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Trying Not to Try: The Art and Science of Spontaneity by
Edward Slingerland (review)

Paul D'Ambrosio

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BOOK REVIEWS

Trying Not to Try: The Art and Science of Spontaneity. By Edward Slingerland. New York: Crown Publishers, 2014. Pp. 1 + 295. Hardcover \$26.00. Paper \$15.00, ISBN 978-0-7704-3761-9.



Reviewed by **Paul D'Ambrosio**
East China Normal University
pauljdambrosio@hotmail.com

Edward Slingerland has been working on notions of spontaneity in classical Chinese thought and modern science for many years. In his newest title, *Trying Not to Try: The Art and Science of Spontaneity*, he approaches this topic by weaving short anecdotes, recent discoveries in cognitive science, and classic Chinese philosophy into an eloquent tapestry that depicts both the everydayness and paradoxical nature of spontaneous action. The text does not read like many other contemporary academic books: it uses colloquial language and does not directly address contemporary philosophical debates. But this does not compromise its ability to stimulate the intellect, or deliver solid philosophical arguments. Slingerland does a wonderful job at providing the reader with solid scientific evidence and textual analysis in a lighthearted, easy to read fashion. In many ways it follows the style of Hans-Georg Moeller's *The Moral Fool: A Case for Amoralism* in being original, informative, and well researched while simultaneously moving seamlessly between theoretical problems and concrete practice.¹

In order to present the complexity and pervasiveness of spontaneity, Slingerland begins the book with self-descriptions of sports stars and musicians who say that they perform best in a cultivated state of effortless action. They all note that this “being in the zone” is extremely productive, but also not something that is easily achieved. In fact, trying to get there is often a one-way ticket to failure—the more one tries to be spontaneous the more “tried” their actions become, and therefore less spontaneous. One must somehow deal with this paradox of “trying not to try” in order to get “in the zone.” Slingerland points out that this is part of everyone's daily lives. Everything from dating to competing in the Olympics can benefit, he argues, from a strategy for overcoming the tension between conscious effort and acting in a natural, spontaneous manner. This goes against the grain of many traditional philosophers such as Plato or Descartes, who emphasize rational analysis and abstract thinking as the basis for action. Slingerland points out that many traditional Chinese thinkers can provide a resource for a more “embodied view of cognition” that is useful for dealing with the problem of trying not to try (p. 13). He argues that “For the early Chinese thinkers . . . the culmination of knowledge is understood, not in terms of grasping a set of abstract principles, but rather as entering a state of *wu-wei* [无为]” (pp. 13–14).

Setting up the framework for this discussion, Slingerland looks closely at *wu-wei* and *de*. *Wu-wei* is basically equated with spontaneity, and characterized by two essential features. First, it is experienced as a type of “split” between personal identity and other forces or desires. Grounding this concept in everyday familiarity, Slingerland notes that this break is articulated in common expressions such as “I couldn’t make *myself* get out of bed this morning” (p. 26). Second, a *wu-wei* or spontaneous state is extremely efficacious—a point that was addressed already in the self-descriptions of sports stars and musicians. Slingerland goes on to say that cognitive science is beginning to recognize the difference between spontaneous (*wu-wei*) and non-spontaneous action in terms of cognition. Scientists generally agree that there are “fast, automatic, effortless, and mostly unconscious” ways of thinking that are considered “hot” (p. 27). They are contrasted with “cold” “slow, deliberate, effortful and conscious” thinking (pp. 27–28). *De* 德 (“virtue,” “power”) is, then, the outward sign that someone is in a state of spontaneity or *wu-wei*. According to Slingerland, early Chinese philosophy revolves around reaching or achieving *wu-wei* and *de*, though this goal is not always explicit. Scholars of Chinese thought unfamiliar with Slingerland’s previous work may find this point somewhat unconvincing as Slingerland does not give thorough arguments for reading *wu-wei* as a significant concept in texts that never mention it.²

Slingerland also spends time differentiating *wu-wei* spontaneity from other more popular Western notions, such as Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of “flow.” The latter is often situated within a perspective where the individual acts in a manner that is perceived as isolated, to some degree, from others. At its extreme this can be interpreted as simply doing whatever one wants. *Wu-wei*, Slingerland argues, is social and involves a genuine expression of values. So binge shopping and TV watching do not constitute *wu-wei* action since they are not constituted by values or engagement with others. Slingerland summarizes, “Interestingly, if you were to keep track of the activities that induce *wu-wei* in me or anyone else, you’d be able to piece together a rough outline of what sorts of things a person values or doesn’t. . . . Crucially, *wu-wei* can occur in group activities only when we genuinely value the social relationships involved” (pp. 51–52). The personal comment (mentioning “me”) here is characteristic.

Throughout the book Slingerland makes comments that read somewhat like a personal journal or diary. For example, he admits to being from “New Jersey, with a Jerseyite’s low tolerance for B.S.” (p. 12). He tells us, “I still have a vivid memory of my first eight-track, Elton John’s *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road*, which I played until it broke” (p. 126). These comments are not necessarily productive for making his point, but will perhaps be amusing for some readers.

The next step for Slingerland is to contextualize this concept, and compare how different thinkers in ancient China tackled the paradox of trying not to try. He first looks at the *Lunyu* 论语 and *Xunzi* 荀子, which emphasize a certain kind of education. Slingerland believes that in these two texts, “Cold cognition must be made hot. The Confucians [Kongzi and Xunzi] tried to accomplish this by intensively training people’s embodied minds until consciously learned processes could be performed in

a *wu-wei* fashion” (p. 67). Although neither the *Lunyu* nor the *Xunzi* theorize directly about *wu-wei* to this extent, Slingerland is able to show convincingly that their views on morality do necessitate a certain type of learned spontaneity. From this perspective the link between the *Lunyu* and the *Xunzi* is certainly stronger than either’s connection to the *Mengzi* 孟子. The comparison is especially interesting because it sheds light on new ways to look at the relationship between these three classic Confucian texts. (Standard interpretations often categorize the *Mengzi* as being closer to the *Lunyu* than the *Xunzi*.)

Before getting to the *Mengzi*, however, Slingerland proposes looking at the *Laozi* 老子, which takes a different view of *wu-wei* and its paradoxical nature (i.e., trying not to try). He argues that the *Laozi* advocates a small, primitive society where technology is kept to a minimum, and people seldom travel or trade beyond village limits. Here the major metaphor is the uncarved wooden block, which remains in its natural state, and does not attempt to be “carved” into any certain shape or form. People should emulate this hunk of wood and not try to become moral or ethical in any particular way. This would allow them to retain a kind of naturalness that would limit any “cold cognition.” This is quite the opposite of the conscious learning and training processes proposed in the *Lunyu* and *Xunzi*. However, Slingerland expresses some hesitation about the theoretical and practical validity of this position. He mentions, “If it’s so natural to be like the uncarved block, if all we’re being asked to do is return home [to a small village], why do we need a book to tell us to do it?” (p. 106). A much better approach is given, according to Slingerland, by the *Mengzi*.

Somewhere between the somewhat forceful training of the *Lunyu* and *Xunzi* and the *Laozi*’s model of the uncarved block emerges the *Mengzi*. The general orientation of this text is in line with the Confucian learning project, but it dials back the amount of effort needed. The *Mengzi* says that humans naturally have sprouts of morality, which need to be cultivated in a particular fashion but cannot be pulled or forced to grow. Slingerland identifies these sprouts as related to *wu-wei* action. Again it is an easy point of contention for anyone who has not read his previous work. However, while certainly not in accordance with traditional interpretations, Slingerland does make a persuasive case. Comparing the *Mengzi* with Mohist texts—which seem much closer to the “cold cognition” favored by many prominent Western thinkers—Slingerland shows how even modern cognitive science can attest to the *Mengzi*’s theory of sprouts as a *wu-wei* phenomenon.

The *Zhuangzi* 庄子, often classified as “Daoist” along with the *Laozi*, is similarly against Confucian cultivation. Slingerland differentiates it as simply proposing that people “go with the flow” (on a broad social scale). He argues that for the *Zhuangzi* “Complete relaxation and freedom from external concerns perfect your *de* and make you formidable” (p. 155). However, the initial problem of the *Laozi* is found in this second Daoist text as well. Specifically, “a group of people who claimed to embrace this idea nonetheless felt the need to write an entire book about it.” In the final two chapters Slingerland then sides with Confucian approaches, especially in terms of valuing relationships and social roles.

After evaluating the four approaches above to *wu-wei*, Slingerland returns to the problem they all face, namely “the problem . . . of how we can consciously *try* to be sincere or effortless . . . [or,] the problem of how you can try not to try” (p. 168). Concentrating on how to be genuine or sincere, Slingerland identifies cheaters, liars, or poseurs as a major social problem, not only for ancient Chinese thinkers, but for modern life as well. Trying to be sincere or foster certain values is a problem that is “a structural feature of civilized life” (p. 192). Ancient Chinese thinkers are a useful resource for tackling this problem because they give myriad solutions, all of which might be helpful for living with (not solving) this paradox.

In the final chapter Slingerland emphasizes that no single model for dealing with the *wu-wei* paradox is best. Instead he suggests, “You choose a desirable model, then reshape your hot cognition to fit by immersing yourself in reminders and environmental cues” (p. 203). Though theoretically the paradox will remain, Slingerland asserts that this is a practical solution. After all, he argues, “We’re made for *doing*, not thinking” (p. 213).

Slingerland’s *Trying Not to Try* is, overall, a success. He gets complex philosophical and psychological ideas across in simple language, with just the right amount of simple everyday examples that are extremely illustrative. The major drawback of this approach is that, like Moeller’s *The Moral Fool*, it deals with general philosophical issues without entering into specific academic debates (though Slingerland’s writing style differs in that it is much more personal). This style is both philosophically engaging and inclusive of non-expert readers. In terms of content, *Trying Not to Try* is valuable as a text in cognitive psychology as well, as it builds a bridge to philosophical concepts, grounding them both in practical examples and shared life experiences.

Notes

- 1 – See Hans-Georg Moeller, *The Moral Fool: A Case for Amoralism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).
- 2 – E.g., see Edward Slingerland, *Effortless Action: Wu-wei As Conceptual Metaphor and Spiritual Ideal in Early China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Reframing the Intercultural Dialogue on Human Rights: A Philosophical Approach. By Jeffrey Flynn. New York: Routledge, 2014. Pp. x + 223. ISBN 13:978-0-415-70602-5.



Reviewed by **Loubna El Amine**
Northwestern University
loubna.elamine@northwestern.edu

Can we respond to the charge that human rights are a Western product without relinquishing human rights altogether? Can we be sensitive not only to the dominant