Wu-wei – doing less and wanting more

The only way to succeed is to not try, argues Edward Slingerland

Although modern Western society tends to emphasise the importance of willpower and striving, there are some central human goals – happiness, relaxation, charisma – that appear to come only to those who are not trying to achieve them. The importance of ‘not trying’ was recognised by early Chinese thinkers, who understood how relaxed spontaneity could lead to both personal and social success. The early Chinese ideal of effortless action is also looking increasingly plausible from the perspective of modern psychology, as we come to better understand the pervasive role of embodied, tacit knowledge in human behaviour.

A 2014 study by Heejung Park and colleagues, focusing on annual surveys of 12th-graders that have been conducted since the 1970s, showed a steady increase in expressions of materialism, as well as a corresponding decrease in professed concern for others, for the first decades of the surveys. This trend began to reverse itself, however, in about 2008, with the younger members of the so-called ‘Millennial’ generation. (The Millennial generation is loosely defined as those born from the early 1980s to about 2000.) Materialism and self-concern appear to play a less central role in the lives of these young adults than in the generations that preceded them. In their discussion of this study, Emily Esfahani Smith and Jennifer Aaker (2013) connect this work to a 2011 study by the Career Advisory Board and Harris Interactive, surveying both Millennial workers and their supervisors, which showed that Millennials are much more concerned with meaning, and less concerned with money, than those responsible for hiring them.

The Millennial search for meaning leads them down many paths, but one of the directions they may be turning is East. Over the past decade and a half, I’ve noticed a marked uptick in the number of students interested in my specialty, early Chinese thought. And this is not an idiosyncratic observation. The Chronicle of Higher Education has documented a sharp increase in the visibility of Chinese philosophy in the American academy (Romano, 2013), while The Atlantic describes the hundreds of Harvard students that every year pack the lectures of my colleague Michael Puett on early Chinese thought – the third largest enrollment in the entire university (Gross-Loh, 2013).

This is, of course, not the first time young Westerners have had a surge of interest in Eastern thought. There were widespread flirtations with Vedantic thought in the 19th century, as well as the counter-culture movement of the 1960s that saw in Chinese and Indian philosophy the perfect antidote for the alienated squareness of their parents generation. The Millennial turn toward Eastern thought strikes me as different, though. Whereas many of the devotees of Alan Watts or celebrity Indian gurus looked to Eastern thought for a confirmation of their own worldviews – assurance that Zen or Hinduism said that sex, drugs, free love and interminable guitar solos were OK – the academic bent of the Millennial generation (notably better educated than their predecessors) seems to reflect a growing desire to understand alternative ways of thought on their own terms.

This is important because there are significant contrasts between, say, early Chinese thought and recent Western philosophical and religious thought – contrasts that have much to say about how we value the different components of our psychological make-up. One of the more salient is an early Chinese suspicion of the value of conscious striving. Western philosophers tend to emphasise the importance of thinking rationally about our goals and then exerting effort and self-control to achieve them. Putting this in terms of dual systems models of cognition (Evans, 2008; Kahneman, 2011), Western thought has strongly emphasised System 2 (or ‘cold’ cognition), and based their models of ethics on the exertion of cognitive control. Their influence has much to do with the focus on discipline and persistence that we see in academic psychology and education. Although there were certainly

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thinkers in early China advocating rationality and self-control, the mainstream thinkers – the Confucians and Daoists who set the tone for the subsequent 2000 years of East Asian intellectual history – believed that true moral perfection and spiritual fulfilment required attaining a state where striving is transcended. The ideal of ‘effortless action’, or wu-wei, refers to the dynamic, 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 behaviour flows automatically and spontaneously from the self, without the need for thought or exertion (Slingerland 2003, 2014). Since none of these thinkers believe that we can reach this state without some sort of self-cultivation, we might see this model of ethics as a kind of time-delayed cognitive control, in which the fruits of cold cognition are built into our ‘hot’, embodied systems (Slingerland 2011).

In our contemporary world, we can see the importance of wu-wei in many areas of life, from sports to interpersonal relationships. As in many elite sports, where levels of training and professionalism are uniformly high, the athlete’s greatest enemy is typically his or her own mind. The difference between Olympic medal and demoralising failure often hinges on an ability to forget the years of preparation, forget the rankings and the pressure, and to simply relax into the moment (Beilock, 2010). While the crucial importance of spontaneity for athletes or other performers is widely recognised, we have a tendency to overlook its importance in everyday life. But it is certainly the case that the insomniaic trying to fall asleep, the nervous bachelor on a blind date, and the job applicant striving to appear confident and relaxed all find themselves in precisely the same situation as an elite Olympic athlete: the only way to succeed is to not try.

One of the reasons for our blindspot when it comes to the pervasiveness of spontaneity, and the unique tensions involved in obtaining it, is precisely because we are heirs to the Western philosophical tradition that emphasises conscious striving and will power. We are taught that we have to use our minds to control our bodies, and that success and happiness are inextricably intertwined with discipline and effort. The ideal of wu-wei, on the other hand, presents an embodied model of the self, one that seems increasingly in line with our best current understanding of human cognition. Contemporary cognitive science, slowly emerging from a philosophical hangover induced by dualistic Western thought, is gradually coming to a consensus that human thought is embodied (Barsalou, 2010; Gibbs, 2006; Shapiro, 2014; Varela et al. 1991; Wilson, 2002), and that – while abstract knowledge certainly has a role to play – we are at our most powerful and effective when we are not thinking, when we let our body take over. Ironically, disembodied scientific rationality has, in recent years, begun to reveal the profound limits of abstract thought and conscious control when it comes to our lived experience. We have very good scientific reasons for thinking that logic and willpower – especially when we’re talking about one human being relating to another, or a person learning to inhabit his or her social world – are extremely useful in an indirect way, but can’t actually be trusted when there’s actually something urgent to do. In most moments, success does not come from thinking more rigorously or striving harder, because our minds are built for doing, not thinking (Clark 1997; Thompson 2007), and we can only act effectively when we can persuade our conscious mind to get out of the way.

To those familiar with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of ‘flow’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) this might sound familiar. Like flow, wu-wei involves a loss of sense of self and a feeling of effortlessness. Flow, however, is typically conceived of in very individualistic terms, and portrayed as a state that requires a constant ramping up of challenge and complexity. Many of the exemplars presented by Csikszentmihalyi in his 1990 book Flow – the world-renowned businesswoman who spends her life in perpetual motion, migrating between her various residences around the world, or the rock climber constantly striving to find a more challenging ascent – have a strong every-person-for-herself feel to them. The distinctive feature of wu-wei, on the other hand, is a sense of immersion in a greater, shared and valued whole. So, although wu-wei can be attained in challenging situations requiring skill or training, it is more commonly encountered in less
adrenaline-inducing activities, like a quiet walk in a special landscape, a simple meal with family and friends, or just sitting on a beach watching the ocean roll in. Wu-wei is fundamentally about belonging and meaning, not skill or challenge per se.

Belonging and meaning seem to be precisely the things that the Millennials who fill my classroom on early Chinese thought seem to be looking for. Whereas my fellow university graduates in the early 1990s were hell-bent on landing jobs in business, finance or law; the recent graduates I know tend to work for non-profits or alternative newspapers, or head abroad for a year or two of volunteer work. They also seem quite comfortable with the idea of blazing their own career path: a full 50 per cent of Millennials in the 2011 career survey reported feeling interested or very interested in being self-employed. Cynical observers may dismiss all of this as a pragmatic response to a weak job market but, whatever the ultimate cause, these young people do seem to have embarked on a quest for rewarding, meaningful work and a sense of community. This is reflected in a host of recent trends, from the locavore movement to apartment sharing and tool swapping.

These frameworks, cobbled together from a variety of sources, are nowhere near as comprehensive or coherent as traditional religious worldviews, including the early Chinese thought-world in which wu-wei was originally embedded. It is also no doubt the case that some drawing upon Eastern thought are less motivated by spiritual thirst than an interest in using alternative modes of knowledge to maximally leverage their tech company's IPO. Events such as 'Wisdom 2.0' (www.wisdom2summit.com), where ancient Eastern wisdom is combined with motivational speakers and frenetic business networking, strike one as more instrumental in their use of alternative religious traditions. The millennial seekers whom I know, however, strike me as entirely sincere in their quest for rewarding, meaningful work and a sense of community.

To my considerable surprise, interest in early Chinese thought also appears to be growing even in the unlikeliest of all places: China itself. Anyone who has experienced a modern Chinese city, with its packed Gucci outlets and golden iPhones, might be forgiven for thinking of the modern Chinese ethos as the precisely the opposite of wu-wei, a wildly individualistic and materialistic frenzy of acquisition and consumption completely unmoored from any recognisable moral or social values. It’s also true that, when I studied in Taiwan in the late 1980s, fellow students greeted my explanation that I was planning to specialise in ancient Chinese thought as if I’d expressed an interest in papyrus-making or medieval alchemy. They themselves wanted to study Western, modern things – economics, business, engineering or English – and saw my interest in ancient China as culturally flattening, but also faintly ridiculous.

Returning to China as a professor in the new millennium, I find the landscape – physical and intellectual – fundamentally transformed. As the initial rush of consumerism begins to wear off, the young Chinese counterparts to the Millennials are looking for something more. Evan Osnos has recently documented the resurgence of interest in Confucius in mainland China, where many of the same revolutionaries who burned feudalistic books and sent Confucian scholars down to the countryside in the 1970s are now aggressively promoting Confucius Institutes and celebrating Confucianism as the essence of Chinese cultural soft power (Osnos, 2014). There is an undeniably cynical and sinister aspect to this trend: the new cult of Confucius allows China’s leaders to deflect concerns about human rights and rule of law, while simultaneously using Confucius as a convenient hook upon which to hang whatever form of Chinese nationalism is currently most useful for maintaining one-party rule (Buckley, 2014). But Osnos argues convincingly that there is also a

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Nose to the grindstone?

Modern workplaces tend to emphasise long hours and constant striving as the keys to success, whether it comes to successfully managing a team of employees or coming up with a conceptual breakthrough. In many cases, however, this ‘nose to the grindstone’ approach may be profoundly counterproductive.

A growing literature in the psychology of perception has demonstrated that, when it comes to certain difficult visual tasks, simply relaxing and letting the answer ‘pop out’ works much better than actively trying (Smilie et al., 2006; Watson et al., 2010). Similarly, when one is stymied by a problem, simply changing your focus of attention is often the best way to solve it (Dijksterhuis et al., 2013). Relaxing the conscious mind allows the adaptive unconscious to take over, and frequently our tacit selves are better at solving certain types of particularly complex problems. In the field of psychotherapy, so-called ‘acceptance’ strategies, in which clients are instructed to simply allow unwanted thoughts or memories to flood over them, seem to have embarked on a quest for ultimate cause, these young people do with the idea of blazing their own career path: a full 50 per cent of Millennials in the 2011 career survey reported feeling interested or very interested in being self-employed. Cynical observers may dismiss all of this as a pragmatic response to a weak job market but, whatever the ultimate cause, these young people do seem to have embarked on a quest for rewarding, meaningful work and a sense of community.

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The Daoist thinker Laotze at one point advises the ruler, ‘Governing a large state is like cooking a small fish’ – in other words, you don’t want to overdo it. This is equally good advice for a workplace manager or knowledge-economy worker. When faced with a difficult management decision or an intractable technical problem, the best approach may be just to walk away. Sleep in, take a walk, go weed your garden.

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grasstoots component to this return to the classics, which are perceived as a way to fill the ‘spiritual void’ left by the abandonment of the proletariat revolution. There seems to be a need for personal and social goals that go beyond merely maintaining a 7–10 per cent annual GDP growth rate.

+Meaning-embedded, socially situated ideals such as wu-wei are also appealing because they reflect the important insight that we are not 1980s-style solitary, Ayn Randian heroes wresting resources out of the ground and building capital out of thin air, but rather profoundly social animals, more dependent than ever in our evolutionary history on our communities for the basics of life. Barack Obama’s observation that entrepreneurs need to recognise their dependence on publicly created resources, ranging from roads to police services, was lambasted by the Right as yet another example of wild-eyed socialism. From an academic perspective, though, it’s just a basic anthropological and economic fact. Human beings are able to function in modern, large-scale societies, not because we’re good at calculating costs and benefits or reasoning carefully, but primarily because we are emotionally bound to the people around us (Durkheim, 1915/1965; Rappaport, 1999).

Implicit trust, and spontaneously embraced values, function as the glue that holds civilisations together. Moreover, recent work has suggested that the feeling of being connected to a larger, meaningful whole is a key component of psychological wellbeing and reported happiness (Baumeister et al., 2013).

That said, these days we do seem to live in a society dead-set against spontaneity. We’ve got three year-olds attending drill sessions to get an edge on admission to the best preschool, and then growing into hyper-competitive high school students popping Ritalin to enhance their test results and keep up with a brutal schedule of afterschool activities. As adults, our personal and professional lives increasingly revolve around a relentless quest for greater efficiency and higher productivity, crowding out leisure time and simple unstructured pleasures. The result is that too many of us spend our days stumbling around tethered umbilically to our 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, never far from the bright glow of tiny LCD screens.

It doesn’t need to be this way, though, and in fact this incessant effort and striving are often profoundly counterproductive. Many of our most desired goals – happiness, attractiveness, spontaneity – are best pursued indirectly, and conscious thought and effortful striving actually interfere with their attainment (Baumeister, 1984; Schooler et al., 2003; Wegner, 2009). This is a fact that is slowly being more appreciated. Recent studies have suggested that non-stop exam prep and a dearth of unstructured playtime is having a negative impact on children’s emotional and cognitive development (e.g. Barker et al., 2014; Pomerantz et al., 2014). In business management, there’s a growing recognition that pushing harder too often leads to producing less (Schumpeter, 2013), and that people who put themselves last, in the sense of generously helping others, actually end up ahead in the long run (Grant, 2013). And for many people the realisation is gradually dawning that creativity – the magic, elusive key to success in our new knowledge economy – cannot thrive unless given room to breathe (Lefitiv, 2014). Furthermore, research suggests that we are often at our most effective when can relax and allow our unconscious hot cognition to take the reins (Jackson et al., 2006; DeCaro et al., 2011; Dijkestra et al., 2012). As an early Chinese saying has it, ‘Be wu-wei [literally ‘do nothing’], and nothing will be left undone.’ In many situations, this turns out to be pretty good advice.

The Millennials who pass through my classroom seem to have developed a healthy scepticism of materialism and winner-take-all individualism. They want deeper connections to their communities, and choose careers that they see as imbued with value. While they may have been driven to this by economic necessity, they also seem to have stumleed onto something important. By doing less, and wanting more – more belonging, more meaning – we might all find ourselves connecting better with our communities and families, deriving more satisfaction in our work, and sleeping better at night.

Not quite the ecstatic union with the Divine envisioned by 1960s spiritual seekers, but nothing to sneeze at either.