Wuwei and Flow: Comparative Reflections on Spirituality, Transcendence, and Skill in the Zhuangzi

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WUWEI AND FLOW: COMPARATIVE REFLECTIONS ON SPIRITUALITY, TRANSCENDENCE, AND SKILL IN THE ZHUANGZI

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1. Introduction

One of the many senses of the word *spirituality*—surely one of the vaguest words in the modern English language—is that of a special quality of life, a sublime fulfillment that somehow transcends the vicissitudes of fortune. According to this sense, spiritual people experience life as having such abundance of value or meaning that they can endure great hardship and tragedy without coming to despair. This abiding fullness and the equanimity it provides are perhaps the greatest prize of the spiritual life.

Spiritual fulfillment was once claimed as the special reward of religion, but no longer. In late modernity “spiritual but not religious” has become a commonplace self-description, and presumably this concept of spirituality aims to retain the rewards of religious practice, including the equanimity of spiritual fulfillment, while jettisoning the rest.¹ In addition, while most uses of spirituality retain by implied contrast with materiality or physicality some sense of transcendence—that is, some sense of “standing out of” or rising above the ordinary or everyday—in secular culture this sense has become so vague that the connection between spirituality and transcendence of any kind is now open to doubt. As argued recently by Charles Taylor, one of the marks of our secular age is the possibility of framing all of life’s goals within the confines of a “self-sufficient humanism,” so that even spiritual fulfillment—what Taylor calls “fullness”—can be conceived without reference to anything beyond the human sphere.²

This ambiguity with respect to transcendence is an important part of the attractiveness of the word spirituality for late moderns, insofar as it allows one to talk about holistic well-being or “human flourishing” without having to specify a humanistic or religious framework—that is, without having to enter into disputes about the source of spiritual satisfaction, its attachment to one or another worldview, or its reference to some ultimate reality. Spirituality is detached from truth claims and reduced to a quality of life, and the question of transcendence is left open, or even rendered moot.

The ambiguity of spirituality in secular culture at large is reflected within the psychology of religion by recent debates over the categories of spirituality and religion as potentially distinguishable spheres of human experience and objects of psychological study.³ Psychological literature on the relationship between spirituality and religiosity is much too vast and contentious to be adequately summarized here. Nevertheless it is possible to pick out two general features of psychological approaches
to spirituality that are especially telling. The first is the recognition among psychologists that the category of spirituality should include “humanistic” or “naturalistic” varieties distinguished by their explicit rejection of “supernatural” transcendence.\(^4\) The second is the tendency, especially within the subfield of positive psychology, to focus on subjective or affective aspects of spirituality as indicators of psychological well-being.\(^5\)

Philosophers, however, should take care that the ambiguity of the modern concept of spirituality does not lead to complacency. Given that spirituality entails a special quality of life, we should inquire whether this quality is sufficient in itself for equanimity, or whether this quality must be taken as a sign that points beyond itself, bringing into experience some important dimension of reality and thereby making a difference as to how the subject engages the world. We also should inquire whether spiritual people are distinguished only by the degree to which they enjoy this quality of experience, or if they are also more kind, just, or wise than the rest of us. And we should inquire whether the equanimity associated with spirituality necessarily entails some kind of transcendence—that is, some way of escaping, resolving, or otherwise rising above the problems of ordinary life. Specifically, we should inquire whether the spiritual satisfaction promised by traditional religions necessarily entails transcendence of the limits imposed by our embodiment, whatever those limits may be.

Thus the vagueness of the modern concept of spirituality, especially its tenuous relationship to religiosity, presents an important opportunity for philosophical inquiry: it invites us to compare religious and humanistic models of human flourishing in order to clarify what is—or at least what is claimed to be—necessary and sufficient for the attainment of uniquely spiritual rewards such as equanimity. This essay attempts such a comparative investigation, focusing on the spiritual ideal of wuwei as expressed by the ancient Daoist classic, the Zhuangzi, and “flow,” Mihaly (Mark) Csikszentmihalyi’s theory of optimal experience.

2. Preliminary Remarks on Wuwei and Flow

This section attempts to set the stage for a successful comparative investigation by stipulating its scope, terms, and goals. The first subsection provides further clarification of what I take to be the difference between “humanistic” and “religious” models of fulfillment and of the transcendence generally entailed by the latter. The second subsection then provides a vague outline of wuwei as a religious model of spirituality common to pre-Qin Confucian and Daoist classics, focusing especially on wuwei as a model of spiritual equanimity.\(^6\) Because the kind of spirituality that I am calling wuwei is exemplified by instances of skillful spontaneity, this analysis focuses on the question of whether perfect skill—or at least superhuman skill—is the form of transcendence presented by wuwei as a necessary condition for spiritual equanimity. A third subsection introduces flow as a psychological theory of skillful spontaneity. Because flow theory suggests a humanistic model of fulfillment centered on skillful spontaneity, it provides a handy point of reference for clarifying the kinds of transcendence that might distinguish wuwei as a religious model. Finally, a fourth subsection
defends my decision to focus on the Zhuangzian version of wuwei and outlines the goals of this comparison with respect to Zhuangzi scholarship.

2.1. Religious and Humanistic Models of Spirituality

First let us stipulate that spirituality refers to the highest or fullest level of human fulfillment. As already indicated in the introduction, this comparison differentiates humanistic and religious models of spirituality with respect to whether this fulfillment is located “inside” or “outside” the human sphere. In other words, whereas humanistic models affirm that all measures of fulfillment are purely self-determined (such that “man is the measure of all things”), religious models tie human fulfillment to engagement with some ultimate reality, or at least with some dimension or characteristic of reality important enough to serve as the focus of a comprehensive worldview.

All such pictures of religious engagement entail a dual reference: on one side is the reality engaged, and on the other side is the aspect of human nature that calls for and enables engagement with this reality. For the purposes of this comparison, the realization of this aspect of human nature is the respect in which all religious models of spiritual fulfillment can be said to entail some kind of transcendence. Whether the reality engaged is also transcendent in some respect is left an open question. For instance, I will not attempt to decide the issue of whether the ultimate dimension of ancient Chinese cosmology—Dao or Heaven (tian)—is transcendent in the rather specific sense defined by David Hall and Roger Ames. The transcendence investigated here is the human side, and so is defined with respect to human nature rather than to the whole of nature or existence.

Thus a key assumption of this comparison is that despite the enormous distance between modern psychological and ancient Chinese concepts of human nature, a common reference point for transcendence can be found insofar as human nature, at least in its everyday, non-spiritualized form, is universally recognized as inherently limited. Indeed, that we are somehow limited, that this limitation is problematic, and that spiritual equanimity cannot be achieved without somehow coming to terms with this limitation are central points on which the following argument turns.

2.2. The Theme of Wuwei Spirituality

The term wuwei is often translated as “non-action” or “non-striving” but is probably better left untranslated. It denotes a special kind of action and a way of life based on the regular practice of that kind of action: an effortless way of comporting oneself in the world with supreme harmony or efficacy. How this is accomplished is something of a mystery. The subtle power of wuwei has been associated most closely with Daoism, and within that tradition with the Laozi, the pre-Qin classic traditionally considered to be Daoism’s core and founding text. However, the consensus of recent scholarship is that the effortless efficacy of wuwei, or something like it, was regarded as a mark of spiritual achievement by early Confucians (i.e., Ruists) and Daoists (or proto-Daoists) alike. This action-centered concept of human fulfillment likely originated in the Lunyu (Analects), wherein the kind of spontaneous, harmonious skill-
mastery exemplified by musical virtuosos is elevated to a comprehensive moral and spiritual ideal.¹⁰

The most rigorous investigation of this theme is Edward S. Slingerland’s Effortless Action: Wuwei as Conceptual Metaphor and Spiritual Ideal in Early China (2003). Following Edward Slingerland, I have adopted wuwei as an umbrella term that encompasses various textual expressions of this ideal. Reviewers of Effortless Action have objected to the particulars of Slingerland’s analysis—especially his understanding of the “paradox of wuwei”—but not his overall case for the widespread “valorization of spontaneous, immediate, yet appropriate action” in ancient China. Chris Fraser observes:

Provided we work at a high enough level of abstraction, it seems correct to say that the various pre-Qin texts share, to various degrees, a conception of the perfection state of human life as involving a form of immediate, appropriate response to the particular situation. This ideal is prominent in the Xunzi and the Daoist texts and is detectable, though not stressed, in the Mengzi, the Lunyu, and the Mozi . . . This observation has rightly won the status of consensus, I think, and we find it in one form or another in the work of Munro, Fingarette, Graham, Hansen, Hall and Ames, Eno, Kupperman, and Ivanhoe, among others.¹¹

This consensus should not, however, obscure the many differences between pre-Qin expressions of the wuwei ideal, which are no less important than the commonalities. For instance, Confucian texts tend to depict wuwei as something acquired by a lifetime of diligent study, whereas Daoist texts tend to depict wuwei as an innate ability, a difference Philip J. Ivanhoe summarizes as “cultivated” versus “untutored” kinds of spontaneity.¹² Further differences can be found between various Confucian images of wuwei.¹³

Nevertheless, Slingerland’s metaphorical analysis of a wide range of expressions demonstrates that it is possible to distill from various texts a number of traits that define the abstract category of wuwei as a distinct image of spirituality. As mentioned above, wuwei is first and foremost a special way of comporting oneself in the world: more specifically, it is a form of action distinguished by (1) fine-tuned responsiveness or skill, (2) non-deliberative spontaneity, (3) effortlessness, and (4) enjoyment. This composite picture of wuwei is incomplete, however, as it remains vague in precisely the respect that is presently under investigation, that is, the respect in which these traits combine to present an image of ultimate or spiritual fulfillment. The question at hand is as follows: how does action characterized by these traits provide the spiritual reward of equanimity, and what kind of transcendence, if any, is necessary for the enjoyment of this reward?

In his reflections on the theme of unselfconsciousness in the Liezi and other early Daoist texts, P. J. Ivanhoe suggests a very similar line of questioning by his distinction between “everyday” and “religious” forms of unselfconsciousness. Ivanhoe notes that examples of “everyday” unselfconsciousness, though remarkable, offer “nothing mysterious or supernatural” in themselves. However, they “point toward the
more dramatic claims of the religious sense,” suggesting a trajectory that leads to radical unselfconsciousness and oneness with the Dao.14

By focusing on the issue of transcendence, the present comparison presses the question of what, exactly, is involved in the transition between “everyday” and “religious” forms of action distinguished by the aforementioned traits of skill, spontaneity, effortlessness, and enjoyment. On the “religious” side is the model of spirituality that I have termed *wuwei*. On the “everyday” side is a related form of action referred to here as *skillful spontaneity*. One of the principal aims of this comparison is to challenge the tendency to assume that the difference between *wuwei* and *skillful spontaneity* is principally a matter of degree, such that *wuwei* is a religious ideal because it aspires to perfect skill. This is a rather literal reading of transcendence entailed by *wuwei*, as it assumes the realization of superhuman ability.

Granted, the textual evidence for this kind of transcendence is so ample that its validity as a reading of *wuwei* spirituality cannot be denied. In the case of the *Liezi*, P. J. Ivanhoe finds that the religious sense of unselfconsciousness is linked to a “way of life that purportedly protects one from all physical and psychological harm,”15 and much the same could be said for the pre-Qin expressions of *wuwei* examined by Slingerland and others. On the Ruist side, for instance, Mark Csikszentmihalyi’s detailed examination of physiological theories of virtue in early China finds a tradition of “sagely exceptionalism” in the *Wuxing* and *Mengzi* that claims moral perfection as the definitive characteristic of *sheng* (sagacity), the culmination of human virtue.16 Moreover, this tradition links moral perfection with a literally “superhuman” kind of transcendence that results from connection with a transtemporal ultimate reality, *tian* (heaven).17 Slingerland argues for essentially the same point, though on a much broader scale, as he explicitly rejects comparisons between the *wuwei* ideal and ordinary kinds of skillful spontaneity (e.g., musical virtuosity) precisely because the former allegedly entails comprehensive moral perfection and “almost supernatural efficacy.”18

However, despite their insistence on “sagely exceptionalism,” both Slingerland and Csikszentmihalyi fail to clarify how the transcendence of moral perfection represents a “difference in kind”19 in comparison with the everyday examples of skillful spontaneity so frequently employed by these texts. Pointing out the alleged connection between moral perfection and *tian* does not help to clarify this discontinuity, because the human side of transcendence is still a matter of degree: supernatural or superhuman efficacy and/or moral perfection are simply upper limits extrapolated from normal human capacities.

I suggest that the fact that such readings fail to deliver a clear interpretation of how *wuwei* spirituality is discontinuous with everyday life is a sign that other kinds of transcendence besides moral perfection deserve closer attention.

2.3. Flow Theory
The usefulness of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s theory of flow is now easy to state: what flow provides is a candidate theory of skillful spontaneity and thus a reference point
for defining the kinds of transcendence that might distinguish wuwei as a religious model of spirituality. While the following discussion will not enter into the neurological details of flow experience (as far as these are known), it aims to provide enough information to carry the investigation forward in the following respects.\textsuperscript{20}

First, the theory of flow helps to explain why the traits of skillfulness, spontaneity, effortless, and enjoyment fit together as a coherent phenomenon. Csikszentmihalyi’s studies of the conditions and phenomenological traits of various “autotelic” activities (i.e., activities that are intrinsically rewarding) illuminate the connection between objective and subjective aspects of skillful spontaneity, particularly the connection between skill and enjoyment. From the perspective of flow theory, then, the elevation of skillful spontaneity to the level of a spiritual ideal is readily understandable. Moreover, as a theory of “optimal experience,” flow suggests a humanistic model of fulfillment based on the maximization of flow experience, and thus allows us to pose the question of whether religious transcendence of any kind is necessary for the spiritual fulfillment promised by wuwei.

Second, flow’s explanatory power is tied to a particular limitation of human nature, namely our limited capacity of focused attention. The fact that attention is limited, though undeniable, may seem like a rather mundane basis for a model of human fulfillment. But the simple fact of limited attention has far-reaching consequences, and in recent years Csikszentmihalyi’s work on flow has been joined by an increasing number of studies that focus on the careful management of attention as the key to happiness.\textsuperscript{21} What is crucial for present purposes is the way in which this basic fact of limitation presses the question of whether some kind of transcendence is required for spiritual fulfillment, because spiritual equanimity seems unattainable unless the limitations of human nature are somehow taken into account.

2.4. Wuwei in the Zhuangzi
The final preparatory step is to justify the restriction of the following comparison of wuwei and flow to the Zhuangzi. As argued above, when defined on a sufficiently abstract level the theme of wuwei spirituality can be found in all of the major pre-Qin classics. However, as each text specifies the transcendence of wuwei differently, a comprehensive comparison of wuwei and flow would be too unwieldy for a single essay. Besides, the original impetus of the following comparison is not to provide a new or authoritative reading of one or more pre-Qin texts, but to shed light on questions of philosophical and religious interest. For this purpose one text might serve as well as many.

And if one text will suffice, the choice is easy, as the Zhuangzi is singularly well-suited for comparison with flow. In fact the affinity of flow and Zhuangzian spirituality has been noted previously by Csikszentmihalyi himself (1990) and by Chris Jochim (1998), a scholar of ancient Chinese thought, although neither of these comparisons directly addressed the issue of transcendence.\textsuperscript{22} As a resource for reflection on spiritual equanimity, it is hard to imagine a more fitting text than the Zhuangzi. One of its distinctive themes, wandering (you), is typically construed as a metaphor for the ability to abide peacefully in a constantly changing or even tumultuous world.
Furthermore, the *Zhuangzi* presents some of the most memorable images of wuwei spirituality in its various “knack stories,” especially the story of Cook Ding, which is arguably the quintessential example of skillful spontaneity elevated to a spiritual ideal. Finally, the *Zhuangzi* is an especially attractive text for the purposes of this comparison because the connection between its striking images of equanimity and its equally striking images of skillful spontaneity is so ambiguous. That is to say, more than any other major pre-Qin classic, the *Zhuangzi* presents a complex image of wuwei that is rich with interpretive possibilities for the question at hand: in what sense is wuwei transcendent?

3. Interpretations of Skillful Spontaneity and Spiritual Transcendence in the *Zhuangzi*

The goal of this section is not to provide an authoritative reading of the *Zhuangzi*, but rather to summarize recent interpretations of one of its major themes, skillful spontaneity, and to highlight problems with readings that interpret the transcendence of Zhuangzian wuwei as the attainment of a supreme or even superhuman level of skillful spontaneity. In particular, I will argue that the plausibility of such readings—which is not to be confused with their historical validity—is undermined by their inattention to the limitations of human nature.

Let us begin with what is by far the most important passage for investigating the connection between spiritual transcendence and skill, the story of Cook Ding. The story of Cook Ding describes his uncanny ability to carve up the carcass of an ox without ever dulling his blade, and relates this ability to his attainment of a kind of spiritual—and thus presumably transcendent—insight:

Cook Ding was carving an ox for Lord Wen-hui. As his hand slapped, shoulder lunged, foot stamped, knee crooked, with a hiss! with a thud! the brandished blade as it sliced never missed the rhythm, now in time with the Mulberry Forest dance, now with an orchestra playing the Zhing-shou.

“Oh excellent!” said Lord Wen-hui. “That skill should attain such heights!”

“What your servant cares about is the Way; I have left skill behind me. When I first began to carve oxen, I saw nothing but oxen wherever I looked. Three years more and I never saw an ox as a whole. Nowadays, I am in touch through the daemonic in me, and do not look with the eye. With the senses I know where to stop, the daemonic I desire to run its course. I rely on Heaven’s structuring, cleave along the main seams, let myself be guided by the main cavities, go by what is inherently so. A ligament or tendon I never touch, not to mention solid bone. A good cook changes his chopper once a year, because he hacks. A common cook changes it once a month, because he smashes. Now I have had this chopper for nineteen years, and have taken apart several thousand oxen, but the edge is as though it were fresh from the grindstone. . . .

“Excellent!” said Lord Wen-hui. “Listening to the words of Cook Ding, I have learned from them how to nurture life.”

As indicated by the closing line of this passage, the story of Cook Ding is about something much more important than culinary skill. Cook Ding describes his ability as the manifestation of a literally spirit-like power (shen) that transcends normal skill (“I
have left skill behind me”): he perceives the ox carcass not with his eyes but with his spirit. Especially to a modern Western audience, this power is something of a mystery. It is clear that Cook Ding has attained a profound level of awareness, that this awareness is the key to a very special kind of skillful spontaneity, and that this skillful spontaneity is somehow of ultimate value. What is not clear is how literally we should take the transcendence of his spiritual power. Let us consider, then, what scholars have said on this issue.

Perhaps the scholar most responsible for establishing the importance of skillful spontaneity in the Zhuangzi is the late A. C. Graham. In 1981 Graham published a groundbreaking translation, reorganization, and analysis of the Zhuangzi that featured spontaneity as a prominent motif. In fact Graham believed that the ideal of skillful spontaneity was of such importance to Chinese thought that he attempted to express its essence as the following “quasi-syllogistic” formula:

\[
\text{In awareness of everything relevant to the issue I find myself moved towards X; overlooking something relevant I find myself moved towards Y.}
\]

\[
\text{In which direction shall I let myself be moved?}
\]

\[
\text{Be aware of everything relevant to the issue.}
\]

\[
\text{Therefore let yourself be moved towards X.}^{25}
\]

First and foremost, this formula prescribes a state of total awareness, so that every detail of a situation participates in directing our response. Skillful spontaneity is action that arises naturally from a state of total and penetrating attention to the situation at hand. Note that Graham does not specify what kind of “issue” he has in mind; presumably he means any situation of human activity, and that “everything relevant” includes both self-preservation and the flourishing of all things. Thus, Graham is able to claim that the spontaneous person is “amoral,” in the sense of being utterly free from the standards and rules that guide moral deliberation, and yet deeply sensitive at the same time. As one of the most quoted passages of the Zhuangzi says, “A man should not inwardly harm his person with ‘good’ and ‘bad,’ but rather should accord with the spontaneous \([ziran]\) and not add to life.”

It is easy to see how this picture of skillful spontaneity constitutes a spiritual as well as moral ideal: total awareness brings spiritual equanimity by means of perfect attunement between a person and her surroundings. If there is anything transcendent about Cook Ding’s ability, it lies solely in the degree to which he has attained the ideal of total awareness. However, this picture assumes that the context of human activity is unambiguous—as if the relevant situation or “issue” is always given—and that the scope of human awareness is potentially unlimited. Is it possible to be aware of everything relevant to a given issue? Is the issue with which one should be most concerned readily determinable? Does awareness of everything relevant to an issue always lead unequivocally to one optimum solution, X? Spiritual equanimity results from a state of total and penetrating attention only if the answer to all three questions is yes. But it seems that the complexity of human life is such that many issues are
constantly competing for our attention, and that each issue presents conflicts of irreconcilable values. Even if total awareness were possible, it would not guarantee perfect harmony.

Because Graham’s formula fails to take account of human limitations, it fails to present a plausible model of spiritual fulfillment. The promise of spiritual equanimity seems to be attached to literally transcendent—that is, superhuman—skill, not to mention the questionable premise of an unambiguous “issue.” On the other hand, the problems of Graham’s formula are helpful insofar as they highlight a fundamental problem with the wuwei paradigm of action-centered spirituality: what could a spiritual way of acting possibly be, if moral perfection is impossible? I contend that scholars of the Zhuangzi have yet to provide a clear and convincing answer to this question.

For instance, consider Lee H. Yearley’s essay, “Zhuangzi’s Understanding of Skillfulness and the Ultimate Spiritual State.”28 As the title indicates, Yearley claims that the kind of skillful activity depicted in the knack stories of the Zhuangzi “clearly points to the highest spiritual state.”29 Yearley further claims that this state entails the activation of “transcendent” or “daemonic” powers.30 But what kind of transcendence, if any, distinguishes this peak of spirituality?

Yearley argues that the kind of spirituality espoused by Zhuangzi is “fundamentally discontinuous with normal life and expectations. It seeks far more than an amelioration of the problems ordinary life produces.”31 The problems of Graham’s formula indicate that Yearley is right: barring human perfection, the amelioration of ordinary problems cannot bring equanimity. And yet one finds little indication in Yearley’s essay of the radical discontinuity that defines wuwei as the ultimate spiritual state over and against ordinary skill. Instead, one finds only the suggestion that spiritual spontaneity is a “perfected” state that is continuous with generic kinds of skillful activity, and differs only in degree of efficacy. Indeed, after a detailed description of the general characteristics of skillful activity (closely resembling the traits of flow, as we will see), Yearley concludes that the actions of the ultimate spiritual person manifest these same characteristics, only more so.32

There is a tension, therefore, between Yearley’s observance of a kind of spirituality that is “fundamentally discontinuous with normal life,” suggesting a radical kind of transformation, and his portrayal of the ultimate spiritual state as a perfected state that is continuous with generic kinds of skillful activity. In other words, Yearley raises but does not resolve the question of whether the transcendence of wuwei is simply the perfection of skillful spontaneity or something else in addition.

Of course, the kind of transcendence that rises above human limitations to attain perfect skill may in fact be what the Zhuangzi recommends. After all, the scholarly support for this reading is quite substantial. For example, in an essay on the “spirit-like spontaneity” of Cook Ding, Robert Eno observes: “The shamanistic universe of the Zhuangzi relentlessly reflects a fundamental duality between the empowered and the nonempowered: those whose focus allows them to manipulate this protean Nature and transcend the limits it initially seems to place on human life, and those who remain imprisoned within those limits.”33
In a more recent essay, however, Michael J. Puett argues for a very different picture of the transcendent character of Zhuangzian spirituality. As indicated by the story of Cook Ding, spirituality entails insight into a special dimension of reality, the order of Heaven (tianli). Insight into the order of Heaven is knowledge of the natural pattern and course of things—a profound insight, to be sure, but perhaps less demanding than a state of total and comprehensive awareness. Moreover, this insight does not guarantee supreme efficacy. Puett argues that in contrast with shamanistic contemporaries whose notion of spiritual power entailed superhuman control over natural events, Zhuangzi's ultimate spiritual state entails only acceptance of the Heavenly order. At most, a “spirit-man” has the power to enable things “to fulfill their natural endowment,” arising and passing away “as they naturally ought.” Most people attempt to interfere with the natural course of things; in contrast, the “spirit-man” finds equanimity by letting go of such aspirations. Therefore wuwei, in Puett’s reading, is ultimately a kind of gnosis rather than a supreme skillfulness.

Puett’s reading of spirituality in the Zhuangzi is supported by a series of passages in the sixth chapter that are remarkable for their frank and unsentimental view of life and death. The speakers are far from invincible—in fact, as in the following example, many of them are physically deformed or crippled—but their attitude of profound equanimity is awe-inspiring:

“The Fashioner of Things is making me all rolled up [bent over] like this.”
Zisi said: “Do you detest this?”
Ziyu replied: “No—how could I detest it? . . . One obtains life at the proper time; one loses it when it is fitting. If you are content with the time, and if you dwell in what is fitting, then anger and joy will be unable to enter you. This is what of old was called ‘untying the bonds.’ If you are unable to untie them yourself, then you will be bound by things. But things cannot ultimately overcome Heaven. What is there for me to detest?”

Note the very different kind of transcendence that this picture of equanimity suggests. As indicated by the passage above, a “spirit-man” does not transcend the frailties of the human form; rather the limitlessness and freedom of the spiritual life refer to the ability to delight in the Heavenly order of things, accepting good and bad fortune as Heaven decrees.

As a form of transcendence, the ability to discern and accept the order of Heaven is more plausible than superhuman skill, but it still presents some problems, most of which have to do with this notion of Heavenly order. We do not have a very clear idea of how the order of Heaven relates to the multifarious processes of nature. How comprehensive is the order of Heaven, and how is it possible even to attempt to interfere with this order if, as Zhuangzi himself claims, “things cannot ultimately overcome Heaven”? Especially in human affairs, there is no way clearly to distinguish “artificial” interference from the “natural” course of things. Is it not natural for humans to judge some affairs better than others and attempt to direct things accordingly? These questions are symptomatic of a more general tension within the Daoist mystical worldview, between declarations of a dichotomy of natural and human activity, on the one hand, and declarations of the pervasive unity of the Dao, on the
A similar tension can be found in Puett’s view of Heavenly order as a determinate, all-encompassing, and unitary structure: how can one recommend the acceptance of the Heavenly order without somehow standing outside of it? Thus the question of limitations returns in another guise.

Providing yet another perspective on the transcendence of wuwei, several other scholars have found evidence of a radically pluralistic worldview in the Zhuangzi and, moreover, a profound connection between this pluralism and the espousal of skillfulness as a spiritual ideal. In this pluralistic reading, the key to skillfulness is the ability to see things from different perspectives. A sense of the many different ways of looking at something destabilizes our habitual notions of utility and thereby (almost paradoxically) enables us not only to use things more effectively but also to attain for ourselves a “uselessness” that is peaceful and secure (and therefore spiritually “useful”). Many passages in the Zhuangzi attest to the importance of this ability to shift perspectives, and commentators have taken these passages as expressions of a profound metaphysical vision: a picture of an anarchic cosmos (or a-cosmos), in which all values—even all identities—are constituted by, and therefore relative to, particular perspectives. In such a world, the only constant value is the ability to take up the values of diverse and changing perspectives.

Despite its profound skepticism with regard to intellectual knowledge, the pluralist or “perspectivalist” reading of Zhuangzian spirituality is actually quite philosophical, especially insofar as it makes its case on the level of high metaphysical abstraction. Most perspectivalist readings give prominence to a series of mind-bending passages in the second chapter of the Zhuangzi that ponder the mutual dependence of all perspectives:

This is also that, that is also this. This has its own this/that and that also has its own this/that. So is there really a this/that or isn’t there? When this and that no longer find anything to be their opposites... this is called the Pivot of Dao. Once the Pivot finds the center, so that it can respond infinitely without obstruction, this/self/right is unobstructed and inexhaustible, and that/other/wrong is equally unobstructed and inexhaustible. This is why I said that there is nothing better than using the obvious.

Brook Ziporyn has forwarded a subtle interpretation of this recommendation that attempts to reconcile not only Zhuangzi’s spiritual advice with his apparent skepticism but also the cosmic unity claimed by some passages with the radical pluralism implied by others. The “obvious” that Zhuangzi recommends, according to Ziporyn, is the reality of an irreducible plurality of perspectives. There is no underlying unity. The view of underlying unity belongs, therefore, to this plurality of perspectives; it is simply one perspective among many. However, the perspective of underlying unity is privileged insofar as it has the pragmatic value of allowing the person who adopts it to move freely from one perspective to another. Not only does this freedom bring with it all the practical benefits described by the skill stories, it also brings spiritual equanimity.

The transcendence of wuwei, in this reading, is not a matter of attaining some fundamental reality, but of allowing oneself to take up different perspectives without
“storing” them, so that some aspect of the person always remains at the “center” or “pivot” of transformation, and is therefore unattached to any given perspective.41 Provided we accept the premise of a radically pluralistic world, this is a compelling reading of Zhuangzian spirituality, and it has the advantage of providing a coherent interpretation of a large number of seemingly diverse passages in the Zhuangzi. But there is a catch, albeit a subtle one: the abstract level of metaphysical argumentation on which this model operates presents special challenges for understanding Zhuangzian spirituality as a humanly realizable way of life.

First, there is the unanswered question of whether the maintenance of a completely unattached attitude is compatible with the continuity of personal identity, especially with regard to the limitations inherent in our embodiment. Certainly a person can transcend some perspectives, but since, in this reading, perspectives constitute identity, is it self-consistent to recommend that a person transcend all perspectives? It is one thing to appreciate the world as a plurality of perspectives on the abstract level of metaphysical speculation; it is quite another to embody these perspectives as one’s own. Even the partial transcendence of one’s own perspective presents a problem insofar as this process of abstraction moves away from the particularities that constitute the richness of personal experience. As suggested at the very beginning of this essay, spiritual fulfillment has the connotation of greater richness of experience, not less. And although the standard of richness has not been a prominent theme of the discussion so far, it fits with arguments that Zhuangzi’s brand of spirituality is characterized by worldly engagement—indeed, total immersion in the situation at hand—rather than disengagement.42 Granted, Ziporyn’s point is probably that engagement is facilitated rather than hindered by the ability to transcend perspectives, but without a fuller account of how this works, it sounds suspiciously like having your cake and eating it too: the richest engagement with the widest variety of perspectives. Surely this is a fine ideal, but is it possible to live out?

I cannot claim here to have exhausted the available interpretations of Zhuangzian spirituality, or to have demonstrated which of the above interpretations is most authoritative. Still, I hope at least to have shown how even some of the most sophisticated interpretations still beg questions about human limitations and the kind of transcendence that is necessary for spiritual equanimity as modeled by the wuwei ideal. Spiritual fulfillment in the form of consummate skillful spontaneity is an enticing ideal, but without a more plausible picture of its genuine realization, it is only that: an ideal.

Now insofar as the interpretations just examined are examples of historical or “descriptive” scholarship, it may seem inappropriate to question whether they present genuinely realizable kinds of spiritual fulfillment. However, given the centrality of the wuwei ideal for so many influential texts and the interpretive difficulties that these texts present to the modern reader, attempts to provide historically accurate readings of wuwei spirituality cannot dispense with attempts to articulate plausible and compelling pictures of its actual realization. Whatever historical scholarship ultimately decides about the transcendence of Zhuangzian spirituality, it can only benefit from a wider range of interpretations, including some that are plausible and compelling to a modern audience.
This section delineates the main traits and conditions of flow, the phenomenon targeted and explained by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s theory of optimal experience. It then applies Csikszentmihalyi’s theory to four traits of skillful spontaneity that are central to wuwei: fine-tuned responsiveness or adaptive skill, non-deliberative spontaneity, effortlessness, and enjoyment. Two aspects of flow theory are of crucial importance for this investigation.

The first is the two-sided character of flow experience—that is, its combination of subjective and objective characteristics. Because flow describes how intrinsically satisfying or “autotelic” experience is embedded in contexts of skillful activity, it supports and clarifies the central insight of wuwei spirituality: namely that consummate skill is a path to fulfillment. At the same time, however, this clarification of the connection between skill and enjoyment suggests that fulfillment can be attained by whatever conditions are sufficient for the enjoyment of flow experience. Moreover, although paradigmatic instances of flow display fine-tuned sensitivity to details of the immediate environment, the conditions that matter most to the attainment of flow are ultimately relative to the interests and abilities of the subject, such that flow is, in fact, a radically perspectival phenomenon. Perhaps the perspectival nature of flow is evidence of its particularly close affinity to the Zhuangzian version of wuwei. But because it suggests a humanistic model of skill-based fulfillment, it challenges the assumption that the transcendence of perfect skill—or any transcendence, for that matter—is necessary for spiritual equanimity.

The second crucial aspect of flow theory is its dependence on the fact that our capacity of conscious attention is somehow limited. In short, flow theory describes how optimal experience arises from optimal use of our limited resources of attention. The dependence of flow theory on our limited capacity of attention is a two-edged sword that undercuts both literal understandings of the transcendence of wuwei and the potential for flow to become the basis of a humanistic model of spiritual fulfillment. On one side, it serves as the basis for a plausible psychological account of the four major traits of skillful spontaneity, both individually and together as a coherent phenomenon. While such an account helps to clarify how wuwei might transcend skillful spontaneity in various ways, it casts doubt on the most literal kind of transcendence, that of superhuman skill. On the other side, the same fact of limitation suggests that the maximization of flow is not sufficient for spiritual equanimity. As a candidate theory of skillful spontaneity, then, flow theory seems to preclude both the possibility of attaining equanimity by means of literally transcendent skill and the possibility of attaining equanimity within the confines of a humanistic framework—that is, within a framework that defines fulfillment as the maximization of flow.

4.1. Traits and Conditions of Flow Experience

The first intimations of flow theory arose in the 1960s, when Csikszentmihalyi noticed that the total immersion of artists in their work was an example of intrinsically motivated or “autotelic” experience, and that this kind of experience lay outside the grasp of the theories of motivation that were dominant in psychology at the time.
Thus began Csikszentmihalyi’s career-defining investigation of the special “quality of subjective experience that made a behavior intrinsically rewarding.”

The term “flow” emerged early on, from Csikszentmihalyi’s first studies of autotelic experience as a general phenomenon in the early 1970s. For these initial studies, he focused on avid participants in strenuous activities that are largely without extrinsic rewards: amateur athletes, chess masters, rock climbers, high school basketball players, and composers. Csikszentmihalyi decided to replace the term “autotelic experience” with the term “flow” because of the frequency with which the latter term appeared in subjects’ descriptions of activities that were especially rewarding.

His initial choice of subjects shows that Csikszentmihalyi has from the beginning conceived of flow as a skill-based, interactive phenomenon, based partly on conditions of the environment. This two-sided character is reinforced by Csikszentmihalyi’s tendency to divide his analysis of the flow phenomenon into traits and conditions, suggesting both subjective and objective dimensions. However, as we will see, a closer examination of the conditions of flow reveals that they ultimately depend on the subject’s perspective as constituted by her interests, by her abilities, and, most importantly, by the focus of her attention, and this dependence shifts the balance of flow theory toward the subjective side. Given a particular perspective, the conditions of flow that correspond to this perspective are objectively determinable. Nevertheless, in keeping with the field of positive psychology with which he has become closely associated, Csikszentmihalyi seems to have made the subjective quality of flow experience, rather than any objective standard of performance, the primary measure of psychological well-being.

Let us now turn to the basic traits of flow experience. Over the course of several decades of research across diverse ages, cultures, and activities, Csikszentmihalyi and his colleagues have found the following traits to be remarkably stable features of optimum experience:

1. Intense and focused concentration on task at hand
2. Merging of action and awareness
3. Loss of reflective self-consciousness
4. Sense of control or, perhaps more accurately, complete absence of anxiety
5. Distorted sense of time
6. Experience of activity as intrinsically rewarding (autotelic experience)

These traits bear a striking resemblance to the characteristics of “perfected skill activities” described by Lee Yearley in his analysis of Zhuangzian spirituality: “adaptive responses to external changes; gains in power and efficacy without additional effort; unification of the mental and the physical; generation and manifestation of tranquility; and the sense of participation in a larger, more harmonious whole.” They also fit well with the traits described by Edward Slingerland as marks of the more general wuwei ideal, summarized above as fine-tuned responsiveness, non-deliberative spontaneity, effortlessness, and enjoyment. Thus Csikszentmihalyi’s data seems to confirm that the various qualities prized by pre-Qin classics belong together as a coherent phenomenon.
Furthermore, Csikszentmihalyi provides an account of this interdependence, beginning with the two basic conditions for flow experience:

1. Perceived challenges, or opportunities for action, that stretch (neither overmatching nor underutilizing) existing skills; a sense that one is engaging challenges at a level appropriate to one's capacities

2. Clear proximal goals and immediate feedback about the progress that is being made

At first glance, these conditions seem much too structured, too goal-oriented, and too circumscribed—in short, too rigid—to hold for the free and easy wandering of Zhuangzian spirituality. Perhaps Chris Jochim is right to conclude that the ideal of the “autotelic person,” a person whose everyday life manifests flow to the maximum degree, requires excessive planning and organization, and thus represents a “self-conscious, goal-oriented lifestyle” that is fundamentally at odds with Zhuangzi’s “chaos friendly” picture of the spiritual life. For the purposes of developing a plausible model of spiritual fulfillment, however, this is a critical difference that cuts both ways, especially if it turns out that it is impossible to achieve unconditional skillful spontaneity. But the conditions of flow are not quite as restrictive as they appear.

The first condition can be reduced to attunement: harmonious adjustment between the self and the environment. Because so many of Csikszentmihalyi’s examples of flow demand years of disciplined training (e.g., basketball, rock climbing, chess), this adjustment appears to be the product of acquired skills, suggesting a closer fit with the cultivated spontaneity prized by early Confucians. In contrast, a famous passage in the Zhuangzi depicts spiritual achievement as the product of unlearning or forgetting. But perhaps the end result of harmonious adjustment is the same. In any case, in theory this first condition is much more flexible than typical examples of flow suggest: because the requisite fit is between perceived opportunities for action and capacities of the person, there is always the possibility that flow can be achieved simply by adopting a different perspective on the situation at hand. Perhaps every person already possesses the “skill” to achieve flow at any given moment, so long as one finds and adopts the “right” perspective.

The second condition can be understood as having more to do with the articulated nature of flow than the imposition of overarching guidelines, goals, or standards for success. After all, aesthetic experience can be considered as a species of flow, and is often characterized by a receptive, even disinterested attitude. In the context of aesthetic experience, “proximate goals” and “progress” refer simply to the dynamic and cumulative character of aesthetic appreciation as it develops over time. But, in any case, the determination of a flow experience by external goals or standards of progress would be incompatible with its essential autotelic character. Goals and standards of progress, if they are present at all, must arise out of the activity itself. Csikszentmihalyi describes this “emergent motivation” as follows: “what happens at any moment is responsive to what happened immediately before within the interaction, rather than being dictated by a preexisting intentional structure located within either the person (e.g. a drive) or the environment (e.g. a tradition or script).”
Goals and feedback about progress are thus emergent articulations of a continuous and self-directed experience. Far from being restrictive impositions of external structure, such articulations may in fact be essential to any experience that is richly detailed in the manner of aesthetic experiences. Consider, for instance, John Dewey’s description of what it is like to have “an experience”:

In such experiences, every successive part flows freely, without seam and without unfilled blanks, into what ensues. At the same time there is no sacrifice of the self-identity of the parts. A river, as distinct from a pond, flows. But its flow gives a definiteness and interest to its successive portions greater than exist in the homogeneous portions of a pond. In an experience, flow is from something to something. As one part leads into another and as one part carries on what went before, each gains distinctness in itself. The enduring whole is diversified by successive phases that are emphases of its varied colors.52

This articulated character is an important clue to the special satisfaction of flow experience, about which I will have more to say below.

Note that the second condition, like the first, depends on the perspective of the subject. One might even go so far as to say that the second condition is really a version of the first, differing only with respect to its emphasis on dynamic and responsive engagement with the environment in the midst of ongoing activity. The key to flow, then, is a state of sustained and lively attentiveness—that is, a state of total absorption—just as Graham’s formula suggested above.

However, the crucial difference between Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of flow and Graham’s formula is that only the former takes account of attention as a limited resource. This limitation is typically expressed in terms of “bits of information,” and it is commonly reported that only seven bits can be attended to at one time. Consequently, if the duration of an “attentional unit” is one eighteenth of a second, we can attend to 126 bits per second, or 7,560 bits per minute.53 I find the “information bit” to be a rather dubious theoretical entity for psychology, as it is based on the information processing systems of computers; moreover, our ability to “chunk” bits so as to compress information and thereby expand the scope of awareness suggests to me that there is no simple way to quantify the limits of attention. Nevertheless, there is ample evidence that our attention is finite and thus somehow limited.54

4.2. Finite Attention and the Traits of Skillful Spontaneity
Now, let us see how this crucial limitation, as applied to states of total absorption, helps to explain how the traits of skillful spontaneity—fine-tuned responsiveness or adaptive skill, non-deliberative spontaneity, effortlessness, and enjoyment—fit together.

The limitation of attention provides a straightforward (indeed, obvious) explanation of the connection between consummate skillfulness and unselfconscious absorption: attention is a precious resource. Accordingly, when a situation is complex enough to demand our full attention, we cannot afford to be self-conscious. Of course there is no automatic connection between absorption and consummate skillfulness, at least insofar as skillfulness is measured by any objective standard. Al-
though absorption does seem to make the most of whatever skill one has, an amateur pianist who becomes completely absorbed in her playing does not thereby play like Martha Argerich. Musical performances, however, are relatively well-defined situations for which we have relatively stable, albeit conventional, standards of skillful performance. If the relevant situation is defined much more loosely as “getting the most out of the present moment,” then perhaps consummate skillfulness is a simply a matter of being fully engaged.

Explaining precisely what we mean by the spontaneity of skillful action during states of complete absorption is a little less straightforward. Most of us have a vague sense of what distinguishes spontaneous from contrived conduct, but the value of spontaneity is difficult to define without seeming to make arbitrary distinctions between “forced” and “natural” kinds of behavior. Importantly, Csikszentmihalyi does not exclude rational deliberation from the category of flow experience. After all, it is possible to become completely and unselfconsciously absorbed in rational deliberation, and, as many philosophers and mathematicians can attest, this absorption is sometimes attended by profound aesthetic pleasure. In contrast, a consistent theme of wuwei spirituality is its expressly non-deliberative character.

What distinguishes spontaneous from deliberative human behavior, and why is the former more desirable, at least in the Chinese context? We can rephrase this question in the terms of Csikszentmihalyi’s theory of optimal experience: if all flow is optimal experience, why is non-deliberative flow preferable to deliberative flow?

An answer to this question can be found in the collaborative works of David Hall and Roger Ames, especially in their distinction between “aesthetic” and “rational” kinds of order. According to Hall and Ames, “aesthetic order obtains when any items except those comprising the order fail to meet the conditions for the order or harmony in question.” That is to say, an aesthetic order is uniquely constituted by its components. In contrast, a rational order is indifferent to substitutions among its components as long as they fall within general limits, because an indefinite number of items will meet the conditions for the order in question. The distinction between rational and aesthetic orders should not be construed as absolute, as most of the situations that matter to human life lie somewhere between abstract generality and concrete specificity. But insofar as the distinction applies, it can help us to understand why fine-tuned responsiveness must be spontaneous rather than deliberative.

Let us grant that deliberation is an inferential thought process characterized by “rational”—that is, general—order. Such thought processes are necessarily disengaged from the particularities of the present situation, even when the present situation is the object of thought. The reason for this is that attention must be removed (at least in part) from situational details and shifted to a relevant network of semantic or logical relationships.

Thus, for example, if a worrisome encounter with a troubled friend is taken up and reflected upon as an instance of the challenges of friendship, the particular identity and troubles of this friend are replaced by a token that functions more or less like any other “troubled friend” within a semantic network. Hall and Ames refer to this kind of substitution as “construal.” In their view, construal is incompatible with the
wuwei ideal because the latter is characterized by spontaneous deference to the particularity of the situation at hand.\textsuperscript{59} The implication of this contrast is that we are more sensitive, and therefore more responsive in our care for our friend, if we keep our attention focused on the uniqueness of this friend and her current situation. When we attend to this uniqueness, we experience these details as irreplaceable components of an aesthetic order, and our spontaneous response will be tailored to fit this order. This is skillful spontaneity of a particular kind: non-deliberative or deferential spontaneity. It is a species of flow.\textsuperscript{60}

One can easily appreciate the importance of being sensitive to aesthetic orders and, conversely, the danger of becoming lost in rational or abstract deliberation. Note that the limitation of attention is again a crucial factor. When attention is structured so that the details of the present situation are minimally obscured by abstract conceptualization, experience approaches the phenomenological ideal of the “pure” perceptual experience, during which the distinction between sensory-motor engagement and inferential cogitation disappears. The benefits of such experiences of perceptual immersion are not just aesthetic: they often disclose matters of crucial importance. Numerous experiments have demonstrated that our habitual ways of construing familiar visual experiences can lead to gross and potentially disastrous distortions, a phenomenon sometimes referred to as “inattentional blindness.”\textsuperscript{61}

In addition to non-deliberative spontaneity, another frequently noted mark of Zhuangzian skill-knowledge is effortlessness or ease. Cook Ding cuts through an ox carcass with such ease that he never has to sharpen his blade. Flow involves a much more qualified kind of effortlessness, but nevertheless one that is important for understanding the special satisfaction that attends flow experience.

According to Csikszentmihalyi, flow experience follows a middle path between the boredom of activities that are too easy and the anxiety and frustration of being overwhelmed by activities that are too difficult.\textsuperscript{62} Therefore, it is not quite accurate to say that flow is effortless, except in one crucial respect: the relevant “effort” is the energy required to stay focused.\textsuperscript{63} Flow experiences are “negentropic” because they do not require us to expend extra energy on the maintenance of focused attention. This is no small advantage: consider how tiresome it is to be bored or frustrated! Put another way, consider which is more “work”: complete absorption in a challenging task during which time flies, or the seemingly endless labor on which one repeatedly fails to stay focused, because the task is either too easy to maintain interest or too hard to make any discernable progress. Because mental energy dissipates so easily in these latter situations, our experience is “entropic.”\textsuperscript{64} Flow experiences feel effortless because for their duration the maintenance of a state of focused attention seems to happen by itself.

The “negentropic” character of flow leads us at last to intrinsic value. Why is flow so enjoyable that it is its own reward? Is it because flow is negentropic, or is negentropy a consequence of some especially satisfying quality that is unique to flow? Does flow experience activate what psychologists refer to as the “pleasure center” of the brain? One can only speculate as to the answer, but the character and conditions of flow suggest that the complexity of the flow experience is itself the reward, not
some simple emotion or feeling that is super-added to an experience of skillful engagement. That is to say, flow experience is optimal because it is maximally rich.\textsuperscript{65}

In contrast, experience that does not flow is impoverished by the fitfulness of attention, which results in haphazard sequences of informational content. As indicated by John Dewey’s description of aesthetic experience, each moment gains in distinctness when it is embedded within a continuously flowing stream of similar but distinct moments. If successive moments are too similar, experience becomes monotonous; if they are too different, experience becomes chaotic. In contrast to each of these extremes, during flow every moment in the stream seems to be carried along by its neighbors, so that the total enhancement of experience seems like an effortlessly self-sustaining process. Thus negentropy and richness of experience may be two sides of the same coin.

5. The Limits of Skillful Spontaneity and the Transcendence of Wuwei

Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of flow has given us a rudimentary theory of skillful spontaneity as a richly lived experience. It explains how various traits of skillful spontaneity—responsive skill, non-deliberative spontaneity, effortlessness, and enjoyment—arise and fit together as a coherent phenomenon. But most importantly, the dependence of flow on attention has provided us with tools for speculating about the limits of skillful spontaneity and the ways in which these limits might be transcended.

Though it cannot be manufactured at will, there is nothing particularly mysterious about the special satisfaction of flow. It is the pleasure that attends complete absorption, and complete absorption occurs when a person is so well attuned to details of her present situation that her experience attains a balance of diversity and continuity, allowing attention to feed on itself. So the question is, can experiences of flow rise to the level of spiritual satisfaction, and if not, what else is needed?

The answer to this question, of course, depends partly on what one means by “spiritual satisfaction.” My contention from the start of this essay has been that spiritual satisfaction entails equanimity. Along the way I have argued that because all skillfulness is imperfect, to attain equanimity we must have resources for dealing with our inevitable failures. Even adequate skillfulness in the broadest sense—that is, making the most of the present situation—is often beyond our grasp. Thus, the occasional attainment of flow experience is not sufficient for spiritual satisfaction, and it is evident that flow experience cannot be more than occasional. The very concept of flow is predicated on the fact that attention is limited, and so implies that the conditions of flow can be realized only sporadically at best. Even if flow can be found simply by adopting the right perspective, it is hard to imagine how this skill could be perfectly realized: the continuity of embodied personal identity seems to demand that our range of perspectives is limited. Consequently, flow alone cannot overcome the limitations of human nature and the suffering and disappointment that such limitations inevitably bring. Increased flow may be a reliable indicator of increased quality of life, but it is not, by itself, a guarantee of spiritual equanimity.
Still, given that flow provides a theory for the skillful spontaneity that is necessary but insufficient for *wuwei*, what kinds of transcendence can we imagine for *wuwei* as a spiritual ideal? For ease of comparison, I suggest that the options be gathered into three categories: strong transcendence, weak or minimal transcendence, and personal transcendence.

Strong transcendence, with respect to flow, is “super-flow”: paranormal sensitivity and skill. This version of the *wuwei* ideal copes with human suffering by overcoming the limitations of human nature, and it does so by means of literally spirit-like insight and power. A strong reading of the transcendence of Zhuangzian spirituality has the obvious disadvantage of being implausible to a modern audience, but it should not for that reason be dismissed as irrelevant. Aside from whatever textual support it has in the *Zhuangzi*, the strong reading has the distinction of squarely facing up to the problem of limitations. That is to say, strong transcendence reminds us of why we seek transcendence of any kind, even if the solution it offers is unsatisfactory. If that seems like a backhanded compliment, consider the next option.

Weak or minimal transcendence, with respect to flow, is simply the maximum extension of flow, the cultivation of skillful spontaneity in as wide a range of activities as is humanly possible. Because weak transcendence does not exceed the limits of human nature, its transcendence is only relative at best: some people have more flow than others, and thereby manage to cope better, because their experience of life (on average) is richer, and perhaps also because they deal more skillfully (on average) with life’s challenges. In contrast with the previous option, a weak reading of the transcendence of Zhuangzian spirituality is plausible but not very compelling. In this reading, the *wuwei* ideal is simply “24–7” flow, and this is only a regulative ideal, as it is impossible to realize in fact. The problem with treating spiritual ideals as regulative is that as such they fail to confront the problem of limitations. The ideal of greater flow may serve to ameliorate the problems of ordinary life, but without facing up to the inevitability of failure it cannot address important existential issues. The conditions for flow are not entirely under our control, and among the conditions we can control we face difficult decisions regarding the kinds of flow that we pursue. The simple injunction “More flow” does not address these issues.

Another problem with both strong and weak forms of transcendence, as I have just defined them, is that neither option presents us with a clear discontinuity that marks off the spiritual life as the other side of a radical transformation. Super-flow is, after all, simply an extension of normal flow beyond the limits of human nature. But it is not a radically different form of life. One could say that strong transcendence lies along the same trajectory as weak transcendence. In his essay on skillfulness and Zhuangzian spirituality Yearley argues that the ultimate spiritual state is discontinuous with normal life, but his account of the transcendence enabled by “spiritual drives” suggests only this trajectory. A fuller range of options for Zhuangzian spirituality must include some way of departing from a simple continuum of more or less flow.

Accordingly, personal transcendence is distinguished from the other two categories by the attainment of a radically different perspective, a perspective from which all of life’s experiences—including its inevitable failures—are experienced within an
interpretive framework that is somehow discontinuous with normal life. This interpretive framework is not just a way of glossing over experience; rather, as in the case of all deeply engrained habits of interpretation, it constitutes a different way of experiencing.

Because of its emphasis on discontinuity, the relationship of personal transcendence to flow is much more complicated than that of strong or weak transcendence. Nevertheless, it is possible to sketch an outline of personal transcendence based on convergent elements of Zhuangzi scholarship and the implications of the previous discussion.

I suggest that while flow experience is an important—perhaps even essential—engine of Zhuangzian spirituality, it cannot supply the spiritual equanimity of wuwei unless it is harnessed within a conceptual framework that interprets flow experience in ways that direct personal transformation and reorient engagement with the world. In light of the special characteristics of flow—especially unselfconsciousness—it seems likely that this personal transformation involves the interpretive reconfiguration of the subject’s experience of her own personal agency. On the path to wuwei, the qualitative richness that accompanies total absorption in some activity (perhaps a meditative activity, perhaps something more interactive) is not taken as an end in itself (as it would be in the context of a humanistic view of fulfillment) but rather is interpreted as access to the spontaneous power of an ultimate reality such as the Dao or Heaven. Thus, the act of skillful spontaneity is taken to be a manifestation of this ultimate reality rather than the work of a personal will. Or, alternatively, the activity is experienced as the work of a harmonious plurality of spontaneous entities with no overarching or underlying order. Either way, what Csikszentmihalyi described as the condition of “emergent motivation”—activity without a preexisting intentional structure—is interpreted as a profound fact of reality, and, in turn, this view of reality informs the experience of flow as a kind of transcendence, that is, the transcendence of personal agency by means of direct engagement with the completely unfettered spontaneity (ziran) of reality itself.

While the traits of flow experience are essential to wuwei spirituality, the religious character of wuwei spirituality lies in the way that these traits are used both to engage the world and to transform personal character and sensitivity. Thus, the religious character of wuwei spirituality holds regardless of what we think of the truth of its interpretive claims or the value of its transformational consequences. As radical as such a transformation might be, it does not require any literal transcendence of human nature, including the culturally informed structures of embodiment that constitute personal identity. Given the connection between the qualitative richness of experience and skill, however, claims of superhuman skill powered by access to a flood-like wellspring of spiritual power are readily understandable. But there is also the possibility of interpreting the richness of flow experience in other ways: for instance, as insight into the creative power that underlies the ceaseless transformations of all things. In either case, instances of consummate skill might serve as instigators of spiritual transformation and as important signs of spiritual attainment, but as they are not the primary measure of spiritual equanimity there is no need for them actually
to exceed human limitations. Likewise, the equanimity that distinguishes spiritual satisfaction from ordinary happiness is not attached exclusively to actual experiences of flow, although it is probably sustained by their occurrence. Once the concept of the non-personal spontaneity of reality is adopted as an interpretive framework, it might play a role in the constitution of all experience, flow-like or not. And if the internalization of this interpretive framework brings true spiritual satisfaction, it should provide resources for coping with experiences of suffering, disappointment, and failure.

6. Conclusion

In closing, I would like to point out the wider significance of this third way of reading the transcendence of Zhuangzian spirituality. The importance of an interpretive framework for personal transformation suggests that spiritual equanimity may not be easily detached from its traditional moorings in religious thought. Perhaps Zhuangzi was too subversive to be identified with anything so staid and institutional as a “religious tradition”; nevertheless his skill stories cannot be understood as expressions of an ultimate spiritual state without reference to a larger cosmic (or a-cosmic) framework. Especially when considered from the vantage point of our late-modern secular world, this framework is distinctly religious: not because it is theistic or supernatural, but because it is radically nonhumanistic. In other words, the religious nature of Zhuangzi’s ideal is apparent insofar as its notion of human flourishing is tied to engagement with a radically nonpersonal reality. If Zhuangzian spirituality, or wuwei, is just a feeling of effortless, unselfconscious, and harmonious flow—that is, just a special quality of life—then it belongs to the simple trajectory of more or less flow. But if such feelings are by themselves inadequate, then it seems that wuwei is something else in addition: a radically different way of interpreting the world.

Consequently, this reading of the Zhuangzi is a challenge to late moderns who would prefer to be “spiritual but not religious.” I suspect that this preference arises from a desire to affirm and enjoy the meaningfulness of life without having to commit to some particular worldview and thereby risk entanglement in the endless disputes that arise from conflicting worldviews. But the question remains: can the fruits of spiritual satisfaction be harvested from qualitatively rich experiences without an interpretive framework and all the problems that go with it? Even the enigmatic figure of Zhuangzi, who played the gadfly to the religious disputers of his day, suggests that spirituality may not be possible without some such commitment. The model of spirituality that transcends disputes by the realization of a deeply pluralistic reality may, in fact, be the exception that proves the rule.

Notes

1 – According to psychologist Ralph W. Hood, Jr., recent surveys consistently report that a significant minority of Americans, perhaps as many as 30 percent, de-
scribe themselves as “spiritual but not religious,” and that many in this group are “vociferously antireligious,” indicating the emergence of a concept of spirituality that is distinct from religion. See “Mystical, Spiritual, and Religious Experiences,” in Raymond F. Paloutzian and Crystal Park, eds., *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* (New York: Guilford Press, 2005), p. 350.


4 – See Hood, “Mystical, Spiritual, and Religious Experiences,” p. 350. Emmons remarks that “in contrast to religion, conceptions of spirituality do not always have a transcendent reference point, a fact that has led to much confusion over its meaning in research contexts” (Emmons, “Spirituality: Recent Progress,” p. 64).


7 – An extensive treatment of religion as a form of symbolic engagement with ultimate reality, as well as the double reference of religious symbols, can be found in Robert Cummings Neville, *The Truth of Broken Symbols* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).


9 – Accordingly, the distinction that I make between religion and humanism should not be confused with the antihumanistic stances of neo-orthodox Christian theologians like Paul Tillich and Karl Barth. On the contrary, in contrast to these thinkers, who condemned the religious inadequacy of naturalism, I am interested in exploring fully naturalistic models of religious spirituality and the kinds of transcendence that such models might entail.


12 – Ivanhoe, “Spontaneity as Normative Ideal.”

13 – The importance of these differences signals that insofar as it applies to all of these texts *wuwei* should be treated as a *vague* rather than a *general* category. Following the technical sense of *vagueness* defined by Charles S. Peirce, a vague category is indeterminate in important respects and so requires further specification when applied to a particular instance, whereas a general category applies uniformly, and thus indifferently, to all of its instances. Although deceptively simple, the difference between vagueness and generality has significant ramifications for how categories are used in the comparison of ideas. See Robert Cummings Neville and Wesley J. Wildman, “On Comparing Religious Ideas,” in Robert Cummings Neville, ed., *Ultimate Realities: A Volume in the Comparative Religious Ideas Project* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), pp. 187–210.

14 – Ivanhoe, “The Theme of Unselfconsciousness in the *Liezi*.”

15 – Ibid.


17 – Ibid., pp. 162, 192.


21 – For an accessible introduction to these studies, as well as a fairly convincing case for the importance of attention, see Winifred Gallagher, *Rapt: Attention and the Focused Life* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009).


29 – Ibid., p. 164.

30 – Ibid., p. 154.

31 – Ibid., p. 159.

32 – Ibid., p. 176.


35 – Puett, “‘Nothing Can Overcome Heaven,’” pp. 252, 258.


42 – For instance, see Alan Fox, “Reflex and Reflexivity,” p. 221: “Zhuangzi does not merely tolerate the world; he actually affirms it as wonderful and enjoyable, once one learns to fit in.”


44 – Csikszentmihalyi, “Introduction,” p. 7. It may be helpful to note that Csikszentmihalyi’s methods of research are characteristic of the subfield of psychology known as qualitative psychology. As the name indicates, this subfield is particularly interested in the subjectively felt, qualitative aspects of human behavior in normal settings. Accordingly, it relies upon observation and carefully conducted interviews. The methodological rigor of this subfield is a matter of the degree to which special methods of interviewing and data analysis can overcome the obvious pitfalls of first-person accounts of experience delivered after the fact. Csikszentmihalyi has attempted to bypass at least one of these pitfalls by what he calls the “Experience Sampling Method” (ESM), which utilizes beepers to collect qualitative reports from subjects at various times during their normal everyday life. In addition, over the past several decades Csikszentmihalyi and his colleagues have cast an impressively wide net, drawing data from diverse activities, cultures, and age groups.


49 – Graham, Chuang-Tzu, p. 92. See also the “fasting of the heart,” pp. 68–69.


53 – Ibid., p. 18.

54 – See Gallagher, *Rapt*.


59 – Hall and Ames, *Thinking from the Han*, p. 57.

60 – The link between the richness of experience characterized by aesthetic orders and a deferential kind of skillful spontaneity lends support to those who defend the moral sensitivity of Zhuangzian spirituality against more relativistic readings. For example, see Ivanhoe, “Was Zhuangzi a Relativist?” It also supports the more general claim that moral and aesthetic ideals converge in ancient Chinese thought. However, it is worthwhile to consider how the limitation of attention complicates this conflation of moral, aesthetic, and spiritual ideals.

   The problem with categories of aesthetic and rational order is that they tempt us to make a difference of degree into an absolute distinction. Neuroscience has not yet given us a rock-solid theory of perceptual experience, but it strongly suggests that even the “purest” perceptual experience entails abstractive and inferential processes. Consequently, construal is not just a bad habit that some people have, and it is not just an inevitable consequence of language and other systems of the rational-type order. It is a necessary condition for human experience. In other words, there is no experience that is not, in part, a product of construal (albeit mostly unconscious).

   While this fact may seem so obvious as to be hardly worth noting, any interpretation of *wuwei* that follows the pattern of A. C. Graham must take it into account. Many such interpretations imply that the spontaneously deferential character of *wuwei* guarantees that it achieves a level of fine-tuned responsiveness that is morally impeccable. But in fact deferential sensitivity depends on a prior construal of the relevant situation, and any construal is morally problematic once alternatives are recognized.

   Recall that my earlier analysis of Graham’s formula questioned its assumptions about the univocal nature of the situation at hand. Flow theory suggests
that there is an element of truth to Graham’s reading insofar as non-deliberative spontaneity can be deemed morally superior to deliberative conduct given that the relevant situation is already somewhat circumscribed. In other words, the moral superiority of non-deliberative spontaneity actually depends on some degree of construal—much in the way that successful musical improvisation usually depends on pre-established conventions. The very existence of deferential standards is dependent on the choice of some relevant situation, a choice that is necessarily, in part, a process of construal.

Those who picture Zhuangzian spirituality as a kind of radically perspectival and impeccably deferential sensitivity must face two important challenges: the first is the natural limitations of human experience as necessarily constituted by processes of construal; the second is the incompatibility of radical perspectivalism and any objective standard of deferential sensitivity.

61 – A particularly striking example of “inattentional blindness” came from a flight simulator test conducted by NASA on professional pilots, many of whom were so unaware that an image of a plane had been inserted on the runway that they landed right on top of it. I learned of this study from a fascinating book written by Temple Grandin with Catherine Johnson, Animals in Translation: Using the Mysteries of Autism to Decode Animal Behavior (New York: Harcourt Books, 2005), p. 25. Grandin is full of insights into the dangers of human conceptualization—what she calls “abstractification.” For more on inattentional blindness, see Alva Noë, Action in Perception (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), pp. 52–53.

62 – This has been a constant theme since Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s Beyond Boredom and Anxiety (San Francisco: Josey-Bass Publishers, 1975).

63 – See Bruya’s Effortless Attention for reviews of experimental studies of the effort expended during tasks that demand focused attention.

64 – Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi, Optimal Experience, pp. 22–24.

65 – It may be useful here to distinguish enjoyment from pleasure, as some psychologists do. Brian Bruya (personal communication) suggests a handy way to understand the difference: a connoisseur’s appreciation of a fine wine is an example of enjoyment, while drunkenness, especially when habitual, is an example of pleasure. Note that these examples suggest not just a difference of feeling but also a difference of engagement: the connoisseur enjoys the wine whereas the binge drinker takes pleasure simply in being drunk. The positivity of flow is clearly a kind of enjoyment.