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Drunk on Heaven

THE SOCIAL AND SPIRITUAL
DIMENSIONS OF *WU-WEI*

AMONG THE STUDENTS WHO TAKE MY COURSE ON EARLY CHINESE thought, a perennial favorite is a story from the *Zhuangzi* that concerns someone hitching a ride home after a night of heavy drinking. “When a drunken person falls out of a cart,” *Zhuangzi* observes, “although the cart may be going very fast, he won’t be killed. His bones and tendons are the same as other people’s, and yet he is not injured as they would be.” I always advise my undergrads not to try this at home, but I’ve personally seen the principle in action. Under conditions that remain somewhat hazy to this day, I once witnessed a friend take an incredible tumble down a grassy hill, then a short flight of stone stairs, finally and inexplicably ending up on a concrete sidewalk, on his feet, completely unharmed. The rest of us were so impressed that we tried it, too, all of us landing on our feet like world-class gymnasts and then sauntering back to the dorms.

The explanation for our temporary gymnastic excellence is relatively simple: drunk people are physically (and often morally) looser because, to draw upon the terminology introduced above, their cognitive control regions are partially disengaged—“downregulated,” as neuroscientists would put it. They are only dimly aware of what’s going on around them. This makes them less inhibited—more will-

ing to do the Macarena, for instance—and also less inclined to consider future consequences. On the negative side, this leads to behavior that is sometimes regretted by the sober, hung-over, coldly conscious self the next day (see Macarena, above). On the positive side, it means that when the inebriated, say, fall off a cart, they don’t stiffen up in anticipation of contact with the ground but just roll with the fall and therefore emerge relatively unhurt. As *Zhuangzi* puts it, his drunken cart-rider “was not aware that he was riding, and is equally unaware that he has fallen out. Life and death, alarm and terror cannot enter his breast, which is why he can bump into things without fear.” This, *Zhuangzi* explains, is because “his spirit is intact.”

Why does *Zhuangzi* celebrate the partial paralysis of our cognitive control regions? Because drunkenness induces something very much like a crude form of *wu-wei*: a short-term suspension of active self-monitoring. At the same time, it’s clear that this metaphor of the drunken man is just that—a metaphor—and that the substance *Zhuangzi* really wants us to get drunk on is Heaven. “If a person can keep himself intact like this by means of wine,” he concludes, “how much more so can he stay intact by means of Heaven! The sage hides in Heaven, and therefore nothing can harm him.” The cart rider is meant to show how being “drunk on Heaven” provides a degree of independence from the ordinary world. Things that would hurt most people do not harm the Heaven-drunk sage.

We see here a tight connection between *wu-wei* and a specific religious worldview, and this is significant. In the previous chapter, we’ve gone some way toward providing a naturalistic account of at least certain aspects of *wu-wei*—that is, a scientific explanation of how behavior can be effortless, unselfconscious, and yet perfectly efficacious. At the same time, we miss some crucial features of *wu-wei* by too abruptly pulling it out of Warring States China and plopping it into the modern world. For the early Chinese, being in *wu-wei* is not just about how one feels internally, or to what extent one’s conscious brain is in charge. It is, at the end of the day, about being

properly situated in the cosmos. And this too has important implications for contemporary life.

Everyone—including the early Chinese—loves the Butcher Ding story. Everyone—including the early Chinese—also thinks that being physically skillful and effective is a great thing. Ultimately, though, thinkers like Zhuangzi don't really care about how you cut up oxen or carve bell stands. What they care about is how you relate to others. This is why Butcher Ding says, at the end of the story, that what he cares about is the Way (the *Dao*), not skill per se. After seeing his performance, Lord Wenhui doesn't announce that he'd really like to give up the feudal lordship business and become a butcher, but rather that he's learned from the performance the secret to living his life. This is because the story is really about *social* effectiveness: the ability to move through the human world with the same ease as Butcher Ding's blade through the ox.

This social dimension of *wu-wei* becomes crystal clear in texts such as the *Analects*, where we read that Confucius always appears in the proper attire, knows the right way to enter a room, utters the most apropos words, and deals with others in the most tactful manner, and yet is never stiff or formal. His behavior seems to flow spontaneously from his very nature, which completely disarms philosophical opponents, tames ornery rulers, and shames lazy disciples into pursuing their studies with renewed effort. You can practically hear the *swish* and *swoosh* of Ding's blade as Confucius glides through an official reception with consummate grace or deftly handles a rude interlocutor without missing a beat.

This kind of social efficacy, in turn, depends crucially upon the mysterious power of *de*, the charismatic tractor beam that emanates from a person in *wu-wei*, drawing other people to him or her and inspiring trust. In the *Analects* we read that "one who rules through the power of *de* is like the Pole Star: it simply remains in its place and receives the homage of the myriad lesser stars." In early Chinese astronomy the Pole Star was thought to be the fixed center

of the nighttime sky, with all of the other heavenly bodies moving around it in concentric circles. The truly virtuous Confucian ruler can simply take his place in the palace and the gravitational force of his *de* will draw everyone into his or her proper place around him. In the *Laozi* we read of the hidden Daoist adept, with an empty mind and a child's heart, who is able to walk among fierce wild animals or through walls of fire without being harmed. The Laozian ruler is also able to bring the human world into order through his *de*, although unlike the Confucian ruler—high up and bright in the heavens like the Pole Star—the Laozian sage is invisible, dwelling in the dark valleys and pulling everyone in the world into order as gravity pulls water downhill. The Zhuangzian sage similarly possesses a powerful *de*, which has a therapeutic, relaxing effect on others and allows him to move unharmed through the physical and social worlds.

For the early Chinese, there was a fundamental link between this crucial power of *de* and Heaven, the drink of choice for our Zhuangzian sage. The concept of Heaven (*tian*, 天) is an ancient one, appearing in bronze vessel inscriptions from the second millennium B.C.E. It refers to the high god worshipped by the early Zhou kings, conceptualized as a powerful person dwelling somewhere up in the sky—*tian* refers both to this being and to the physical sky. This is why "Heaven" is the standard English translation, and probably the least inaccurate one we can find. It's important to realize, however, that we're not talking about a *place*, as in the Christian conception of heaven, but rather a godlike being who can send down orders, control the weather, determine success in battle, and reward and protect its followers. From Zhou times on, Heaven is also seen as the source of value or goodness: what Heaven wants is, by definition, good. The same inherent goodness characterizes the "Way" (*Dao*, 道), which literally refers to a path or road—a physical *way*. By extension, it can also mean the *way* to do something and, in this context, the *right* way. For the early Chinese, it had cosmic significance: the Way is the

proper means of being a perfected human being, or faithfully doing the will of Heaven. The Way is Heaven's Way, the grounding of all goodness or value in the world.

So *wu-wei* and *de* are fundamentally linked to Heaven. *Wu-wei* works because to be *wu-wei* means that you are following the Heavenly Way, and anyone following the Way gains the power of *de*. This connection has important implications for understanding the kind of spontaneity that the early Chinese valued so highly. Spontaneity in the West is typically associated with individuality—people just doing whatever they want. *Wu-wei*, on the other hand, means becoming part of something larger: the cosmic order represented by the Way. Sages from Confucius at age seventy to the Daoists describe *wu-wei* as a state of “fitting” with the universe. Similarly, *de* is powerful because Heaven has made humans, animals, and even the natural world in such a way that they respond instantly and unquestioningly to virtue. The *de*-bearing sage can attract people, calm wild animals, and ensure good harvests and clement weather. By rewarding the *wu-wei* ruler with this power, Heaven ensures that its will is done. *De* is like a halo that surrounds someone in *wu-wei* and signals to everyone around: “Heaven likes me! You should too! I’m okay.”

Grasping the fundamentally religious nature of *wu-wei* is vital, and not just for reasons of historical accuracy. For one thing, the example of mastering a physical skill (like ox butchery), while a helpful analogy, becomes misleading if it’s disengaged from its original cultural and religious context. The problem is that we can imagine someone being a skilled butcher, pianist, or tennis player and yet still an atrocious human being. (I’m sure you know a person or two like this.) What *wu-wei* represents, on the other hand, is the state of being a perfected part of a greater whole that is also embraced by others. It is this holistic, social, and religious quality of *wu-wei* that makes it unique.

The best way to get a handle on this point is to consider what is probably the best-known contemporary account of spontaneity as

an ideal, the concept of “flow” developed by the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. If we consider the major features of flow as he outlines them, many similarities pop out: deep but effortless concentration, responsiveness to the environment, a high degree of effectiveness, profound enjoyment, the loss of a sense of self, and an altered sense of time. Over the past couple of decades, Csikszentmihalyi and his colleagues have demonstrated that flow experiences appear to be universal cross-culturally and to be described in similar ways by people involved in a broad range of activities. In Csikszentmihalyi’s view, the key feature that unites all of these experiences—the defining condition for flow—is a precise calibration of challenge and skill. Flow happens when we hit the “sweet spot” between too easy and too hard. Since skills improve over time, this means that flow requires exposure to constantly “spiraling complexity” that “forces people to stretch themselves, to always take on another challenge to improve on their abilities.” It is this emphasis on *challenge* and *complexity* that best allows us to see the distinction between flow—at least as defined by Csikszentmihalyi—and *wu-wei*. It also helps us to see how Western individualism can obscure certain important aspects of spontaneity that are, in contrast, highlighted by the early Chinese.

Consider one of the examples that jumped out at me when I first read *Flow* as a college student, that of “E.,” an anonymous but reportedly well-known and powerful European woman:

A scholar of international reputation, she has at the same time built up a thriving business that employs hundreds of people and has been on the cutting edge of its field for a generation. E. travels constantly to political, business, and professional meetings, moving among her several residences around the world. If there is a concert in the town where she is staying, E. will probably be in the audience; at the first free moment she will be at the museum or library. And while she is in a meeting, her chauffeur, instead of just

standing around and waiting, will be expected to visit the local art gallery or museum; for on the way home, his employer will want to discuss what he thought of its paintings.

The example of E. certainly fits the profile of individual challenge and constantly spiraling complexity. From what we can glean, she is an impressive individual. Her life story is inspiring, and she herself “radiates a pure glow of energy.” I have to admit, though, that when I first read about E. her lifestyle struck me as rather exhausting, with all of this constant traveling, activity, and relentless self-improvement. (I also remember thinking that, were I her chauffeur, every now and then I might just want to chill out and have a smoke instead of being force-marched through a museum and then getting quizzed about it.)

Flow also contains other stories that I originally found much more compelling than that of E. One good example is the story of Serafina Vinon, a seventy-six-year-old inhabitant of a small mountain village in the Italian Alps. Serafina is described as living a lifestyle that remains more or less unchanged from that of her ancestors for the past few hundred years: she rises at five in the morning to milk her cows, she cooks, she cleans, she takes the herd up to higher pastures or tends to her orchards, she cards wool. When asked to describe what gives her the greatest pleasure in life, she reports that it is precisely these everyday activities that put her into a state where she is absorbed, unselfconscious, and at ease. “To be outdoors, to talk with people, to be with my animals . . . I talk to everybody—plants, birds, flowers, and animals,” she explains. “Everything in nature keeps you company; you see nature progress every day. You feel clean and happy. . . . Even when you have to work a lot it is very beautiful.”

This story has little to do with complexity and challenge, still less with constantly spiraling complexity. Rather, the main sense one gets is of peaceful, relaxed absorption into something larger than the self: the natural beauty of the Italian Alps, an inherited tradition

that provides routine and structure, a sense of companionship with animals and birds. These bigger wholes into which Serafina feels absorbed—Nature with a capital “N,” or her cultural tradition—are also seen by her as important sources of value or goodness. Indeed, it is the fact that she deeply *cares* about her beautiful surroundings and her way of life, and derives meaning from them, that allows her to become absorbed in the first place. When I first read this account, as a beginning student of Chinese thought, I recall feeling that Serafina’s experience not only looked a lot more like early Chinese conceptions of *wu-wei* than the endless travel and self-improvement of E. but also matched my own experience better. This is a conviction that has only strengthened over time.

To be sure, when I’m lucky I am able to enter *wu-wei* in complex, challenging situations linked to my job—for instance, while writing this book. When I’m in the “writing zone,” as I think of it, I experience all of the classic flow hallmarks. Entire paragraphs seem to emerge spontaneously from some mysterious region of my brain, I am completely absorbed in what I’m doing, I lose all sense of time, I forget to eat, and I emerge feeling relaxed and pleased with my work. No one could deny that complexity and challenge play a role here. In the final analysis, though, they are incidental. The complexity and challenge of writing a book can induce *wu-wei* only if they are encountered in the service of something bigger, such as an idea that I really care about and want to share with others.

It is this focus on *caring*—on getting beyond the self—that, in turn, allows us to connect *wu-wei* states characterized by high complexity and challenge to their infinitely more common relatives: very routine, thoroughly familiar, low-complexity activities that allow us to be fully absorbed in something that we love and value and that we see as being larger than our individual selves. My most common *wu-wei* experiences, like Serafina’s, have always tended to involve activities that put me in contact with the natural world. Hiking the same trail I’ve hiked a hundred times through Point Reyes National Seashore on the California coast reliably puts me in *wu-wei*, as does

weeding my vegetable garden, pruning and tending to my fruit trees, or simply sitting on an ocean beach watching the waves crash. Except for the psychological profile of the state they produce, these activities do not look anything at all like E.'s frenetic life. Indeed, if one looks past Csikszentmihalyi's own emphasis on complexity and challenge, the survey data that he and his colleagues have gathered suggest that most flow experiences actually occur in social situations of relatively low complexity, like conversing with friends, sharing a meal with family, or playing with small children.

Why, then, did flow researchers end up focusing on complexity and challenge as the defining features of the experience? Because these researchers are, for the most part, Western individualists. In our culture, activities like running ultramarathons or exploring new art museums tend to be solitary and aimed at self-improvement. We focus more on the intersection of our individual skills with the demands of the task at hand and overlook the fact that the resulting challenge engages us only against a broader background of things we care about. Flow researchers also latched on to complexity and challenge because they were keen to distinguish flow states from other states that share some of the same features—loss of a sense of self, an altered experience of time, relaxation—but that we wouldn't want to dignify with the label of "flow." Watching a mindless TV show would be a good example, but we could include any simple, passive activity that fully occupies our attention while we are immersed in it, yet leaves us feeling empty or tired rather than fulfilled and energized: gambling, reading a trashy magazine, aimlessly surfing the Internet, or exchanging desultory gossip with acquaintances we don't even really like. When faced with the question of how to distinguish between flow and activities such as this, complexity and challenge jump out as the salient features when considered from a purely individualist perspective.

Our consideration of the early Chinese religious worldview, however, gives us an alternate, and ultimately more satisfying, way to make this distinction. It is the connection with a larger, valued whole

that allows *wu-wei* or true flow experiences to leave us feeling "clean and happy," as Serafina puts it, rather than dirty and worn out. One can think of this larger whole as a *framework of values*—that is, a structure within which we situate ourselves or our actions and that allows us to classify some things as *good* and others as *bad* and to behave accordingly. Many in the West have attempted to ground such values in objective facts or rational calculation, but they are, by their very nature, beyond the purview of science. Science can tell us what *is*, not what *should* be: it traffics in facts, not values. This means that we go beyond the facts anytime we make value judgments. We feel that slavery is *wrong* because there is something special about human beings that makes us different from cattle, although from a biological perspective there is nothing that qualitatively distinguishes *Homo sapiens* from *Bos taurus*, the domestic cow. Our value judgments are ultimately grounded in these kinds of unjustifiable, but nonetheless deeply held, convictions. Moreover, human beings are built in such a way that we cannot do without such convictions. Imagine trying to move through life without any sense of good or bad, or without the motivational drive that such commitments give us.

Understanding the essential role that these frameworks play in human life is, in turn, the key to understanding *wu-wei*. I would suggest that the distinguishing feature of *wu-wei* is the absorption of the self into something greater. That is, whether we emerge from a state of effortlessness and unselfconsciousness feeling energized or enervated probably depends, at least in part, on our values: How does the activity in which we just engaged reflect our larger sense of who we are and what we hold dear? For example, if you value a particular set of friends, you're likely to come out of an evening of drinking and chatting with them feeling good about how you've spent your time. The mere anticipation of value may also be a facilitator of *wu-wei* experiences: the fact that Point Reyes occupies a special place in my own personal set of values makes me much more prone to experience *wu-wei* when hiking there. Indeed, the very act of preparing

to go there puts me into *wu-wei*, and even the drive up takes on special qualities.

For most of recorded human history, value frameworks were provided by organized religion and were shared more or less universally across large populations. For the early Chinese thinkers, for instance, this framework was provided by faith in Heaven and its Way. For traditionally religious people today, this “valued whole” looks very much like the early Chinese Way: a coherent, clearly defined metaphysical structure (God’s plan, the working out of karma), backed by a priesthood and a set of important texts, that gives meaning to activities that contribute to a greater good. Such frameworks typically include a widely shared sense of which places, objects, and activities are “sacred,” or endowed with supercharged meaning. Another relevant feature of traditional religions is that they tend to really script out your day. There are loads of rituals to be performed at specified intervals, concrete guidelines about what to eat and wear and touch, and lots of group activities. This makes interacting with the sacred, typically in the company of like-minded individuals, a very reliable and effective means of getting into a state of *wu-wei*. Indeed, this is probably how *wu-wei* has been experienced by most people for most of human history.

We are now living in an age, however, where traditional religious values and commitments are being called into question. Many people today have rejected all traditional religious frameworks, characterizing themselves as secular or “spiritual but not religious.” This is not to say that they have figured out how to live entirely without value frameworks. If we take a step back, we will observe that even the most ardently atheistic secular humanist is still committed to *some* very abstract, metaphysical framework, revolving around such values as a respect for human dignity and freedom, individualism and equal rights, and rationality as the preferred means for guiding public policy. Looked at this way, secular humanism functions very much like a traditional religion. It gives its followers a set of sacred values that allows them to make distinctions between

right and wrong, good and bad, as well as the motivation to punish or shun those who do not live up to those values.

In another sense, however, contemporary secularism has new and distinct features, the source of both its strengths and its weaknesses. Its commitment to rationality and evidence, for instance, means that it’s unusually open to modification around the edges, although—as with any value system worth its salt—the core values like human rights or freedom are in principle non-negotiable. The flip side to this openness is a somewhat disorienting minimalism: liberalism is about as stripped down as a value system can be and still function. Most of its injunctions are *negative*. Do not violate human rights, do not restrict people’s freedom of expression, do not allow the strong to oppress the weak. As long as you are careful to steer clear of committing genocide or being oppressively prejudiced, however, secular humanism then doesn’t have a lot to say about what you *should* be doing. Besides vaguely sacred communal rituals such as listening to NPR, reading the *New York Times*, or buying locally sourced organic vegetables, secular humanists are not given much guidance on how to actually live their lives. And this vacuum has to be filled by something—avoiding human rights abuses still leaves a lot of hours in the day.

This is why we tend to align ourselves with certain social tribes—Suburban Soccer Mom, Urban Hipster, Tortured Artist—that can live comfortably under the very large, but rather empty, umbrella of secular humanism. These groups or stereotyped roles give us precisely the kind of detailed scripts that secular humanism eschews, specific guidance regarding dress, food, and other lifestyle details normally provided by traditional religions. Tortured artists dress strictly in black and are encouraged to get small, esoteric tattoos, to smoke, and to read Camus. Minivans are the sacred chariot of the Soccer Mom but anathema to the Urban Hipster, unless driven ironically. (For Urban Hipsters, irony functions like a magic shield, allowing them to emerge unscathed, or even invigorated, by contact with objects or scenarios—meatloaf, diners, kitschy movies,

seventies-style clothing—that would otherwise be considered *trafe* or unclean.)

In addition to the everyday guidance provided by these tribes, which can be mixed and matched, hybridized, whatever floats your boat, secular people can often be found embracing a variety of more specific value commitments—such as environmentalism, economic reform, or hedonism—that can all be accommodated by the bigger framework of secular liberalism. Hedonism, to focus on my personal favorite, centers on the belief that value lies in the maximization of pleasure, broadly understood. The word *hedonism* itself refers originally to a Greek school of thought, but despite its modern connotations the early Greek hedonists were actually not all that fun. You certainly wouldn't want to party with them. In the early Greek hedonist view, most of the things—like sex, food, or wine—that are typically viewed as pleasurable by the “vulgar” (that is, you and me) are in fact causes of suffering in the long run. This is because they are by their very nature ephemeral and therefore never genuinely satisfying. The only way to truly maximize pleasure, in the Greek hedonists' view, was to stick to eternal, imperishable pleasures, like philosophical reflection, while keeping one's involvement in the physical world to a bare minimum.

As a hedonist, I'd probably peg myself somewhere in between the modern and ancient Greek versions, but closer to the modern. I get the point about the enduring pleasures of the mind but have a more optimistic view about food and sex and wine than the ancients did. Sheltering under my broader, but pretty abstract, secular liberalism—with its commitments to human rights, individual freedom, evidence-based public policy—my smaller personal faith, if you could even call it that, is anchored in a set of personal relationships, an enjoyment of intellectual inquiry, a profound love of the ocean, an appreciation of good food and wine, and an oddly firm sense that human beings are meant to live only in Mediterranean climates with access to fresh citrus and proper olive oil. In fact, I

used to have a litmus test for places I'd be willing to move to: if you couldn't grow lemon trees there, it was off the list.

That said, I've now lived in Vancouver, Canada, for over six years, and have done so quite happily, despite the tragic death of my small potted lemon tree halfway through my first Pacific Northwest winter. This just goes to show how coherent and consistent my personal framework is. If you press me on it, I'll have to admit that I have no coherent—let alone empirically defensible—story about, say, what makes Point Reyes special. But it *is* special for me, and this halo of specialness extends to the other aspects of my life that I value: my family, my friends, certain landscapes and tastes and colors. A very common predicament for people like me is to experience *wu-wei* in the context of small-scale, fleeting moments where I feel at home and connected to something. If we're lucky and have managed to set up our lives well, we spend most of our time moving between these moments and would describe ourselves as “happy,” although if there's any overarching belief structure it's typically pretty minimal.

As silly as these fragmentary collections of personal frameworks may seem to a traditionally religious person, they are all we secular folks have in terms of concrete commitments, and they *do* seem capable of inducing *wu-wei*. By dint of great effort, I somehow manage to tenuously maintain a Mediterranean-style garden above the forty-ninth parallel, and tending to that garden—or even gazing at it through my office window as it bravely endures the inhuman rain and darkness of a Vancouver winter—will often put me into a state of *wu-wei*. The same is true of spending time with my wife and daughter, having a drink with friends and colleagues after work, deciphering a difficult ancient Chinese text, figuring out what makes human beings build pyramids or stick metal skewers through their cheeks, or hiking the beautiful, steep path between my campus office and the rugged beach fronting the Strait of Georgia. 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. You'd also be able to tell *whom* they value, and whom they don't, and this is perhaps of even greater importance. Crucially, *wu-wei* can occur in group activities only when we genuinely value the social relationships involved. We can effortlessly engage with others only when we care about, and feel relaxed with, the people we are with.

It's now easy to see why *wu-wei* is about more than isolated individuals incrementally improving their personal bests in the Ironman Triathlon or mastering a new level of Tetris. *Wu-wei* involves giving yourself up to something that, because it is bigger than you, can be shared by others. For those of us who no longer embrace the early Chinese faith in the Way and Heaven, the precise nature of this "larger whole"—the framework of values that gives shape and meaning to the *wu-wei* experience—is going to vary from tribe to tribe, even person to person or moment to moment. By its very nature, though, this framework needs to be something larger than the self. An essential fact about *wu-wei* is that it's not just about the experience unfolding within the mind of an isolated individual but also about social connections *between* people. This has some important social and psychological consequences that we will explore later.

So, we now have a sense of how *wu-wei*'s fundamentally spiritual and social nature reveals aspects of spontaneity that modern psychological approaches have overlooked. We still, however, have not addressed the bigger question posed at the beginning of the book. Being in *wu-wei* is great. Having a bit of *de* to smooth our way through the social world is obviously desirable. How, though, do we get these things if we don't already have them? How do we try not to try?

One of the great strengths of the early Chinese thinkers is that they did not merely describe states of effortless perfection but also focused on how to create these states, developing a variety of cultural practices, mental techniques, and physical exercises meant to nudge us into the right sort of spontaneity. As we'll see, they tended

to oscillate between *trying* strategies (work really hard, and eventually you'll acquire *wu-wei*) and *not trying* strategies (just stop trying, and *wu-wei* will be there). We'll begin with Confucius and his follower Xunzi, who developed the first and greatest of the *trying* strategies, and the one against which all subsequent strategies were formulated.