Die Kunst des Lebens und andere Künste: Skurrile Skizzzen zu einem euro-daoistischen Ethos ohne Moral (review)

Geir Sigurðsson

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wrong (the *four sprouts*), while Wang’s view seems to focus more on the knowing (zhī 旨) aspect. Whether Lu and Wang really differ in their views is itself a worthy topic for dispute, but Ivanhoe’s translation in this case does not allow such distinctions to be made, and could lead to an interjection of Wang’s ideas into Lu’s philosophy.

In conclusion, Ivanhoe’s *Readings* is a highly commendable translation of Lu Xiangshan’s and Wang Yangming’s works. It gives good coverage of their philosophical views and literary styles, and can be used as a reliable sourcebook for the Lu-Wang School. This book can be used for any course on Neo-Confucianism, and I will certainly adopt it myself when I teach such a course. I hope Ivanhoe will continue his endeavor and bring more Neo-Confucian works into the English-speaking world.

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Reviewed by **Geir Sigurðsson**  
University of Iceland

East-West philosophical encounters pose a tantalizing problem: virtually endless comparisons and attempts to find resonating (or contrasting) features seem to prevent us from ever getting to the heart of the matter and say what we want to say. It can be hard enough, as a matter of fact, to have to deal with only one of the traditions in question, as it requires that we work through a long list of commentaries and interpretations before we can even hope to find anything resembling a solution to the problem(s) giving rise to our explorations. In this way, the history of philosophy has become philosophy itself, as Günter Wohlfart writes in his challenging book, *Die Kunst des Lebens und andere Künste* (The art of living and other arts), echoing a complaint made by Albert Camus.  

The widespread philosophical tendency to bypass the complex historical and hermeneutical web of dialogues and return to simplicity, *zu den Sachen selbst* (Edmund Husserl), to that which “really matters,” is an understandable temptation. The tendency is recurrent in the history of Western philosophy, reaching a higher level of urgency at the turn of the twentieth century and beyond. In China, however, ancient Daoist philosophy already presents itself as such an endeavor to rid itself of the baggage of tradition, history, and established systems in its quest for optimal ways of living—and dying. The Daoist sage is one who finds stability and tranquility in the continuous turbulence of an ever-changing existence. But one does not become a sage out of the blue. Sagehood demands a long and continuous process of learning, self-cultivation, perspicacity, et cetera. It may very well consist in simplicity and plainness, but unfolding and cultivating these qualities is not necessarily simple and plain. It requires complex “undoings” of the acquired views and tendencies with which modern life has imbued us.

Sagehood is therefore a paradoxical combination of acquisition and forgetting—or this seems to be one among the many flavors contained in Günter Wohlfart’s philosophical soup of spicy Zhuangzian tales as well as Daoist- and Zen-inspired
irony, puns, and oblique observations in combination with Western insights, or, as he puts it himself, “somewhat bland Germanic thought-ingredients” (p. 12).

This book, a “tractatus poético-philosophicus,” as the author calls it, could be read as a commentary on the ancient Daoist masters, in particular on Zhuangzi. But it is a commentary à la chinois in that Wohlfart attempts, in a most trenchant manner, to apply their philosophical insights to contemporary issues and perspectives, offering poignant and often witty criticism of seminal Western-based views and values. At the same time, however, he rejects the unproductive partisan view according to which anything coming from the East will be presented as superior to the West. In fact, not only does he mix his reflections on the ancient Daoist thinkers with selected insights from Western thinkers such as Hegel, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein, among others; he also condemns severely any kind of esoteric Orientalism—in a style and manner much reminiscent of Nietzsche: “nothing is more repulsive than those para-religious gurus rolling around in the post-Christian meaning-vacuum, sprawling on the east-west couch, intoxicating their credulous disciples with enticing eso-cocktails, whereby they completely discredit an engagement with Asian thought” (pp. 38–39). While he compares, in the opening sentence, his exploration with an “aimless morning stroll,” it is obvious that at least one of his objectives consists precisely in demystifying ancient Chinese philosophy by presenting it as an applicable and sensible (but not “rational”!) philosophy of life.

Wohlfart’s subtitle could be translated “Ludicrous Sketches of a Euro-Daoist Ethos Without Morality.” Thus, the central theme has to do with ethics and morality, but, as indicated, it revolves around the idea of (localized) ethos as being prior to universal ethics and morality. He problematizes the Western penchant for universal rationalization that he sees epitomized in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Kant’s deontic ethics, he says, with its “pure theoretical practical reason, locks us inside a parallel universe of a universalism out of pure glass, inside a crystal bowl of formal idealism of action” (p. 226). Wohlfart sees in Kant’s philosophy a symptom of a culture that has been fixed on the mind, reason, and selfhood instead of trying to figure out how action occurs in real-life situations. One devastating consequence of this, Wohlfart notes, is the kind of hypocrisy that veils itself as universal ethics in order to justify aggressive actions resting on mere greed for wealth and power, such as the Bush administration’s war for “freedom and democracy” in Iraq.

The Daoist alternative to the Western obsession with rationality, according to Wohlfart, consists in training one’s sensibilities through action and interaction with one’s immediate environment. The model is found in the well-known Daoist artisans from the Zhuangzi, Cook Ding and others, who have mastered their skills to such an extent that they have become entirely effortless, spontaneous, smooth, and efficient. According to Wohlfart’s interpretation, these actions exemplify an art of life in an “extra-moral sense” as they concern a certain way to handle things, but they also indicate efficient moral action, that is, how best to act toward or interact with other people: “the art of action manifests itself as artisan know-how to deal with things as well as ethical know-how to deal with living creatures” (p. 229). A common feature of the artisans and the old swimmer, not to mention creatures such as the millipede,
is that they are immersed in what they do, just as we are immersed in communal human living from the very day we are born. Why should we not be capable of developing our “moral” skills in a comparable manner by gradually refining our “feel” for each and every inter-human situation until we respond to novel situations with the natural spontaneity that knows how to deal with them before we know it ourselves (in our mind)?

An important obstacle may be the inescapable fact that we communicate through language, which Wohlfart tackles from a Daoist point of view, playing with language himself in order to overcome it. We tend to let language, its words, explicit notions, and grammatical structures dominate our approach to the things themselves. The words linger in our minds and can sediment there, creating principles, reifications, categories, systems, and dogmas that prevent us from evaluating each and every particular situation on its own terms. In Zhuangzi’s terms, words are like certain ancient Chinese measure-goblets, zhī卮, that turn over as soon as they are full, empty their content, and then adjust themselves again in an upright position—but now empty: “The content is the meaning or sense of the word. The meaning of the word depends on its use, on the everyday context of events. This context is fluctuating” (p. 57). If we prevent the measure-goblet from turning over, as it is meant to do when full, it will simply overflow. The excessive focus on reason derives from such a conceptual cage inside which we willingly lock ourselves. Is it because we cannot handle the natural indeterminacy of life? Does it take too much effort—indeed, courage—to overcome the necessary vagueness of real situations? Rules and principles may be similar to words in that they are merely provisional rules of thumb that need be adjusted to every new situation. Taking rules as absolute is the easy way out: it oversimplifies reality, turns it into a coarse grid that fails to account for the fine nuances between circumstances that may seem comparable on the surface, but in fact would require different approaches.

Wohlfart argues that the analytical tendency in Western thinking to absolutize language, reason, and the will of the ego is detrimental to genuine ethical growth and maturity. Ethics, then, is a kind of skill that can only be developed through practice and training in real-life situations. In this regard, the art of action in an extramoral sense is taken as an analogy for the art of action in a moral sense. But is this viable? Wohlfart finds his analogies in particular in everyday action and artisan skills, and he is, for instance, correct when he says that “it is best to forget one’s feet when one intends to run downstairs—in order to avoid falling downstairs” (p. 108). But the skill of walking may not be an appropriate analogy, for walking is too simple. Moreover, a child who has just started walking is indeed careful and conscious of where she places her feet. The same applies to adults while walking in unusual and uneven terrain. Carelessness could cause them to fall and hurt themselves. So what does this tell us about action in the inter-human sphere where we are continually encountering new and unusual terrain? It is not so clear whether the Daoist vision is particularly helpful in this regard.

In fact, the Confucian view, which Wohlfart seems to downplay (he is admittedly rather ambiguous in his opinion of Confucianism), may indeed be more sophisticated,
and, perhaps, not as distant from the Daoist approach as Wohlfart often seems to suggest. After all, when Confucius describes his own developmental process, beginning with conscious learning and ending with the ability to give his “heart-and-mind (心) free rein without overstepping the boundaries,” is this not precisely what Wohlfart has in mind? The “feel” and “acuity” of inter-human circumstances may require a rational kind of “technique” provided by ethics and morality before it can be obtained. As Wohlfart notes himself, Cook Ding acquires his “art” of cutting oxen without rational analysis after many years of training. But Cook Ding himself admits, at least implicitly, that adopting some such kind of technique (技) was a necessary stage in this development. He has simply “surpassed” or “developed beyond” (进) it. Before acquiring the ability to forget one’s feet while running downstairs, one must acquire the technique of walking—there has to be something there to forget.

Many, perhaps even most, Western ethical thinkers would not be averse to this view. John Stuart Mill, for instance, hoped that the utilitarian guidelines would eventually be internalized through moral cultivation so that some kind of refined “intuition” or “feel” for the situation would enable us to assess how to handle it correctly or appropriately. After all, and whether or not one accepts the utilitarian criteria, an ethical “feel” could be understood in a somewhat utilitarian fashion as an intuitive “calculative assessment” of the situation at hand. But Wohlfart’s point is certainly well taken. Somewhere along the way, rational rules, regulations, and technical criteria have come to dominate our ethical approach instead of being taken as useful crutches on our way to ethical self-cultivation—an indication that we may have lost that way.

Wohlfart’s final part, on “the others,” in particular his reflections on the Daoist wu 无 forms and his egological reflections on selflessness, is perhaps the most thought-provoking section of the book. The dominant place of the self, the ego, in the modern world is identified, correctly in my view, as one of its major ills. Spontaneous action, on the other hand, action that seeks to respond to the situation in an appropriate manner, presupposes not only an act of forgetting oneself but even others as well. It simply acts according to the needs of the situation. Excessive self-reflection and excessive consideration of others spoil the “sense” of one’s environment. Much in line with Zhuangzi, Wohlfart demands the reactivation of an ethical “instinct” in social life. But surely we cannot go back to the animal kingdom. We are already beyond that stage. And this is certainly not what Wohlfart means—nor is it what Zhuangzi meant, despite his belief that there is much that we can learn from animals. Here Wohlfart introduces an interesting Daoist-Hegelian philosophical construction (with a Heideggerian twist) of the ideal human modus vivendi by associating the Daoist wu-forms with the ego, will, action, intention, ratio, and emotion, but also with love. And the last may be the clearest case of them all: the “love-free love,” a kind of love that forgets itself as love, a love without an I, a spontaneous kind of love that corresponds to the Daoist wei wu wei 为无为, the act of non-action: “It is a passion-free [leiden-schaftsfreie], I-free, love-forgetting love in which the lovers forget each other together [miteinandervergessen].” It is, in fact, the sublation (Aufhebung) of love (pp. 204–206). But clearly, according to Wohlfart, the key to all these
sublations is the sublation of the self itself, leading to action and a way of life that is so-of-itself (ziran 自然), for, as it turns out, “the self itself is of-itself” [Selbst das Selbst is von-selbst] (p. 255).

Not only is Günter Wohlfart’s Die Kunst des Lebens und andere Künste sharp and powerful in its expression; it also offers us a particularly timely and challenging meditation while facing the debris of a world torn asunder through the neoliberal glorification of the ego. Translations of this fine work into English and other languages, however difficult due to its subtle style, would be most desirable. Such translations, or, indeed, successive German editions, would further profit from the inclusion of Chinese characters in its many references to Chinese expressions from the philosophical classics. Their omission is, on occasion, somewhat of an obstacle to delving further into the fascinating sources employed by Wohlfart in this appealing and highly recommendable work.

Notes

1 – Camus wrote that “the age of philosophers concerned with philosophy was followed by the age of professors of philosophy concerned with philosophers” (Carnets 1942–1951, trans. Philip Thody [London: Hamish Hamilton, 1966], p. 44).

2 – Analects 2.4.


Reviewed by Mario Poceski

University of Florida

Linji Yixuan 臨濟義玄 (d. 866), also known as Rinzai in Japan, is one of the best-known historical figures associated with the Chan and Zen traditions of East Asian Buddhism. He is widely regarded as a paradigmatic exemplar of the novel type of iconoclastic Chan ethos—invented by a cluster of dynamic and charismatic Chan masters—that supposedly burst onto the Chinese religious scene during the glorious heyday of the Tang dynasty (618–907). Linji’s posthumous fame is largely based on the success of later generations of prominent disciples in transforming the Linji School 臨濟宗, which traced its spiritual ancestry back to him, into the dominant Chan faction and main representative of Chan orthodoxy, not only in China but also throughout the rest of East Asia. Much of the popular lore and iconoclastic imagery associated with Linji, along with the common knowledge about his life and teachings, are based on the Linji yulu 臨濟語錄 (Record of the sayings of Linji), a text composed during the Song era (960–1279). Ever since its initial compilation in the early eleventh century, Linji’s Record has enjoyed great popularity and revered status.