’s favored term. Prior to exerting its macrocosmic efficacy; naturalness must be realized in microcosmic actions and behaviors through the cultivation of an ethos of expertise. Therefore, it is appropriate to draw connections between the Daoist conception of *wu-wei* and naturalness (which is both a normative as well as a cosmological principle) and Dewey’s pragmatic formulation of know-how.

Taken together, then, Dewey’s analysis of know-how and the Daoist insistence on the pragmatic significance of *wu-wei* together point to a phenomenon that we might refer to as the body’s “intentional project,” or a form of noncognitive motor intentionality. The body’s intentional project is the prereflective level of experience through which the body is knowingly (i.e., feelingly) integrated into its lived environment. There is precedence for this idea within the phenomenological tradition of Western philosophy as well. Merleau-Ponty speaks of a “maximal grip” that obtains between an agent’s body and the practical saliences of its environment. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, he writes that “maximal grip” consists of achieving

a certain possession of the world by my body, a certain gearing of my body to the world . . . my body is geared onto the world when my perception presents me with a spectacle as varied and as clearly articulated as possible, and when my motor intentions, as they unfold, receive the responses they expect from the world.³⁶

But the mechanism enabling this intimate maximal grip with the world—the body’s intentional project—again does not exhibit a propositional or representational structure characteristic of knowing-that. According to Merleau-Ponty, “Our body is not an object for an ‘I think,’ it is a grouping of lived through meanings which moves towards its equilibrium.”³⁷

Drawing out the *responsive* nature of bodily intelligence, Dewey writes similarly that know-how consists of “securing prompt and exact adjustment to the [organism’s] environment” since “the truth is that in every waking moment, the complete balance of the organism and its environment is constantly interfered with and as constantly restored.”³⁸ Life just is, then, a perpetual series of “interruptions and recoveries”³⁹ according to Dewey. This organic exchange between the organism and the environment constitutes what Dewey also terms “equilibrium.” Equilibrium is the “degree of fit” between the body’s intentional projects and the environment (including the practical saliences constitutive thereof) within which the body’s intentional projects are enacted. Similarly, Daoism’s notion of “naturalness” emphasizes the importance of maintaining both a practical as well as

an ethical equilibrium by effortlessly adapting to the perpetual “interruptions and recoveries” that comprise our daily life. The sage manifests a practical sagacity that allows her sage to yield to the demands of encountered situations and to respond spontaneously, effortlessly, and expertly. Thus, we read in chapter 64:

Therefore the sage desires not to desire
And does not value goods which are hard to come by;
Learns not to learn,
And makes good the mistakes of the populace
In order to help the myriad creatures to be natural and to refrain
from daring to act.⁴⁰

But to reiterate the essential point here: Both Dewey and Daoism insist that we do not explicitly represent formal conditions of satisfaction to determine whether or not an action has been performed correctly (and thus “equilibrium” achieved between the body, its lived environment, and the situational salencies of the environment to which the body is attuned and responsive). For the body’s intentional project is not a form of cognitive or representational intentionality whatsoever. It is a skillful *poise*,⁴¹ a felt ethos of expertise. The body thus exhibits its own affective intelligence that allows it to navigate the world smoothly and spontaneously. Reflective thinking can, of course, enrich this bodily intelligence in important ways. But both Dewey and Daoism insist that the animate body, too, is a significant source of genuine knowledge in its own right.

V. ETHOS, EXPERTISE, AND AN ETHICS OF EFFORTLESS ACTION

Though Dewey clearly provides a more systematic treatment of bodily know-how than the *Daodejing*, the notion’s ethical-religious significance is not developed within Dewey’s writings. And though the *Daodejing*’s development of *wu-wei* lacks Dewey’s systematic approach, it is, as I have argued earlier, primarily an ethical-religious concept. In this final section, I suggest that Dewey’s treatment of knowing-how can be applied to the ethical dimensions of *wu-wei* to generate an “ethics of effortless action” without doing injustice to the aims of either Dewey or the *Daodejing* and their respective characterizations of know-how and *wu-wei*. I develop this claim by sketching out the phenomenological form such an ethics might take. Due to considerations of space, however, I offer only an outline, leaving the specifics for another time.

To begin, we can note that, generally speaking, the majority of Western ethical theories can be at least partially characterized by

noting certain conceptualist or cognitivist presuppositions. As a gloss of these theories and their presuppositions, it can be said that (again, generally speaking) Western ethical theories portray moral cognition as an exercise in detached, critical-rational evaluation of a priori principles concerned with determining the “rightness” of subsequent actions. In other words, the formulation of reasoned, universalizeable principles always precedes the particular actions these principles are meant to govern. This critical-rational tradition of “morality as the formulation of moral judgments” is of course best exemplified by the Kantian tradition.⁴²

Utilizing insights from Dewey and Daoism, I suggest instead that moral cognition is first and foremost a practical skill: Specifically, a synthesis of moral perception and embodied action. Moral development thus entails the cultivation of an ethical “ethos of expertise,” or a morally attuned bodily comportment that enables one to skillfully and intuitively respond to the morally salient features of concrete situations. More simply, the vast majority of our moral life involves moral *action* before it does moral *thought*. The former does not preclude the latter, certainly. But one of the lessons from our discussion thus far is that, to think (i.e., reason) morally, one must already be attuned to the world in such a way that situations are disclosed as morally significant in the first place. And this attunement is enacted at the level of our bodily affective engagements. Behavioral programs meant to facilitate moral growth must therefore soften the more traditional cognitivist orientation and give due attention to the embedded and embodied nature of ethical *conduct*. The body must be a focal point of moral training.

I will sketch out this claim by developing the two major components of an “ethos of ethical expertise”: moral perception and moral action. The first component will be developed by a phenomenological articulation of the *gestalt shift* that occurs in expert moral perception. The second component of my main argument in the remainder of this article will be an analysis of intuitive moral action as emergent from expert moral perception—in other words, expert moral action as a spontaneous mode of activity that does not (necessarily, at least) involve the invocation of reflective judgments or rational principles.

1. *The Nondual Gestalt Structure of Expert Moral Perception*⁴³

When I speak of expert moral perception as involving a nondual gestalt shift, I have in mind something like the following. In expert moral perception, the moral expert (or sage, if you like) immediately and noninferentially perceives the morally salient features of a situation. These morally salient features can be of a nearly infinite variety,

and vary in intensity and degree: For example, a nearly imperceptible change in a coworker's tone during a casual conversation versus their suddenly bursting into tears; the slight blush of someone whom I have abruptly made uncomfortable by uttering an ill-considered comment; a twenty-dollar bill that slips out of the pocket of a person in front of me as he/she continues down the street unaware; a sudden cry for help just around the corner; the expectant glance of a lone child waiting to be acknowledged in a room full of adults.

Via an immediate, noninferential perception of these features, a gestalt shift or perspectival reorganization is affected. What is normally in the *foreground* of the moral expert's experience—egocentric self-interests; self-directed concerns with one's own well-being and immediate desires—abruptly shift to the *background*. And what is normally in the *background* of a moral expert's experience—other-directed concerns and considerations; a global awareness of moral saliences not directly relevant to one's own self-interests—shifts abruptly to the *foreground* of their experiential field. By intuitively fixing onto these morally salient features, the perceptual organization of the moral context is reconfigured in a profound way. In an important sense, the very phenomenological structure of the moral situation itself has changed. The figure-ground shift that I am speaking of entails a thorough *moral refocusing*: What is normally figure (self-directed concern) is resituated as ground, and what is normally ground (other-directed care) is resituated as figure. By intuitively foregrounding an other-directed care—where my self-directed concern is no longer experienced as over against the moral needs of the other as they present themselves to me—I become capable of an spontaneous, egoless response to the particular demands of the situation.

Consider the following scenario:

At work one day, I am walking down the hall when I encounter a coworker with whom I am on generally friendly terms. However, this individual, Jane, is not an especially close friend of mine. Our relationship does not extend outside of work-related situations. Today Jane seems unusually cold and indifferent. She is curt in her response to my greeting and barely meets my gaze before continuing on her way. Later we have a similarly frosty encounter. The workday concludes with Jane walking briskly by my desk, head down, without offering a word.

Thinking about these things that evening, I become offended. I am convinced that I have done nothing to deserve this treatment. Rather, I have gone out of my way to be consistently pleasant and affable to Jane. I decide that Jane is clearly a moody individual, more so than I had previously realized. Thinking back over the course of our work relationship, I begin to fixate on other previous encounters

with her that, in light of today's experience, I now see hint at this propensity to sullenness, even though I had failed to "read" them properly. Thinking some more, I decide that Jane is simply an unpleasant person. I convince myself that I have *always* really felt this way about her; today's experience simply confirmed my intuition. In fact, I am grateful that today's encounters finally revealed her true character. I anticipate future encounters with Jane and begin to imagine how this realization will shape those encounters.

The next morning, I see Jane and another coworker, John, chatting quietly at the end of the hall. I begin walking toward them, steeling myself for what I expect to be the first of many cool encounters with Jane. However, as I am suddenly within earshot of my two coworkers, Jane looks up at me with swollen eyes and musters a faint smile. Simultaneously, John leans closer to Jane and says, "I'm so very sorry about your mother's passing. I know the two of you were very close." At the moment, I experience an abrupt and comprehensive *moral refocusing*. What was previously at the foreground of my moral perception—feelings of resentment and anger, an anticipation of future unpleasant encounters that would reinforce my resentment—now *recede into the background* and subsequently disappear. A profound perspectival shift has been affected. I move beyond the self-directed considerations that had colored my experience until this moment and am immediately aware of the morally salient features of the current situation, which I had previously overlooked. I see Jane for what she is: a daughter who is coping with the death of her mother. Jane is an individual suffering in the face of a great personal tragedy, a person in need of selfless compassion and sensitivity. In a very important sense, I enter into Jane's grief by foregrounding her immediate needs. In doing so, I am in a position to spontaneously respond to these needs in an authentically selfless manner, as my prior bitterness has now dissipated completely into the background via this moral gestalt shift.

In failing to be attuned to the morally salient features of my previous day's encounters with Jane—the fact that her curt behavior was in fact not consistent with our personal history; an uncharacteristic heaviness of spirit or telling melancholy that would have disclosed itself had I been more attentive—I reaffirm my status as a moral novice. My own self-directed feelings and concerns were thoroughly foregrounded in my experience, and colored my social encounters throughout the day. It is only through a comprehensive gestalt shift, triggered by my coming into an appropriately significant concrete moral situation (Jane's palpable grief over her mother's death), that I am "jolted," as it were, out of my egocentrism and into a nondual moral figure-ground shift that places me in a morally attuned state of readiness-to-respond. A moral expert would have been poised to affect such a shift much earlier, and would have been more sensitively attuned to the relevant situational salencies that affect such a shift. This perpetual moral attunement, or bodily poise, is what

differentiates the moral expert from the novice. Poise, then, denotes neither a static nor passive state but rather a perpetual readiness-to-respond which is accomplished spontaneously via affecting the gestalt shift described previously. It is a readiness (i) to intuitively perceive the morally salient features of a concrete situation, and (ii) to respond to them with spontaneous (re-)action. It occurs without planning or reflective analysis.

Far from being an isolated experience, I suggest that a significant portion of our moral life is comprised of experiences similar to the one depicted above. These kinds of micro-encounters constitute the very marrow of our social life. Throughout our everyday lives, we are confronted with endless concrete situations that call for an immediate moral response (e.g., giving comfort, lending a helping hand, lifting a mood with humor, etc.)—and by and large, we simply respond. And we do so without deliberating. Again, the upshot of this pragmatic model of moral experience that I have been developing is that moral expertise is seen as a primarily progressive skill cultivation—and not, then, solely as a progressive refinement of moral principles. It is a matter of know-how, not knowing-that. As we develop and age, move throughout our lives and accumulate experiences, we find ourselves encountering and responding to an increasing number and variety of concrete moral situations. Moral maturity develops through our engagement with these situations. Genuine moral maturity is therefore realized not primarily through reflective thinking or deductive principles, but rather in embodied practice: A progressively developed ability to intuitively perceive the morally salient features of a given situation and to affect a nondual gestalt shift or perceptual reorganization similar to the one described previously. Sensitive moral perception thus generates skilled moral action. I now consider this latter notion more carefully.

2. *Skilled Moral Action as Bodily Knowing*

Drawing upon Dewey and Daoism's insights into practical know-how, I suggest that the spontaneous action issuing from intuitive moral perception be characterized as a kind of "bodily knowing."⁴⁴ This sort of spontaneous responsiveness is reported in moral cases (e.g., grabbing a young child about to fall) where one claims to have "acted without thinking about it."

There is precedence for this conception of moral action. Influenced by Zen Buddhism, the Japanese Kyoto school philosopher Kitaro Nishida speaks of spontaneous bodily knowing in the context of both ethical and aesthetic disciplines. He writes that:

‘Consciousness that has become nothing’ is not something that is hindered by action; it must be something that internalizes action.

‘Sensitivity’ acquired through discipline is not mere mechanical habit. In the case of a painter painting a picture, he, of course, does not follow conceptual judgment; but his painting is not mere spontaneous movement, either. His movement must have the self-awareness of power. It is not reflective self-awareness, but self-awareness in action. ‘Style’ is such a self-awareness in action.⁴⁵

Similarly, Francisco Varela writes that “When one *is* the action, no residue of self-consciousness remains to observe the action externally.”⁴⁶ Again, both Nishida and Varela argue that, within this form of spontaneous responsiveness, there is no felt distinction between agent and action: Our agency *is* our action, the action as it is performed in an expert (spontaneous, intuitive, and “nonthinking”) manner. Cultivating an ethos of expertise in nearly any practical domain is precisely the ability to avoid overthinking a proper course of activity—again, recall the earlier discussion of the expert athlete who simply performs without being conscious of the coaching principles governing expert performance—by simply responding to situational saliences in the proper manner. In expert action, we therefore do not conceptualize antecedent success conditions that must be met for a particular action to be considered a successful one. Nor do we represent ourselves *to* ourselves through a kind of higher-order “global monitoring system” that trains a watchful eye on the self as it acts. These tendencies would constitute a conceptual representation of some predetermined goal that is at odds with the nonconceptual phenomenology of our bodily knowing. Moreover, conceptually predetermined goals would compromise the genuine spontaneity of the majority of our moral responses. Again, this is not to deny that reflective thinking sometimes enters our moral experience. It is quite clear that it does. The deceptively simple point, however, is that very often *it doesn’t*. Moral action can thus go on without this component.

Important to note is that our bodily responses to moral encounters of the sorts described previously are not merely instinctual or mechanically blind responses. Rather, they exhibit a situational appropriateness that differentiates them from simple instinct (though again, this directedness and appropriateness does not have to be reflectively present). Moreover, these bodily responses are, once again, genuine knowledge; they exhibit a *goal-directedness*, or situational salience, that indicates a clear understanding of the situation. Samuel Todes offers a helpful phenomenological description of this idea with his analysis of bodily poise. Poise, for Todes, is simply

this intention of the active body . . . in dealing with the things and persons around us. It is sharply to be distinguished from its correlate,

the *pose* of the inactive body. Poise is always a way of responding to, of dealing with, objects around one. . . . Poise does not, when successful, “coincide” or “agree” with its later “effects,” as does will with its achievements. Rather, when successful, poise *is* its own effect.⁴⁷

Poise, as “its own effect,” enables us to bodily know the things of the world that we respond to and deal with in an intimately practical way. This is because, Todes insists:

the success of poise is not in its *execution*, but in its very *existence*, by which the body is, to begin with, knowingly in touch with the objects around it. As soon as I am poised in my circumstances, I know . . . something about those objects to which I am doing something with my body.⁴⁸

Poise thus captures how the body is knowingly in touch with those objects in its environment toward which it is intimately attuned. It is what enables me to enter into my apartment and know, without explicitly reflecting, how to navigate the spatial arrangement of my lived space and the objects that make it up—even if the lights are out and it is completely dark. I can enter into my kitchen early in the morning, bleary-eyed and half-conscious from lack of sleep, and already know (as a function of bodily familiarity with my lived space) how to find my coffee maker, retrieve coffee and begin brewing it. The same is true of my office, the classrooms I teach in, the restaurants I eat in, and any number of the thousands of practical contexts we enter into every day. The body’s poise allows me to intelligently inhabit these spaces without explicitly thinking about it.

But this notion has moral significance, too. For the body is the site of my responsive engagement with others. If the body’s perceptual systems are what disclose certain features of a given context as morally significant, it is the body’s *poise* that prepares the moral subject to both receive and respond to the features in appropriate (i.e., skillful and spontaneous) ways. The body’s moral capacities, understood within a skill-based model, can thus be cultivated, deepened, and refined. As the primary point of moral contact with others, we therefore need to understand the body’s habits and actions, and to account for their ubiquity—and indeed, potentiality—when thinking about the general nature of social and moral relatedness.

VI. CONCLUSION

I have argued that both Daoism and Dewey offer suggestive conceptions of skilled bodily action that is operative without invoking reflective thought. More radically, both Daoism and Dewey argue that the

body's skilled habits actually precede, and are the source of, reflective thinking. The animate body is thus our primary point of contact with the world, a source of both knowledge and feeling. Both contend that we are first acting agents—situated, animate bodies—prior to our being reflective cognitive subjects. In this way, Daoism and Dewey argue that abstract conceptions of the self that overemphasize our cognitive relations with the world rob our self-model of the rich affective ethos that emerges through the spontaneity of a creative life—a life that transforms and is transformed by the situations and world of which it is an active part. In Daoist and Deweyan theories of action, *affectivity* becomes the fundamental interface between self and both the natural and social world. And this has suggestive implications for thinking through the nature of embodied moral experience. I have attempted to explore some of these implications in the preceding section by presenting a very general portrayal of moral skillfulness, and the primary role that the active and affective body plays in structuring this experience.

Many questions, of course, remain. But a lesson from both Daoism and Dewey is that we must not neglect the primacy of the body. We are first and foremost embodied creatures. We know the world and relate to others through various forms of bodily engagement. Our moral training must therefore include a dimension of bodily cultivation. Just as the development of expertise in other skill domains requires practice, repetition, and a familiarity emerging from the accumulation of real-world encounters, so too does our development as moral experts arise from these same components. With the overemphasis on the rational aspect of our moral agency at the expense of the practical and embodied dimension, cognitivist moral theories potentially overlook vital felt dimensions within our moral experience. As Daoism and Dewey would agree, these aspects must be present if we are to exhibit the full expression of our moral capacities as embodied subjects.

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ENDNOTES

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1. Edward Slingerland, "Effortless Action: The Chinese Spiritual Ideal of *Wu-Wei*," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68, no. 2 (2000): 293–328.
2. *Ibid.*, 295.
3. *Daodejing*, "Making This Life Significant." *A Philosophical Translation*, ed. Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003), 123.

4. Ibid., 80.
5. Ibid., 122.
6. Ibid., 175.
7. Edward Slingerland, *Effortless Action: Wu-Wei as Conceptual Metaphor and Spiritual Ideal in Early China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 300.
8. For a discussion of “conditions of satisfaction” as a logical feature of intentional action, see John Searle, *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
9. For an extensive analysis of the notion of *ziran*, see Chung-ying Cheng, “Dimensions of the Dao and Onto-Ethics in Light of the DDJ,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 31, no. 2 (2004): 143–82.
10. *Daodejing*, 178.
11. The discussion above, and that which follows, clearly owes a great debt to Hubert Dreyfus’s well-known analysis of skilled coping as nonrepresentational action. See, for example, Mark Wrathall and Jeff Malpas, eds., *Heidegger, Coping, and Cognitive Science: Essays in Honor of Hubert L. Dreyfus*, vols. 1 and 2 (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000).
12. John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 125.
13. John Dewey, *How We Think* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1977), 6.
14. Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 124.
15. Ibid., 121.
16. Richard Bernstein, *Praxis and Action: Contemporary Philosophies of Human Activity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), 203.
17. Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 123.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid., 124.
20. Ibid., 126.
21. John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (New York: Dover, 1958), 21.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. For an in-depth discussion of the practical and perceptual significance of environmental affordances very much in line with aspects of Dewey’s thinking here, see James Gibson’s *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966).
25. Ibid., 21.
26. Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson, 1949), 29.
27. Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 23.
28. Ibid.
29. Shaun Gallagher and Anthony J. Marcel, “The Self in Contextualized Action,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 6, no. 4 (1999): 5.
30. Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 23.
31. Ibid., 257.
32. Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 123.
33. Ibid., 124.
34. Liu Xiaogan, “An Inquiry into the Core Value of Laozi’s Philosophy,” in *Religious and Philosophical Aspects of the Laozi*, ed. Mark Csikszentmijalyi and Philip J. Ivanhoe (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 211. Through e-mail correspondence, the *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* and Linyu Gu recently brought to my attention that in the above article Xiaogan Liu has acknowledged his debt to the influence he received from Gu on Laozi’s naturalist philosophy of value. Gu has provided the following reference for my information: Linyu Gu 顧林玉, “Laozi Chongshang Ziran de Jiazhi Quxiang 《老子》崇尚自然的價值取向 [Laozi’s Value Approach in Honoring Ziran]” (MA thesis, Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, 1988), and Gu’s article version of the same title was published in *Xueshu Yuekan* 《學術月刊》[*Academic Monthly*], January 1989. I am grateful to the *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* for introducing this connection.
35. Quoted in *ibid.*, 220.

36. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New York: Routledge, 1964), 250.
37. *Ibid.*, 153.
38. Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 124–25.
39. *Ibid.*, 125.
40. Quoted in Liu, “An Inquiry into the Core Value,” 219.
41. I discuss the notion of bodily poise in more detail in the following section. I borrow this notion from Samuel Todes’ *Body and World* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001).
42. Of course, not all Western thinkers (both classical and contemporary) endorse this kind of critical-rational, deliberative approach to ethics. Contemporary challenges to this view are increasingly abundant. They include Aristotelian virtue ethics (including G. E. M. Anscombe and, more recently, Alasdair MacIntyre), Carol Gilligan’s and Annette Baier’s “ethics of care,” and the work of Iris Murdoch and John McDowell, to name a few. However, these are all relatively recent correctives to a critical-rational view that has largely held sway until the latter portion of the twentieth century. And the view I am here arguing for foregrounds the bodily perceptual and spontaneous nature of moral coping in a way that differentiates it from these other alternatives.
43. This section is influenced by Peggy DesAutels’ discussion in her article, “Gestalt Shifts in Moral Perception,” in *Minds and Morals: Essays on Ethics and Cognitive Science*, ed. Larry May, Marilyn Friedman, and Andy Clark (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 129–44.
44. Echoing Merleau-Ponty’s language, Gary Young uses this expression in his “Bodily Knowing: Re-thinking Our Understanding of Procedural Knowledge,” *Philosophical Explorations* 7, no. 1 (2004): 37–54. His discussion of habit and nonconceptual bodily action as a legitimate form of knowledge assisted the developments of several aspects of this section.
45. Kitaro Nishida, *Art and Morality*, trans. David Dilworth and Valdo Viglielmo (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1973), 5.
46. Francisco Varela, *Ethical Know-How: Action, Wisdom, and Cognition* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 4.
47. Todes, *Body and World*, 65.
48. *Ibid.*, 66.