"Slingerland's book exemplifies the very principles it elucidates. Although the material is sophisticated, we effortlessly glide through a highly original integration of ancient wisdom and modern science toward a deep understanding of how one can simultaneously set a course in life and live spontaneously."

—Jonathan Schooler, Professor of Psychological and Brain Sciences at the University of California, Santa Barbara

"This wonderful book not only shows us how to live a more satisfying life, it helps explain why social life is even possible: spontaneity, Slingerland argues, is the key to trust and, ultimately, the evolution of cooperation. A thought-provoking book by a truly gifted writer."

—Harvey Whitehouse, Director of the Institute of Cognitive and Evolutionary Anthropology at the University of Oxford

"I tried hard to avoid reading this book—just too much to do. But I lost control, dipped in, and was swept along by apparently effortless prose describing the contrast between Confucianism and Taoism, and its relevance to our modern lives, including the good evolutionary reasons why commitment is usually more successful than manipulation. This is the perfect book club book."

—Randolph Nesse, Arizona State University Center for Evolution, Medicine, and Public Health; author of *Why We Get Sick*

"A remarkable time-traveling synthesis that shows how classic Chinese philosophers anticipated contemporary brain science and also looked beyond it, offering sage advice about how to live lives that flow. We meet Confucius, Daoists, the first Zen master, a sixth-century hippie, and other ancient Eastern educators, whose ideas have never been rendered more relevant to our times."

—Jesse Prinz, Distinguished Professor of Philosophy and Director of the Committee for Interdisciplinary Science Studies at the City University of New York

TRYING NOT TO TRY

THE ART AND SCIENCE OF SPONTANEITY

Edward Slingerland

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Introduction

THERE IS A WONDERFUL GAME AT MY LOCAL SCIENCE MUSEUM called Mindball. Two players sit at opposite ends of a long table. Each wears a headband equipped with electrodes, designed to pick up general patterns of electrical activity on the surface of the brain. Between the players is a metal ball. The goal is to mentally push this ball all the way to the other end of the table, and the player who does so first wins. The motive force—measured by each player's electrodes, and conveyed to the ball by a magnet hidden underneath the table—is the combination of alpha and theta waves produced by the brain when it's relaxed: the more alpha and theta waves you produce, the more force you mentally exert on the ball. Essentially, Mindball is a contest of who can be the most calm. It's fun to watch. The players visibly struggle to relax, closing their eyes, breathing deeply, adopting vaguely yogic postures. The panic they begin to feel as the ball approaches their end of the table is usually balanced out by the overeagerness of their opponent, both players alternately losing their cool as the big metal ball rolls back and forth. You couldn't wish for a better, more condensed illustration of how difficult it is to try not to try.

In our culture, the benefit of not trying too hard—of "going with the flow" or "being in the zone"—has long been appreciated by artists. The jazz great Charlie Parker is said to have advised aspiring musicians, "Don't play the saxophone. Let it play you." This same openness is also crucial in acting and other performing arts, which fundamentally rely on spontaneity and seemingly effortless

responsiveness. A stand-up comedian who is not in the zone is not funny, and an actor who is not fully inhabiting his or her role comes across as wooden and fake. Explaining how to prepare for a role, the actor Michael Caine cautions that simply memorizing the script and trying to act it out step by step will never work; when it comes time for your line, the only way to bring it off authentically is to not try to remember it. "You must be able to stand there *not* thinking of that line. You take it off the other actor's face. He is presumably new-minting the dialogue as if he himself just thought of it by listening and watching, as if it were all new to him, too. Otherwise, for your next line, you're not listening and not free to respond naturally, to act spontaneously."

The importance of being in the zone is perhaps nowhere more appreciated than in professional sports, where the competitive edge provided by complete absorption is the stuff of myth. A 2005 piece in *Sports Illustrated* consists solely of quotations from professional basketball players about what it feels like to be on fire:

> There are books you can read about how to get into that shooting zone, how to prepare yourself, but it's never something you can predict. The ball feels so light, and your shots are effortless. You don't even have to aim. You let it go, and you know the ball is going in. It's wonderful . . . It's like a good dream, and you don't want to wake up.
>
> —Pat Garrity, Orlando Magic forward

> It's like an out-of-body experience, like you're watching yourself. You almost feel like you don't even see the defense. Every move you make, you feel, God, that guy is slow. You're going by people. You don't even hear the regular noise you hear. It's muffled. You go to practice the next day, and you say, "God, why can't I do that every night?" Guys have wanted to bottle that feeling.
>
> —Joe Dumars, former NBA All-Star guard

The reason professional athletes would love to bottle that feeling is that it all too easily disappears. As Garrity says, professional basketball players in the shooting zone don't want to wake up, but they often do. Ben Gordon, formerly a guard for the Chicago Bulls, puts it like this: "When the feeling starts going away, it's terrible. I talk to myself and say, 'C'mon, you gotta be more aggressive.' That's when you know it's gone. It's not instinctive anymore."

Falling out of the zone is terrifying, and athletes try to avoid it at all costs. The history of sports is full of stories of otherwise promising athletes who somehow lose their mojo and then disappear into obscurity—or, perhaps worse, become famous precisely *for* having lost their stuff. Baseball fans are familiar with "Steve Blass Disease," named after a superstar pitcher for the Pittsburgh Pirates in the 1960s and 1970s. After almost a decade of effortlessly intimidating the best players in the world, Blass suddenly began to lose the ability to perform in actual games. He continued to be fine in practice. He'd suffered no injuries, lost none of his actual physical skill. He just could no longer *throw* when it really mattered. Armies of sports psychologists analyzed him, coaches tried beating it out of him through grueling exercise routines, but nothing worked, and Blass was eventually forced into early retirement.

An inability to relax into the zone is also a danger for artistic performers. One famous example is the pop singer Carly Simon. She had always been reluctant to be up in front of a crowd, but her stage fright came to a head at a concert in 1981, when the tension caused her to freeze. "After two songs, I was still having palpitations," she later told a reporter. "I suggested that I might feel better if someone came on the stage. About 50 people came up, and it was like an encounter group. They rubbed my arms and legs and said, 'We love you,' and I was able to finish the first show. But I collapsed before the second show with 10,000 people waiting." Simon's onstage meltdown led to a long hiatus from the public eye, although—unlike Blass—she later managed to make a professional comeback.

There is a widespread recognition that this tension—how to force yourself to relax, to shut off your mind when you need to—is a challenge for professional athletes or other performers. For those functioning at an elite, competitive level, spontaneity is a basic job requirement; their livelihood depends on the ability to reliably get into the zone. What fewer people realize is that this is a challenge we *all* face. We may not be subject to the same public pressures as Steve Blass or Carly Simon, but in many ways our lives can be seen as a massive game of Mindball.

The pervasiveness of the problem is perhaps more obvious when it comes to physical activities. Even casual athletes or performers are familiar with the pain of falling out of the zone or finding it just beyond their grasp. Imagine that you are in the final set of a tennis match—playing your best game ever and about to defeat your former intercollegiate tennis star friend for the first time in recorded history—and the dawning realization that you are about to win makes you begin to lose. You become tense, overly cautious. You begin to *think* about your swing instead of just swinging, and your friend begins to close the gap. You know what you need to do: just *relax* and get back into the groove. The more you think about relaxing, though, the more you tighten up, and you watch helplessly as your lead disappears and your friend gets to gloat once again.

Or imagine that you are taking an introductory salsa class, and your initial awkwardness is exacerbated by an annoying instructor who keeps telling you to *be spontaneous*. "Relax! Have fun with it!" she chirps, as you stumble through the steps you've been taught and do your best not to crush the feet of your partner. "Relax! *Feel* the music!" The more she urges you to *have fun* the more tense you become. You find that a generous quantity of tequila helps with the relaxing side of things, but only at the cost of radically diminished motor coordination. Simultaneously skillful *and* enjoyable salsa dancing seems forever out of your reach.

Getting the mind to shut off and allow the body to do its thing is clearly a challenge. An even bigger problem—and one we encounter much more often—is the trick of getting your mind to let go of *itself*. This is the central problem in Mindball, where you can win the game only by relaxing, which seems to mean that you can win only if you don't *try* to win. In our everyday lives, this tension is perhaps most intensely distilled in the throes of insomnia. You have a big meeting tomorrow and need to be at the top of your game, so you go to bed early and try to relax into sleep, only to find yourself tortured by incessant thoughts, helpless in the grip of the restless monkey-brain. Counting sheep just makes it worse, no position seems comfortable; you feel in your bones how tired you really are, but how do you make your brain shut off? *RELAX!* you think to yourself, but it's no use.

Insomnia is a fairly simple case, but the problem also manifests itself in more complex—typically social—situations, where the impact is far greater. Consider dating. Anyone who has ever been single for a significant amount of time is familiar with the "never rains but it pours" phenomenon: you can sometimes go for long periods of being miserably alone, desperately trying to meet someone but having absolutely no luck. Then something happens, an encounter occurs, you go out, you have a great time, and suddenly it's raining women or men (or both, if you're so inclined). Attractive potential partners smile at you on the street, strike up conversations with you in cafés. The previously inaccessible beauty at the video store counter—who in the midst of your dry stretch would never even make eye contact with you—suddenly shows an interest in your predilection for Wim Wenders films, and the next thing you know you have plans for that Friday (a Friday!) to watch *Wings of Desire* and eat takeout Indian food. (This example is in no way autobiographical.) You sniff your clothes trying to detect any special pheromones you might be emitting, but if the phenomenon is biochemically based your senses are too dull to detect it. Bathing appears to have no negative effect.

Everyone enjoys these periods of deluge, but once you're back in a dry spell the pattern seems wasteful and fundamentally unjust.

There are too many potential dates when you can't enjoy them all, and none when they are really needed. Serious reflection—and during a drought you have a lot of time to reflect—suggests a possible reason for the pattern, or at least why it is so hard to consciously alter: the best way to get a date seems to be to *not want to* get a date. The problem is that it's hard to know what to do with this knowledge. How do you make yourself *not* want something that you actually *do* want?

For the most part, we—and by "we" I mean pretty much anyone with access to this book, inhabitants of modern, industrialized societies around the world—are preoccupied with effort, the importance of *working, striving,* and *trying.* Three-year-olds attend drill sessions to get an edge on admission to the best preschool and then grow into hypercompetitive high school students popping Ritalin to enhance their test results and keep up with a brutal schedule of after-school activities. Both our personal and our professional lives increasingly revolve around a relentless quest for greater efficiency and higher productivity, crowding out leisure time, vacation, and simple unstructured pleasures. The result is that people of all ages spend their days stumbling around tethered umbilically to their smartphones, immersed in an endless stream of competitive games, e-mails, texts, tweets, dings, pings, and pokes, getting up too early, staying up too late, in the end somehow falling into a fitful sleep illumined by the bright glow of tiny LCD screens.

Our excessive focus in the modern world on the power of conscious thought and the benefits of willpower and self-control causes us to overlook the pervasive importance of what might be called "body thinking": tacit, fast, and semiautomatic behavior that flows from the unconscious with little or no conscious interference. The result is that we too often devote ourselves to pushing *harder* or moving *faster* in areas of our life where effort and striving are, in fact, profoundly counterproductive. This is because the problem of choking or freezing up extends far beyond sports or artistic performance. A politician who is not, at some level, truly relaxed and sincere while

giving a speech will come off as stiff and uncharismatic—a problem that plagued U.S. presidential candidate Mitt Romney. In the same way, a real love of reading, a genuine commitment to learning, and a deep curiosity about the world cannot be forced. Like that most elusive of modern goals, happiness, spontaneity seems to be as tricky to capture and keep as the hot hand in basketball. Consciously try to grab it and it's gone.

WU-WEI ("OOO-WAY") AND *DE* ("DUH")

The goal of this book is to explore the many facets of spontaneity, as well as the conundrum it presents: why it's so crucial to our well-being and yet so elusive. In fact, the problem of how to try not to try is an ancient one, and it has engaged thinkers throughout history and across the world. Some of the most important and influential of them lived in early China. It is my belief that these thinkers, hailing from the so-called Confucian and Daoist schools, had deep insights into the human condition that can still prove very useful to us today. Looking at our lives through this early Chinese lens will require learning about two tightly linked concepts: the first is *wu-wei* 無為 (pronounced *oooo-way*), and the second is *de* 德 (pronounced *duh,* as in "no duh").

Wu-wei literally translates as "no trying" or "no doing," but it's not at all about dull inaction. In fact, it refers to the dynamic, effortless, and unselfconscious state of mind of a person who is optimally active and effective. People in *wu-wei* feel as if they are doing nothing, while at the same time they might be creating a brilliant work of art, smoothly negotiating a complex social situation, or even bringing the entire world into harmonious order. For a person in *wu-wei,* proper and effective conduct follows as automatically as the body gives in to the seductive rhythm of a song. This state of harmony is both complex and holistic, involving as it does the integration of the body, the emotions, and the mind. If we have to translate it, *wu-wei*

is probably best rendered as something like "effortless action" or "spontaneous action." Being in *wu-wei* is relaxing and enjoyable, but in a deeply rewarding way that distinguishes it from cruder or more mundane pleasures. In many respects, it resembles the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's well-known concept of "flow," or the idea of being in the zone, but with important—and revealing—differences that we will explore.

People who are in *wu-wei* have *de*, typically translated as "virtue," "power," or "charismatic power." *De* is radiance that others can detect, and it serves as an outward signal that one is in *wu-wei*. *De* comes in handy in a variety of ways. For rulers and others involved in political life, *de* has a powerful, seemingly magical effect on those around them, allowing them to spread political order in an instantaneous fashion. They don't have to issue threats or offer rewards, because people simply want to obey them. On a smaller scale, *de* allows a person to engage in one-on-one interactions in a perfectly efficacious way. If you have *de*, people like you, trust you, and are relaxed around you. Even wild animals leave you alone. The payoff provided by *de* is one of the reasons that *wu-wei* is so desirable, and why early Chinese thinkers spent so much time figuring out how to get it.

The fact that no other language has a good equivalent to either *wu-wei* or *de* is quite illuminating and reflects a corresponding gap in our conceptual world. Just as the German loan of *Schadenfreude* has allowed English speakers to focus attention on an ever present but otherwise overlooked aspect of their emotional lives, I think that adding the words *wu-wei* and *de* to our verbal repertoires will help us gain insight into aspects of our mental and social worlds that we have tended to miss. Since I was introduced to these concepts as an undergraduate they've become a basic part of my vocabulary and have also spread quickly among my family members, friends, and acquaintances. "You're not being very *wu-wei* about this," my wife now chides me when I'm trying to force something that shouldn't be forced—a recalcitrant door, an obstructionist bureaucrat. "That guy just doesn't have *de*, but you do," I tell a colleague, in an attempt to

explain why I want *her* rather than someone else to join me for an important potential grant interview. And she knows precisely what I mean.

Understanding these two concepts is essential to understanding early Chinese philosophy, which we'll explore by looking at five thinkers who lived and taught during the so-called "Warring States" period (fifth to third century B.C.E.) of China. This was a time of great social chaos and political upheaval. Powerful states swallowed up weaker ones, with the rulers of the losing side often put to the sword. Huge conscript armies roamed the land, devastating crops and making life miserable for the common people. It was also (not incidentally) a period of incredible philosophical creativity that witnessed the founding of all the major indigenous schools of Chinese thought. Despite considerable differences among these thinkers on a wide variety of issues—nature versus nurture, learning versus instinct—they all built their religious systems around the virtues of naturalness and spontaneity and felt that overall success in life was linked to the charisma that one radiates when completely at ease, or the effectiveness that one displays when fully absorbed. In other words, they all wanted to reach a state of *wu-wei* and get *de*.

They also all faced their own version of the Mindball challenge. How could they ask their followers to strive for a state of unselfconscious, effortless spontaneity? How does one *try* not to try? Doesn't the very act of trying contaminate the result? This is what I will be calling the paradox of *wu-wei*. All of our thinkers believed that they had a surefire way to resolve the paradox and get people safely into a state of *wu-wei*, as well as explanations for why their rivals *couldn't* do so. This was viewed as a particularly urgent problem because, for them, *wu-wei* and *de* were not just about winning a tennis match or getting a date—they were the key to personal, political, and religious success.

ANCIENT CHINA MEETS MODERN SCIENCE

Chinese thinkers living more than two thousand years ago inhabited a social and religious world very different from our own. I therefore find it particularly revealing that over the past few decades many of their insights about the importance of spontaneity have been rediscovered by contemporary science. A growing literature in psychology and neuroscience suggests that these thinkers had a much more accurate picture of how people really think and behave than we find in recent Western philosophy or religious thought and that early Chinese debates about how to attain *wu-wei* reflect real tensions built into the human brain. Scientists are beginning to better appreciate the role that "fast and frugal" unconscious thinking plays in everyday human life and now have a clearer sense of why spontaneity and effectiveness hang together.

We also now know something about the psychological mechanisms involved in *wu-wei*, including some details about which brain regions are being turned off, as it were, and which are firing at full speed. Technologies such as fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging), which tracks neural activity by measuring blood flow to the brain, even allow us to see vivid images of the *wu-wei* brain in action. This is not to fetishize brain science as some magic pathway to the truth. The snazzy fMRI diagrams that festoon popular articles and books are not snapshots of the mind itself. That said, they are almost certainly telling us *something*, ideally something we didn't already know about how the brain works. They are a helpful piece in the puzzle. Moreover, contemporary neuroscience is useful because it moves us toward a greater appreciation of the complexities of our embodied mind. When we are consciously struggling with temptation, for instance, what's involved is not a disembodied soul pulling on the reins of a brutish body, but a set of brain regions dedicated to certain functions in conflict with another set of brain regions. Neuroscience therefore gives us a more accurate description of ourselves than we've ever had.

Another important piece in the spontaneity puzzle comes from evolutionary psychology, which gives us insight into why *wu-wei* is so pleasant for the individual and attractive to others. Things tend to give pleasure when evolution approves of them: think orgasms or chocolate. It feels good to be in *wu-wei* because a whole slew of tasks simply can't be performed by our plodding, conscious minds—we need to unleash the power of our fast, unconscious processes in order to get them done. Moreover, we are attracted to people in *wu-wei* because we *trust* the automatic, unconscious mind. We have a very strong intuition—increasingly confirmed by work in cognitive science—that the conscious, verbal mind is often a sneaky, conniving liar, whereas spontaneous, unselfconscious gestures are reliable indicators of what's really going on inside another person. Physiologically, it is hard to consciously kick-start spontaneity, and this is probably why we value it so much in our social lives. It's also why we find spontaneous people attractive and trustworthy, as well as why conscious attempts to simulate spontaneous ease—think of any of the commercially marketed dating strategies, from "the Rules" to "the System"—tend to fall flat.

So although early Chinese thinkers had all sorts of metaphysical theories about how and why *de* is attractive to others, it can probably be explained by this very simple psychological fact: spontaneous behavior is hard to fake, which means that spontaneous, unselfconscious people are unlikely to be fakers. We're also attracted to effectiveness, and people in *wu-wei* tend to be socially competent as they move through life. Taken together, these considerations give us an empirically grounded, scientific basis for taking both *wu-wei* and *de* seriously as concepts that can help us make sense of our own lives. We'll therefore spend time exploring the deep evolutionary and neuroscientific reasons for why *wu-wei* is effective, why *de* works, and why certain contemporary ideas of spontaneity miss important aspects of the *wu-wei* experience.

CONTEMPORARY INSIGHTS FROM ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY

If modern science can tell us so much about *wu-wei*, why bother with these early Chinese guys? (And, yes, as far as we know they were all guys.) As a historian of early Chinese thought—and, not incidentally, someone raised in New Jersey, with a Jerseyite's low tolerance for B.S.—I get a psychosomatic headache from people who glorify "the East" as if it were an exclusive and unfailing source of spiritual wisdom. Nonetheless, there is a kernel of truth lurking at the center of New Age exoticism. There are several important ways that early Chinese thought can help us get beyond some of our philosophical and political hang-ups and better prepare us to grasp the biological and cultural worlds we inhabit.

If we take "the West" to refer to the dominant mode of thinking in post-Enlightenment Europe and its colonies, one thing we *can* say is that it tends to portray rational thought as the essence of human nature, and reasoning as something that occurs in an ethereal realm completely disconnected from the noise and heat of the physical world around us. This view is strongly *dualistic* in the sense that the mind, and its supposedly abstract rationality, are seen as radically distinct from, and superior to, the body and its emotions. Although some sort of mind-body dualism seems to be a human psychological universal, the tradition that can be traced from Plato down to Descartes converted vague intuitions about the distinction between *people* (who possess minds) and *things* (which do not) into a bizarre metaphysical dichotomy between a completely invisible, disembodied *mind* and the physical *stuff* that makes up our material world.

This strongly dualist perspective has not only confused us about ourselves but also had an extraordinarily bad effect on science. Early (mid-twentieth-century) cognitive scientists treated the human mind as a brain in a vat, performing abstract information processing, and this led them down some very unproductive paths. Fortunately, over the past few decades cognitive science has begun to free itself from the conceptual shackles of dualism and to treat human thought as fundamentally "embodied." What this means is that our thinking is grounded in concrete experiences and that even what seem like quite abstract concepts are linked to our bodily experience through analogy and metaphor. It is difficult to think about "justice" without summoning the image of a scale or some physical thing being evenly split; when reasoning about our lives, we inevitably think in terms of journeys and paths not taken. The embodied view of cognition also views thought as inherently tied to feeling, which calls into question any rigid distinction between rationality and emotion. Moreover, cognitive scientists are beginning to emphasize the fact that the human brain is designed primarily for guiding *action*, not for representing abstract information—although it can also do this when necessary. This "embodied cognition" revolution was at least partially inspired by insights from Asian religious thought—including both early Chinese and later Chinese Buddhist accounts of *wu-wei*—which makes this book's melding of cognitive science and Chinese thought particularly relevant.

Although typically a bit slower off the starting block than scientists, Western philosophers are also beginning to realize the importance of both empirical knowledge and alternative traditions for their discipline. A small but growing number of psychologically attuned philosophers now recognize that the early Chinese tradition, with its embodied model of the self, offers an important corrective to the tendency of modern Western philosophy to focus on conscious thought, rationality, and willpower. For instance, while recent Western thought has emphasized the importance of abstract, representational knowledge—that is, information about the world, like the fact that Rome is the capital of Italy or that $e = mc^2$—early Chinese thought instead emphasized what we could call *know-how*: the practical, tacit, and often unformulizable ability to *do* something well. I cannot explain exactly how to ride a bike, but I can ride one.

In fact, as we'll discuss later, consciously focusing on how to ride, or trying to explain the process in words to others, may actually impair your ability to do it.

For the early Chinese thinkers whom we'll meet in this book, 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*. The goal is to acquire the ability to move through the physical and social world in a manner that is completely spontaneous and yet fully in harmony with the proper order of the natural and human worlds (the *Dao* or "Way"). Because of this focus on knowing *how* rather than knowing *this* or *that*, the Chinese tradition has spent a great deal of energy over the past two thousand years exploring the interior, psychological feel of *wu-wei*, worrying about the paradox at the heart of it, and developing a variety of behavioral techniques to get around it. The ideal person in early China is more like a well-trained athlete or cultivated artist than a dispassionate cost-benefit analyzer. This better fits both our intuitive sense of what real human excellence looks like and our best current scientific understanding of how the mind works.

In addition to helping us get beyond strong mind-body dualism, the Chinese concepts of *wu-wei* and *de* reveal important aspects of spontaneity and human cooperation that have slipped through the nets of modern science, which is still very grounded in another basic feature of Western thought: extreme individualism. The ideal person in Western philosophy is not only disembodied but also radically alone. For the past couple hundred years in the West, the dominant view of human nature has been that we are all individual agents pursuing our own self-interest, responsive only to objective rewards and punishments. Human societies, according to this narrative, were formed when lone hunter-gatherers—typically men, suspiciously unaccompanied by their mates, children, elderly parents, or sick friends—met in a clearing, negotiated the rules they would live under, and then shook hands and agreed to cooperate. As economists and political scientists have only recently begun to realize, this is a fairy tale cooked up over the last century or two by a bunch of elite, landowning males—what the philosopher Annette Baier has scathingly referred to as "a collection of clerics, misogynists, and puritan bachelors."

In reality, we are not autonomous, self-sufficient, purely rational individuals but emotional pack animals, intimately dependent on other human beings at every stage of our lives. We get along, not because we're good at calculating costs and benefits, but because we are emotionally bound to our immediate family and friends and have been trained to adopt a set of *values* that allows us to cooperate spontaneously with others in our society. These shared values are the glue that holds together large-scale human groups, and a key feature of these values is that they need to be embraced sincerely and spontaneously—in an *wu-wei* fashion—to do their job. This is why the tensions surrounding *wu-wei* and *de* are linked to basic puzzles surrounding human cooperation, especially in the anonymous, large communities we tend to inhabit today.

Moreover, situating *wu-wei* in its original, early Chinese context helps us to see how it is a fundamentally spiritual or religious concept. One of the key features of the *wu-wei* state is a sense of being absorbed in some larger, valued whole—typically referred to as the *Dao* or "Way." While modern readers are highly unlikely to subscribe to the early Chinese religious worldview, I'll show that, even for us, something quite similar to the Way is at work in the background of any genuine *wu-wei* experience: a sense of being at home in some framework of values, however vague or tenuous. This will make it clear how *wu-wei* differs from modern psychological concepts such as "flow," allowing us to recover the crucial *social* dimension of spontaneity.

There is one final benefit to looking at *wu-wei* and *de* in their original Chinese context, at least for readers outside East Asia. It's important to realize that Chinese culture has never entirely lost its focus on *wu-wei*—it never took that trip down the rabbit hole of hyper-rationality and extreme individualism. The thinkers explored

in this book are still alive and well in the contemporary Chinese mind-set. Because Chinese is not a phonetic language, its written form has remained essentially the same over several millennia, even as the spoken dialects have undergone massive changes. The texts that we will be exploring were written from roughly the fifth to the third century B.C.E., in so-called "classical Chinese," which continued to serve as the sole literary language of China until the early twentieth century. Indeed, until quite recently, classical Chinese was the lingua franca and medium of scholarship across East Asia. For much of this history, the texts that we will be discussing were memorized by every educated person throughout the Chinese cultural sphere. In terms of sheer numbers, then, the *Analects* of Confucius has influenced far more people than the Bible. Even today large portions of these texts are internalized by schoolchildren throughout East Asia, and the classical language—bearing with it particular ways of thinking—permeates all of the spoken dialects of China.

The result is an unusually high degree of continuity between the formative period of Chinese thought and the modern culture of China in particular, and East Asia more generally. To take one example, the contemporary East Asian emphasis on personal relationships *(guanxi)* and informal business networks initially strikes Westerners doing business in China as simply a front for corruption and nepotism—and no doubt it often is. However, it has its own rationale, one grounded in an ancient Confucian preference for character-based, intuitive judgments over rigid rule following. You deal with people face to face because their spontaneous expressions and casual remarks—their *wu-wei* behavior, the quality of the *de* that they emanate—tell you everything that you need to know about them. The best way to ensure that agreements are honored is to forge intense personal loyalties, typically over the course of several evenings fueled by good food and staggering quantities of alcohol. Even in ancient China there was a clear awareness that such personal networks are open to abuse, and there were many who

argued that the only way to prevent this was to replace spontaneous, trust-based social ties with rule-bound, impersonal public institutions. In practice, China ended up with a mixture of the two, but the culturally dominant social norms have continued to be grounded in *wu-wei* and *de*. One cannot understand contemporary China without grasping this point. So, among other things, this book is intended to provide some insights into the nature of Chinese thought, which should be helpful for anyone living in an age where China has reemerged—after what was really just a short hiatus—as a major world power.

REDISCOVERING THE VALUE OF SPONTANEITY

At a very broad level, early Chinese accounts of spontaneity provide us with a unique window into an aspect of human spiritual and social life that has been overlooked in recent centuries in the West. More concretely, although this book will not present a 100 percent guaranteed, ten-step program for achieving *wu-wei*, you will end up learning quite a bit about strategies that have worked for people in the past. One reason that no one has ever come up with a single, surefire technique for achieving *wu-wei* is that the barriers to spontaneity vary from person to person and situation to situation. This means that having a grab bag of strategies at one's disposal is probably quite useful. Whatever technique works in helping you fall asleep the night before a big meeting may prove useless when it comes to helping you get into the zone during your tennis match that afternoon. What tends to help me—an introverted, slow-moving academic—to relax into *wu-wei* at the beginning of a workday (silence, solitude, sunlight, and large quantities of coffee) may be completely different from what an extroverted, hyperactive actor needs (a stiff shot of bourbon, loud music, and a frenetic group brainstorming session). My hope is that by exploring the distilled wisdom of ancient

traditions of thought—as well as the best findings from contemporary cognitive science—you will gain new insights that you can apply to your own life.

Moreover, simply adopting *wu-wei* and *de* into our vocabularies forces us to fundamentally change the way we think about human behavior and relationships. We tend to think of spontaneity—when we do at all—as a helpful ingredient at a cocktail party or as something that concerns only artists or athletes. There is increasing evidence, however, that the early Chinese were right that spontaneity is, in fact, a cornerstone of individual well-being and human sociality. This means that the paradox of *wu-wei* is also more central than we realize, and the problem of overcoming it more urgent than we think.

We have been taught to believe that the best way to achieve our goals is to reason about them carefully and strive consciously to reach them. Unfortunately, in many areas of life this is terrible advice. Many desirable states—happiness, attractiveness, spontaneity—are best pursued indirectly, and conscious thought and effortful striving can actually interfere with their attainment. In the pages that follow, we'll learn how to foster spontaneity in our own lives and gain some insight into how spontaneity affects our relationships with others. Our exploration of *wu-wei* and *de* will offer no easy solutions, no corny "ancient Chinese secrets" that will instantly turn us into serene Zen masters. I am convinced, though, that becoming aware of the power and problems of spontaneity—and thinking through these issues with both early Chinese thinkers and cognitive scientists at our side—can give us a deeper understanding of how we move through the world and interact with others, and can help us to do it more effectively.

1

Skillful Butchers and Graceful Gentlemen

THE CONCEPT OF *WU-WEI*

THE STORY OF BUTCHER DING IS PERHAPS THE BEST-KNOWN AND most vivid portrayal of *wu-wei* in the early Chinese tradition. The butcher has been called upon to play his part in a traditional religious ceremony involving the sacrifice of an ox, in a public space with the ruler and a large crowd looking on. This is a major religious event, and Butcher Ding is at center stage. The text is not specific, but we are probably witnessing a ceremony to consecrate a newly cast bronze bell. In this ritual, the still-smoking metal is brought fresh from the foundry and cooled with the blood of a sacrificial animal—a procedure that demands precise timing and perfectly smooth execution.

Butcher Ding is up to the task, dismembering the massive animal with effortless grace: "At every touch of his hand, every bending of his shoulder, every step of his feet, every thrust of his knee—swish! swoosh! He guided his blade along with a whoosh, and all was in perfect tune: one moment as if he were joining in the Dance of the Mulberry Grove, another as if he were performing in the Jingshou Symphony." The Dance of the Mulberry Grove and the Jingshou Symphony were ancient, venerated art forms: Ding's body and blade move in such perfect harmony that a seemingly mundane task is