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The “Do Nothing” and the Pilgrim: Two Approaches to Ethics

It may be that human civilization is in decline. At least in the West, there is a decided increase in violent crime, in the frequency and intensity of terrorist attacks, in air, water, soil and noise pollution, and in environmental destruction generally. The nuclear threat is still with us, wars continue to break out, cloning and genetic and biological engineering is outdistancing our laws and our moral sense, and “adult” crimes are being committed by children of a shockingly young age. The quality of life on Earth seems to be slipping away. The resulting angst seems to be propelling us to embrace yet again those “old-fashioned” values, emphasizing family, and whatever virtues we have come to associate with a more “golden” era from the past. But the romance of an imaginatively remembered past which did not include violence, dishonesty, and unfaithfulness is neither true to those eras, nor particularly applicable to our own day and age—except as it causes us to re-think who we are, what we are doing as individuals and as nations, and where we are and ought to be heading. The past can never be an answer unless we bring it into the present after incredible amounts of thinking and adaptation. It needs to be reappropriated, and that is hard work. We may yearn for the “good old days,” but we can never simply go back to those days from the here and now. The here and now is a different window in history, with its own outlook and its own complexities which

yield a view on the world that is both distinctive and requires never-before-tried potential solutions. It requires both a memory of the past, an assessment of the present, and a vision of the future. It is not clear that the West has such a vision, and so there is an aimlessness—except for economic pursuits and the incessant drive of consumerism—an apparent boredom, and a rising anger resulting from racial inequality, homelessness, economic stratification, a rising crime rate, and chronic unemployment. These are not the worst of times, but neither are they the best of times. For the first time in human history, we have the potential to destroy all life on this planet, and perhaps even the planet itself: “we have never before been in the position of potential ‘uncreators’ of life, of being able to prohibit birth, but it is precisely imagining the extent of this power and feeling deeply what it means to live in a world where this is possible”¹ that is causing many of us to rethink our theologies, philosophies, and our way of being in the world. This is not a situation that breeds hope and contentment.

As a comparativist, I find I turn instinctively to other cultural traditions for insight which comes from distance, encountering insights and ideals that might enhance and cleanse those of my own. It is not that I think other cultures do not pollute and exploit, and are without their own share of problems and stresses. No culture lives up to its ideals, and increasingly few seem concerned by that fact. Yet it remains within the hopeful depictions of the ideal that any real guidance is to be found. We need to listen to the wisdom of peoples of other cultural perspectives, as well as to our own cultural past and present, if we are to find effective ways of salvaging this sick young planet.

Indeed, it is somewhat in this spirit that Arthur Danto, in a book of quality entitled *Mysticism and Morality: Oriental Thought and Moral Philosophy*, concludes, at the beginning rather than at the end, that

There are times when the moral fabric of our lives appears so rent that one must look with sympathy upon anyone who in desperation turns to other civilizations for guidance. The East has always held the promise of a deeply alternative existence, satisfying and pacific and exalting. . . . It is nevertheless an aim of this book to discourage the hope that a way through our moral perplexities may be found in the Orient.²

One should take seriously a warning of such unconditional clarity from as eminent a scholar as Danto. Therefore, before I begin my inquiry into Oriental thought, I want to address his concerns.

Making the journey from one of the world’s distinctive cultural traditions to another is, at best, daunting, and at worst, impossible. The

reasons have much to do with the inability, and sometimes unwillingness, to put one's own cultural assumptions "at risk"; it is not simply a matter of linguistic and cultural differences. Not that Danto and others would not be willing to put at risk their own positions, but that, as Gadamer and his teacher and colleague Heidegger observe, it is never clear and distinct that one's "translation" of an idea from another culture into the ideational language of one's own culture has not ripped that idea or conceptual cluster out of its own bed of assumptions, and rendered it safe and unthreatening by making it "one of our own." Indeed, Danto warns of this very possibility, except that he *only* speaks the language of *assimilation*, and never the language of risk-taking. To assimilate a tradition to one's own always already presupposes that one's own "house" of language and being is the ruling one, and that whatever is learned must be fitted into this house, or left outside to rust harmlessly on the lawn. There is no thought of *foundational renovation*. Danto writes,

. . . we cannot take over the moral beliefs of the East without accepting a certain number of factual beliefs—beliefs about the world—that such a system of moral beliefs presupposes. But the relevant factual beliefs cannot easily be assimilated to the system of beliefs that define the world for us. The fantastic architectures of Oriental thought . . . are open to our study and certainly our admiration, but they are not for us to inhabit.³

But why not? Yes, there are difficulties, evident even in the fact that there are few in the world who can straddle two cultural traditions intellectually, with half a brain and half a heart in each, who have facility in both languages, or language groups. Yet it is also evident that some do break through the barriers of inscrutability and mystery, and successfully begin the arduous and demanding business of the *fusing of horizons*. Of course, a fusion of horizons leaves neither horizon of understanding intact. The one alters the other, else there would be no fusion but only harmless juxtaposition. Not only does fusion demand the placing of key and fundamental assumptions at risk, but it puts at risk one's way of life as well. Even more to the point, whenever ethics enters into the picture, our defences go up and we become doubly protective for fear of losing the slight hold on civilization that we have. The yawning gap of nihilism and scepticism is usually enough to keep us at home. Indeed, it is the fear of that yawning gap that has already caused many of us to turn backwards in time, towards the days of our grandparents and great grandparents, when we imagine things to have been better and more moral. Perhaps they were, but they were not

without their own problems and, in any case, you simply can't get there from here.

ON THE NATURE OF THE WILL

Insofar as we may be willing to risk it all (ethically speaking), at least for the purposes of reading further in this book, let us push on, inquiring of Danto what it is that forces him to reject the entire Orient as a source of moral renewal and critical reassessment. Writing as an analytic philosopher, he argues that moral beliefs and factual beliefs are connected: moral beliefs presuppose factual ones. *Karma*, the relationship between *samsara* and *nirvāna*, and the Taoist sense of flowing with the heavenly Way are all factual claims about how things really are, and are quite foreign to our own way of perceiving ourselves in the world. Danto thinks it too much to expect that we convert philosophically to perspectives on the world which are, in so many respects, radically exotic and bizarre when compared to our own. And, of course, he is right, if what is demanded of us is that we take over lock, stock, and barrel the various world-views of the East. Yet the goal of comparative philosophy is not conversion. Rather than advocating an alternative world-view, one inquires into that world-view to discern whether there is anything there which might help us to understand where our own is deficient, or whether there is another way of walking in the world that would enhance our personal and cultural understanding. The risks on both sides are of excess: if we take too much, then we may abandon our own homeground, and convert to another understanding; if we take too little, we distort that alternative perspective by making it comfortable and applicable, leaving our own homeground only slightly altered by our utterly safe mining in foreign fields of thought. Yet surely there is a range of middle positions in which we may significantly alter our own understanding, and our own homeground as well, by taking seriously an aspect of another tradition, without distorting its force and integrity, and thereby coming to see the world in a different light.

Nevertheless, even if I am right that one can glean insight from other traditions without seriously distorting that tradition, and while modifying and fundamentally reinterpreting one's own, Danto argues that the Achilles heel of Oriental thought in general (with the possible exception of Confucianism) is its conception of the will. Why is the East's teachings on the will so inimical to the very possibility of ethics? His answer is crisp and to the point: in the East, "the will is not anything like the important moral concept . . . that it is in the West. Equally,

there is none of the agony over freedom of the will, which is, after all, the paradigmatic philosophical concern in the Western tradition.”⁴ The focal issue is the place of the will, and as I will suggest one of the nature of the will in different cultural traditions. Danto is quite right in observing that in the Western traditions, the world that we live in demands that we struggle along the path of righteousness, and that we enlist in the noble battle against evil along the way. Comparing the Japanese *haiku* poet Basho, to Dante, Danto writes,

He [Basho] is no Dante, puffing up an arduous path through a hierarchical universe to a permanent lodging in Paradise. The Way has no vector. One cannot get lost. The way is everywhere. . . . So the wanderer does not follow an itinerary, like a pilgrim thirsting for the final beatitudes. Happiness is the way one goes, not something luminous at the end. Of course there is no rest there: we are always moving . . . but we can move without effort, and that is what following the Way is.⁵

By now the reader may already have inklings about how one might reinterpret the sense and place of the will in the East in order to find a way through this rather sharp dividing of the moral West from the amoral East. For example, one might contend that it is not that the Taoists, the Buddhists, and the Zen Buddhists are amoral, but that their vision of morality is always already an implicit critique of precisely the sort of morality and conception of will which we in the West have taken to be the only genuine and true willful morality. Indeed, the Zen Buddhist philosopher Abe Masao makes this abundantly clear when he formulates a Buddhist perspective on the human will as it is understood in the West:

. . . in Buddhism, human free will is grasped as an endlessly self-determining, self-attaching, and self-binding power—which is the ultimate source of human suffering and which inevitably leads us to the final dilemma—that is, death in the absolute sense. However, when this endlessly self-binding blind power (karma) is realized as it is, through the practice of *dhyana*, meditation, one can be emancipated from it and awaken to boundless openness, [ś]ūnyatā [emptiness, nothingness]. . . . In this awakening to [ś]ūnyatā, human free will is realized entirely anew in its pure form by eradicating its self-attaching and self-binding character. Instead of producing a chain of causation and transmigration, free will, which is now based on the awakening to [ś]ūnyatā, freely works in this phenomenal world without attachment, delusion, or bondage.⁶

No wonder the temptation is not to invite the culturally “different” into our houses: to allow them to enter may result in things at least

being significantly altered, and possibly left in tatters. In the above passage by Abe, a rather different conception of the will is being advanced, one of a will that is not fettered by anguish, intellectual sweat, and intense and focused persistence. Rather, the emancipated will now appears to operate effortlessly, apart from our cravings and selfish desires, and in tune with some sense of the whole of things which makes us a vital part of the universe itself.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE EVERYDAY WORLD

It is sometimes alleged that Oriental thought is unable to make legitimate moral distinctions because it sanctifies this world, making all of it good, or as the Buddhists say, *nirvāna*. All action, all existence is religiously drenched. Danto asserts “this is a teaching it is difficult not to respect. But I do not believe it will do as a moral philosophy.”⁷ If every thing and every action in the everyday world (*samsara*) is good (*nirvāna*), then the distinction between good and bad breaks down, since there can be no evil, “and some way has to be found for rationalizing evil.”⁸ Good and evil, we often hear in Eastern thought, are distinctions made in the state of delusion and ignorance. They are relative, not absolute distinctions, and what they are relative to is the way of thinking that we habitually take to be the absolutely correct and reasonable way(s) of thinking. “Good and evil,” writes Abe, “are completely dependent on one another. They always co-arise and co-cease so that one cannot exist without the other.” There is no “supreme good which is self-subsistent apart from evil.”⁹ Abe concludes that the surface impact of all of this makes it “understandable why . . . Christians find an indifference to ethics in Buddhism.”¹⁰ By contrast, what is typical, particularly in the Far East, is to focus on the ideal state of mind/heart, in which one is transformed to such an extent that one spontaneously does “the right thing.” Doing of any kind “still comes about within the world-nexus through being related to other things,” but now doing “possesses the character of non-doing or *play* in its elemental sense.”¹¹ Abe adds that this playfulness is at the same time an earnestness, and that earnestness results from our infinite task of saving, or releasing from suffering all sentient beings, human and non-human.¹² One is infinitely concerned, in this way, because from the standpoint of *śūnyatā*, one’s vision is now a

selfless self-centredness in which the self and other are completely non-dual within the nexus of reciprocal interpenetration, and thus the self-centredness and other-centredness are dynamically one. This is possible

only through the completed negation of any kind of self-centredness including the religious self-centredness, and the awakening to *śūnyatā* free from the will itself.¹³

Language is being stretched beyond its normal elasticity, and hence, no phrasing seems quite right: "selfless self-centeredness," or the expanded self, or selfless compassion, or non-self-centeredness—all of these phrases reach beyond the dualistic thinking which separates self and the other.

From the standpoint of *śūnyatā*, one no longer follows the moral imperative like a novice learning to paint by number, for now one's capacity to empathetically identify with others is an effortless and unthinking compassion. The ideal, enlightened state of mind is pre-reflective, "without-thinking,"¹⁴ a state of awareness prior to all distinctions and conscious differentiation. And it is a rather constant opinion in the Far East that this pre-reflective state, in particular because it is also pre-ego, is a compassionate state of awareness which seeks to preserve or maintain what is, that it is evenhanded in its compassionate identification with whatever is, and that it is intuitively active, rather than calculative. Pre-reflective change is real and continual, but it is spontaneously and effortlessly active, slipping between the paths of greatest resistance and opposition. Thus, it is not that the will is ignored or depreciated in value, but that it is no longer tied to calculative reasoning. "To do good, not commit evil" is an ethical imperative common to the Easterner and the Westerner.¹⁵ But having abandoned the duality of good and evil, how is this imperative to be understood?

In Buddhism, the non-dualistic state of awareness which transcends the good/evil distinction, you will recall, is called *śūnyatā*. In fact, it is probably more accurate to say that *śūnyatā* is the root source from which all dualistic distinctions are carved or discriminated; it is the original nothingness (or no-thing-ness), or radical emptiness. It is the formless prior to the coming into existence of all distinctions. The technical phrase that Nishitani borrows from Takeuchi Yoshinori to refer to a point before the opposition of the polarities is initially developed is "transcendence." What results from taking the standpoint of *śūnyatā* is a clearer realization of the relative discriminations which come to be carved from the undifferentiated, allowing a fresh trans-valuation of values to occur, but now against the background of valuational relativity, and the compassion which results from seeing that conventional values are delusory and arbitrary. Abe quotes a Zen story in which the master answers a student's question about where the master will go after death, by saying that he will go straight to hell! The student is

shocked, but the master responds to the student's expressed disbelief by adding, "If I will not go to hell, who will save you at the bottom of hell?"¹⁶ As is so often the case in the parables of Jesus, ordinary values are turned over, and what seemed sinful is now revalued as moral, and what was thought to be moral, is now taken to be immoral. If anything, we have come face to face with a "higher wisdom," one that transcends ordinary morality and puts "at risk" that which one heretofore held dear and sacrosanct. Yet this does not mean that one now acts in an unprincipled manner. New principles will take the place of the old, but now set on a more deeply rooted foundation. One's capacity for moral judgment is now more discerning, and one knows that it may be a better thing to dine with sinners than with the smug and habitually unfeeling holy of society. One now looks beneath the surface, and rethinks what it means to be holy, open to the "good will" of a prostitute and sinner, to the desperate and suffering. At the same time, one is now less open to the hypocrite, to the habituated smugness of one who assumes the good, like Plato's Euthyphro. One is open to the other, and as such one must first have become transparent to oneself: because one is more aware than one was previously, listening is now more possible, and so is the mustering of helpful advice.

THE WILL IN EASTERN THOUGHT

What should emerge from the discussion that follows is an awareness of a distinctive "Eastern" point of view, which assumes that it is the aggressive will that is the problem, rather than the ingredient without which there can be no ethical or moral solution. Morality is not a matter of willing the flesh and the mind into a steadfast obedience and renunciation, but of abandoning willfulness altogether in favor of a spontaneity, compassion, and human heartedness which arises from our "truer" nature, if not overlaid with egoistic and individualistic desires. D. T. Suzuki argues that the will in the Zen tradition is prior to the self as discursive deliberator, or as motivator of an ego separate from its objects of awareness:

The will in its primary sense . . . is more basic than the intellect because it is the principle that lies at the root of all existences and unites them all in the oneness of being. The rocks are where they are—this is their will. The rivers flow—this is their will. The plants grow—this is their will. The birds fly—this is their will. Human beings talk—this is their will. The seasons change, heaven sends down rain or snow, the earth occasionally shakes, the waves roll, the stars shine—each of them follows its own will.

To be is to will and so is to become. There is absolutely nothing in this world that has not its will. The one great will from which all these wills, infinitely varied, flow is what I call the ‘Cosmic (or ontological) Unconscious,’ which is the zero-reservoir of infinite possibilities. The ‘Mu!’ thus is linked to the unconscious by working on the conative plane of consciousness. The koan that looks intellectual or dialectical, too, finally leads one psychologically to the conative center of consciousness and then to the Source itself.¹⁷

In a way, “will” is being defined equivocally in what I have suggested thus far: on the one hand, from the point of view of *śūnyatā*, one is beyond will; and yet, as Suzuki argues, there is a “primal will,” a will which wills without willing. What accounts for this ambiguity, I think, is the attempt to deconstruct the old notion in such a way as to speak of willing as non-willing, free of all the baggage that “will” carries with it. But there is more to say here. *Śūnyatā* is a state of awareness that is beyond most people in its fullest sense, and yet in East Asia it is accessible culturally in literature, scripture, art, and in the various “ways” such as the tea ceremony, flower arranging, haiku poetry, the martial arts, etc. Few people attain *śūnyatā*, but most are acquainted with the literature and the tradition of enlightenment, and perhaps with those engaged in practices engaged in by those who attained the perspective of *śūnyatā*. What one learns is at least something about how to will without willing, while recognizing the radical relativity of good and evil. One comes to see the things of the world a little differently, from a broader/wider perspective (as though *sub specie eternitatis*), and in a state of peace and tranquility. The result is likely to be a more compassionate interaction with others, with other living things, and with the world of nature generally—with which one now senses a genuine identification. While few experience the state of *śūnyatā*, most are affected by its reported contours, and are engaged in the practices which slowly move one somewhat in the direction of those characteristics preparatory to its realization. In this sense, *nirvāna* is always already underfoot, once it is more clear what it is that *nirvāna* is all about.

Danto’s criticism of Eastern “morality”—and he takes Taoism as “the more typically Oriental attitude”¹⁸—is that it “aims at the stunning of the will,” and this stunning of the will appears necessary because “the will is considered the enemy of ultimate happiness throughout the East.”¹⁹ The picture that he gives is of effortless, undisturbed, strictly unwillful flowing—a “monotonous flowing away”²⁰—of being at one with the stream of life such that morality as we understand it becomes literally impossible. One no longer possesses the ability to act against the stream of things, or to set out to change the world in some small

way, for happiness demands that one flow in conformity with the world. "Exactly that space that Taoism intends to collapse is what makes morality possible at all."²¹

Where Danto goes wrong, I think, is in assuming that the will is turned off, allowed to atrophy, and abandoned. Rather, the will is understood in a different light, is nurtured differently in the cultural gardens of the East, and yields both quite different methods of application and distinctively different results. To begin, let me focus the discussion by quoting from Danto once more, this time on the concept of *wu wei* (or *wei wu wei*) in Taoist thought. I will analyze the meaning of the term shortly. For now, let me dwell on Danto's rendering of the meaning of this Chinese phrase, for he explicitly defines *wu wei* as "to do nothing," emphasizing that "*wu wei*, non-doing, celebrates the power of immobility."²² In fact, it means nothing of the sort! Rather than implying inaction, it is that which makes all doing, of whatever kind, possible, including moral doing. Chapter forty-eight of the *Tao Te Ching* tells us that we must stop acting altogether, and that once we do so, then there will be nothing that we do not do. "The Tao never acts, yet there is nothing it does not do" (chapter thirty-seven). The Tao is "universal spontaneity."²³ When all is well, one digests one's food without willing it done or checking it step by step through its process. An even better example is pregnancy. The less aggressive and less dominating female is the heroine of Taoist thought, and not because she can bear children, but because the effortless and spontaneous *doing* over nine months is more frequently evident in the way women live their lives generally. Women are more likely to have come to terms with nurturing, and with the importance of gentle interaction and persuasion. One does not force a pregnancy, normally, deciding at seven months that one has had enough. Nor does one force physical and mental development of the fetus. The more aggressive male, in China and here, is more likely to force things, to advocate a "war" on drugs, a "war" on poverty, to discipline quite severely because of a breach of good conduct, to become impatient quickly, and to see to it that injustice does not go unanswered.

By contrast, the Taoist sage intervenes minimally, with others and with the natural world, letting each thing develop in accordance with its own nature. Deliberate intervention, particularly forced intervention, sooner or later results in failure, or in strikingly bad consequences. As Holmes Welch puts it, "in human relations force defeats itself. Every action produces a reaction, every challenge a response." The combination of humility and compassion "work like gravity between man and man," accomplishing effortlessly, and by attraction rather than by force,

what might otherwise not be accomplished, or if forced, accomplished with severe penalties flowing from it in the future.²⁴ Rather than fighting evil, the Taoist realizes that "good creates evil . . . [N]ever [try] . . . to do good, because this requires having a concept of good, which leads to having a concept of evil, which leads to combatting evil, which only makes evil stronger."²⁵ Welch summarizes his account of *wu wei*:

Wu wei does not mean to avoid all action, but rather all hostile, aggressive action. Many kinds of action are innocent. Eating and drinking, making love, ploughing a wheat-field, running a lathe—these *may* be aggressive acts, but generally they are not. Conversely, acts which are generally aggressive, like the use of military force, may be committed with such an attitude that they perfectly exemplify *wu wei*. The Taoist understands the Law of Aggression and the indirect ways that it can operate. He knows that virtuousness or non-conformity can be as aggressive as insults or silence. He knows that even to be non-aggressive can be aggression, if by one's non-aggressiveness one makes others feel inferior. It is to make another person feel inferior that is the essence of aggression.²⁶

Rather than "do nothing," then, *wu wei* means not doing anything that is not done naturally, i.e. spontaneously, and from the heart as well as from the mind. One's doing must be an expression of one's whole character, and must in some way embody an empathetic awareness of the situation of the other. One may stop someone from doing harm, and in so doing harm that person. But one's intent is not to do harm, but to avoid as much of it as one can. The Chinese character for mind, *hsin*, is also the character for heart. Similarly, the Japanese term *kokoro* means both mind and heart, or mind/heart, and underscores that a "heartfelt" gesture is also a "mindful" and a *spontaneous* act. It arises naturally and spontaneously from the depths of one's self, from deeper than one's surface will; it is not mere acting but an authentic expression of one's whole person as "knower," "feeler," and "willer." Such acts are not acts of calculation, not because they are mindless—for indeed they are allegedly mind-full—but because calculation implies being at an objective remove from the situation. Acts of calculation are more like running down the list of debits and credits on a cluttered sheet in order to decipher what would be best in this case. Calculation can result in the ignoring or setting aside of one's feelings and one's sense of how to act in this circumstance here and now. Instead an abstract principle or law is applied to an instance that is rarely ever exactly like what the law envisioned or what is set out in the manual as a test case. T. P. Kasulis articulates the case and the place for the "Eastern" outlook and contribution to moral thought when he concludes:

Even if Western philosophers continue to maintain that consciousness should always remain primarily rational and conceptually oriented, the *capacity* to respond prereflectively should still be nourished. Otherwise, we will lose, along with that capacity, the possibility of being truly compassionate, selfless, and spontaneously moral.²⁷

But deeper still is the observation that ordinary morality arises only from the surface of egos already in social conflict. Morality is a web of prohibitions and prescriptions for people who might otherwise do each other great harm. By contrast, if we saw each other as brothers and sisters, we would identify with each other's gains and losses, pleasures and pains, aspirations and fears. This is not to say that morality requires nothing more—at least it need not mean this—but that whatever rules of morality do arise, should arise out of this foundation of human-hearted capacity for empathetic identification. David Loy makes this point in some detail:

The nondualist traditions make the same point [that the problem of morality is not evil, but delusion] as part of their critique of dualistic categories. The tendency to evaluate all acts as good or bad, pure or impure is a classic example of the delusive *vikalpa* [discrimination or the bifurcation of experience] that needs to be eliminated. To eliminate all delusion therefore means to eliminate all moral codes as well. But this does not excuse selfishness, for a true elimination of delusion will also eliminate all those self-centered ways of thinking that motivate selfish behavior. Deeper than the imperfectly flexible strictures of any moral code (which may still have value as “rules of thumb”) is the concern for others that springs up spontaneously within those who have realized their true nature. This is the heart of the Taoist critique of Confucianism, which sees Confucian emphasis on such doctrines as righteousness and propriety as an attempt to close the barn door after the horse of natural feeling has already run away.²⁸

The will, in the dualistic state of awareness, attempts to manipulate the numerous separate and emotionally unattached entities of the world in order to reconstruct some sense of interconnection, by means of laws, regulations, prohibitions, and intellectual prescriptions and requirements. But, “nondual action does not imply wanton, merely spontaneous activity like that of a spoiled child. The point is more subtle . . . [A]cculturation introduces ethical factors (e.g., a superego) that condition our instinctive selfishness, but nonduality, in denying an ego-self, eliminated the basis of selfishness.”²⁹ Action which emanates from a willful ego simply serves to increasingly dualize us, i.e. separates us from others, and from the natural environment. Action which ema-

nates from a peaceful, meditative, empathetically enfolding state of awareness is already selflessly acting so as to preserve and to protect all that this embracing state embraces. It is not that such action is necessarily done without thinking, but that the thinking is a heartfelt and spontaneous thinking from the depths of one's integrated being, and that this state is a state of compassion and love. This point is emphasized again and again in Far Eastern philosophy: "When the cursed barrier of egoism is broken down, there remains nothing that can prevent us from loving others as ourselves."³⁰ Or, "It is apparent that the ethical application of the doctrine of [n]irvāna is naught else than the Golden Rule, so called. The Golden Rule, however, does not give any reason why we should so act, it is a mere command whose authority is ascribed to a certain superhuman being."³¹ The reason which Suzuki gives in support of acting in accordance with the Golden Rule, on behalf of Buddhism, is the finding of "the oneness of things . . . from which flows the eternal stream of love and sympathy."³² The emphasis on the "enlightenment state," is an emphasis on "the spiritual expansion of the ego, or, negatively, the ideal annihilation of the ego," which then produces a "never-drying stream of sympathy and love."³³ David Loy states the case this way:

Insofar as I realize my true nature, perhaps love becomes, not something that I have, but something that I participate in. Such love would necessarily be non-discriminatory. In moving from the sense of myself as an alienated consciousness to an awareness that all phenomena are a manifestation of the same nondual ground, love and compassion would spontaneously arise for all beings. Understanding myself as a facet of the Whole, I would naturally identify with all other facets of the Whole.³⁴

If the self is not thought of as an independent, self-existing, substantial entity, we are less likely to have a disposition towards self-love and self-attachment, the Buddhists maintain. "Self-centeredness is simply an outcome of this reification or substantialization of the self." Indeed, this reification and substantialization of the self, "and its resultant self-centeredness are the root-source of evil and human suffering. Accordingly, as a way of salvation, Buddhism teaches the necessity of realizing the nonsubstantiality of the self, that is, of realizing no-self or *anatman*."³⁵

WU-WEI AND NON-DOING

For the most part, evil is conceived of quite differently in the East and West. In much of the East, evil arises when one covers over one's natural inclinations towards goodness. Evil is, more often than not,

associated with willfulness and selfishness. In the West, it is willfulness that is the solution, and willfulness is inescapably an individual matter. To be an individual in no way requires that one be selfish, but it is not always a simple matter to keep the two separate. From the perspective of much of the East, it is necessary to get the will out of the way if one wishes to move from egoism to a wider vision of things, and in order to grow from selfishness to selflessness. In any case, Danto's assertion that "[w]u [w]ei, nondoing, celebrates the power of immobility,"³⁶ reads the ironic surface of Taoist and Oriental thought in general, while missing completely its deeper insights. The Tao is able to do without doing not by being immobile, but by acting powerfully and decisively in the least aggressive, least damaging, and the least disempowering way possible with respect to others. The water that finds the path of least resistance as it meanders down a hillside still finds its way to the streambed at its base. It may take longer, but it does less harm along the way. Humans would do well to follow the example of the stream, for human ways tend to be forcing ways, violent ways, and the wounds acquired in war and in courts of justice often take whole lifetimes—or longer—to scar over. Long before that, the stream of gentle persuasion and patient example will have reached the bottom of the hillside, having achieved what it set out to achieve without the negative fallout that besets the other model. We may well ask ourselves which approach is more likely to achieve its ends. Force is not ruled out, but is a far distant last resort. We in the West, by contrast, are often of the opinion that if we are courageous and principled, we ought to be able to bring about the desired results right now, at whatever cost. There is something about steadfastly standing for one's beliefs and values without wavering that brings with it a sort of bonus moral credit. The Taoist quietly urges non-violent, non-aggressive action, which will in all likelihood achieve its goal before any aggressive action—at least long before the aggressor has been able to heal the scars of conquest and the suffering and indignity of violence done. It is anything but a do-nothing model.

EVIL

There is much more to say about nonaggressive action, or creative quietude, or active inaction, or not-forcing, but I want to say something more about how evil arises in this Taoistic-Buddhist scheme of things. If the Confucian Mencius distilled the focus of the Chinese assumption that human beings are by nature good, then Lao Tzu was able to throw

out the bath water while saving the baby by maintaining that our natural state is prior to the distinction between good and evil. As babies, we come into the world as "uncarved blocks" (*p'u*), free from hostility and aggressiveness, but also free of a vast array of distinctions that divide the world up into the useful and the useless, the good and the bad, the progressive and the regressive. It is the mark of civilization that distinctions arise, and when there is recognition of goodness, there is, necessarily and axiomatically the recognition of evil, for otherwise "goodness" would be unable to identify what it is that it is not. Benjamin Schwartz beautifully describes the fall from the Taoist "garden of Eden":

But why does civilization arise? Here our focus shifts to the mysterious emergence within the human *hsin* (mind) of an unprecedented new kind of consciousness that seems to exist nowhere else in nature. Somehow within the Eden of the *tao*, there arises the deliberative, analytic mind which has the fatal capacity to isolate the various forms, constituents, and forces of nature from their places in the whole in which they abide, to become fixated on them, and to make them the objects of newly invented desires and aspiration. The human mind itself becomes, through this new consciousness, isolated from the flow of the *tao* and finds its meaning in asserting its separate existence against the whole.³⁷

The Taoists were fully aware of the evils that were perpetrated in the name of the good, of the goods of yesterday that have since been "seen" to have been evil, and of the evils of yesterday that are now considered to be socially acceptable, or encouraged. But perhaps the point of Taoism can be best understood by us as an ancient form of ecological living. As with the Far East generally, in overwhelming proportion, human nature is seen to be an extension of the nature of the universe itself. To follow nature is to be in accordance with one's own nature, and to follow one's own nature is to be in accordance with the rhythms of nature, the world, and the cosmos as a whole. As Schwartz observed, it is the analytic mind which isolates by distinguishing, and then sets about to encourage what it values positively, and to eliminate what it values negatively. And while some of this is inevitable, even for the Taoist, it is the excessiveness with which we reform nature, with which we carve out a place for civilization, by which we harness and exercise our dominion over nature, and with which we so quickly attack evil and then aggressively extract the good-for-our-purposes that leads to the personal, social, and ecological downfall of the present day. We have lost the sense of flowing, and we no longer are content with dwelling in a world which is our neighborhood. But what we have lost that is most precious is our sense of the whole of things, our sense of the

supportiveness of this great evolutionary flow of adventure that is this human and non-human existence. It is not that we have simply lost our sense of wonder, but that we have lost our sense of the whole. And while the curse is evident, both East and West, it might be argued that it is worse in the West because we are the home of the analytic mind, where the word “mind” does not mean “heart” or “spontaneous arising.” Nor does this analytic mind synthesize nearly as well as it takes apart. For us there is no recent loss, just the inexorable working out of what we have already put in motion as our manner of being-in-the-world.

ON HUMAN HEARTEDNESS

An Eastern perspective switches focus from the tension from the will and the keeping under control of those inevitable evil inclinations, to the spontaneous arising of our natural sense of compassion and feelings of human heartedness. It is a move from the will to the heart. Focus on the “letter of the law,” on rules and regulations, can take us away from what is the center of ethical thinking, for Confucians, Taoists, and Buddhists: that central ethical ideal is human heartedness (*jen* in Confucianism; *tz'u* in Taoism; *kokoro* in Zen Buddhism; *mettā* and *karunā* in Buddhism). One can do the right thing without either wanting to, or without a feeling of caring, or with no human heartedness. One can go through the motions, one can act correctly, but for the Oriental mind, the great characters in their tradition all act as they do out of the spontaneous arising of human heartedness which they express in whatever ways are appropriate to the situation at hand. This is an agent-oriented criterion of ethical action, rather than an act-oriented criterion. Whereas Kant would have us act in accordance with maxims and principles, and would praise us for acting against the grain of our natural inclinations, the Far East stresses doing what we do, not out of duty alone, but out of a sense of respect, reverence, righteousness, or caring. It must arise spontaneously, effortlessly and uncalculatedly, and for no ulterior reasons. It arises from our deeper “will,” which is more like an expression of innate goodness, rather than from the more surface will of obligation and calculation. Ideally, as Confucius remarks, when one matures, then one’s inclinations, one’s moral duty, will always and spontaneously coincide. To quote David Loy once more, “the only way to transcend the dualism between the self and the other is to act without intention—that is, without attachment to some projected goal to be obtained from the action—in which case the agent can simply be the act.”³⁸

The dualistic state of consciousness emphasizes separation from the world, and it is this sense of separation that is itself the root cause of both evil and suffering. The non-dualistic state leads one to recognize that the entire course of history has led to the existence of things existing here and now, just as they are. While we necessarily interfere and intervene in order to live, and to eat and to act, we are likely to interfere and to intervene less, and certainly less aggressively, when we both see and feel the world in this way. We will act non-actively, we will live from a sense of peaceful coexistence, and we will take joy from the manifoldness of the flux which is the world, and of which we are not only a part, but which, at our depths, we actually are.

A RADICAL INTERDEPENDENCE

While Danto's image of Western ethics is one of arduous striving to keep negative impulses in check, the East emphasizes the spontaneous and seemingly effortless arising of feelings of human heartedness and compassion. It is not that effort is not required to achieve such a state of spontaneity, but that the goal is an effortless "willing," a spontaneous expression of an already existing inclination from deep within one's whole being. In the Far East, spontaneity comes at the end of training and discipline, and not early on. As with ballet, one has to practice for years before one can break loose and interpret in an individualistic way, perhaps breaking new ground. Ethically, too, one is brought up within a civilizing tradition, and even the Taoists broke away from Confucian training and did not grow up in a cultural vacuum. Ordinary people continue to march more or less in step with the rules and regulations of their culture (*li*), but the enlightened, wise, and sage-like few go beyond the rules and regulations to that state before moral distinctions were carved out of the heretofore undifferentiated whole of existence. Chuang Tzu in particular refers to this undifferentiated state as *chaos*, presumably because *cosmos* already implies order and classification, whereas chaos is to be taken as referring to everything that is a part of the undifferentiated flow. He engages us in a process which one writer has termed "chaotification,"³⁹ which means that all boundaries and distinctions will appear and disappear, move, shuffle from one place to another, and reappear in a different place, as in a dream. So, whether Chuang Tzu dreamt that he was a butterfly, or the other way around, the fluidity which this image presents is that of "the transmutation of things." Reality is something quite different from what it appears to be to reason. Thus, what we are given is two quite different points of

reference: that of ordinary consciousness, where things are civilized and distinct, and where good and evil are in their place however much they shift from age to age, and that of the chaotic vision which apprehends things as they might be seen by one who had not yet distinguished them, classified them, and made judgments about them morally and valuationally. Everything is a manifestation of one and the same reality, and while there is *b* and *c*, phenomenally, *b* and *c* are both *a*, at this deeper level of metaphysical understanding.

Similar images apply to many of the other Far Eastern traditions, as well. In Buddhist thought, the Jewel Net of Indra is a powerful image of cosmic interconnection and interdependence which reappears again and again. Each jewel in this great net reflects every other jewel, and each of them, in turn, reflect it. Francis H. Cook has observed that in the West, the science of ecology has only recently begun to show that the environment is an interrelated and interdependent web of existence. He notes as well that “the traditional methods of analysis, classification, and isolation [have] tended to erect boundaries around things, setting them apart in groups. . . .”⁴⁰ What Hua-yen Buddhism has pictured from earliest times is not just a world, but a cosmos, a universe which is so interrelated that any one thing reflects everything else, and everything else is reflected in any one thing. Let me quote Cook’s paraphrasing of this image:

Far away in the heavenly abode of the great god Indra, there is a wonderful net which has been hung by some cunning artificer in such a manner that it stretches out infinitely in all directions. In accordance with the extravagant tastes of deities, the artificer has hung a single glittering jewel in each “eye” [or section] of the net, and since the net itself is infinite in dimension, the jewels are infinite in number. There hang the jewels, glittering like stars of the first magnitude, a wonderful sight to behold. If we now arbitrarily select one of these jewels for inspection and look closely at it, we will discover that in its polished surface there are reflected all the other jewels in the net, infinite in number. Not only that, but each of the jewels reflected in this one jewel is also reflecting all the other jewels, so that there is an infinite reflecting process occurring.⁴¹

The result is that there is a mutual identity to be grasped such that what happens to any one jewel happens to all of the others as well. To destroy a single jewel will not cause the net to fall, or even to flutter noticeably, but the loss will be recorded infinitely, in each of the other jewels, and in the reflections of each of the jewels in each of the other jewels. To “understand” any one jewel is to understand them all. Each is inextricably connected to the other.

In Mahāyāna Buddhism, the doctrine of “dependent origination,” or of “interdependent origination” as it is sometimes termed, the inter-relatedness of all phenomena, is again emphasized. Causally, everything causes everything else, and rather than there being a first cause, everything simultaneously arises, or simultaneously is. Everything is empty in that everything is interdependent, or dependent, and nothing whatsoever is self-sufficient. At the same time, each individual thing is, if properly understood, a mirror of the entire universe, since its coming to exist is inseparable from the causal net of the whole cosmos. Nakamura Hajime draws the appropriate moral conclusion when he writes that ordinary consciousness pays “too much attention to the aspect of difference and to the confrontation between individual human beings. We are not separate beings who are absolutely irrelevant to each other, and have nothing to do with each other.”⁴² Thus, the all-encompassing ultimate reality is one, or chaos, or nothingness, or emptiness, and it is in this that each person, and every atom moves, and understands.

THE MORALITY OF ENLIGHTENMENT

The state of enlightenment is a non-dual state, a direct awareness of the interconnection that is discernable at the base of all things. At one’s deepest level of understanding, one is identified with others, and with everything, as clearly as one is identified with one’s own body and mind. If one is the whole world, then one cares about it all as though it were one’s self—because it is oneself. One is indistinguishable from it. Evil is delusion, therefore. It is the mistaking of the surface of things as their depth, a confusing of figure and ground, a confusion of one perspective with another—a valuational transposition. The great delusion is that of selfishness, of self-centered action. In avoiding selfish behavior one must eliminate all distinctions that divide one person or one group from another, and this includes moral distinctions. Only selfless thinking, “willing” and feeling, can take us beyond the vagaries of moral codes, and the ultimate in selfless thinking is thinking that eliminates the self altogether, that empties it, and grasps it as a mirror of, or a manifestation of, the whole of things. Delusion is failing to see that one is a manifestation of the whole, and as such, actually represents the macrocosm in the microcosm. Rather than speaking of “evil,” the Buddhist speaks of “suffering.” Suffering is the result of ignorance, and ignorance is the result of delusion, namely, the sense of separation, individualization without a sense of the whole of things. The result is one’s alienation from the world and from the cosmos, and eventually

from other people as well, and finally from oneself. Evil is separation, willful aggression, selfish separation, painful isolation. “Someone who manipulates the world merely for his own advantage increasingly dualizes himself from it. Those who live in this way cannot help expecting the same from others, leading to a life based on fear and the need to control situations.”⁴³ So, if the entire causal history of the world exists just to bring me into the world, it also exists to bring you into the world, and to bring the single flower to bloom.

For the nondualist, life is nothing but a series of such timeless sunya experiences: a sip of coffee, a few words with a friend, a walk down a path. Someone who cannot trust his world enough to ‘forget himself’ and *become* these situations is condemned—or condemns himself—to watch his life ooze away.⁴⁴

In my own work on Nishida Kitarō, I wrote that one may live, act, and understand in such a way as to move away from interdependence, and towards independence. Estrangement from the whole, or centrifugal movement, is the root cause of evil, and identification with the whole, or centripetal movement, is good.⁴⁵ But if one has had the nondual experience of interconnectedness, then one spontaneously and effortlessly flows with the whole of things of which he or she is now fixedly conscious. It is not that one cannot pick out the good and evil paths or ways when one applies the analytic mind to the subject matter, but that one can simply live and act in accordance with things such that one respects them as being of the same worth and of the same stuff as one’s own self, and one’s own beloved, and one’s own family, and it might never arise, therefore, that you would wish to harm or destroy another. It is no longer a matter of refraining from harming others, for there is no reason not to be inclined to maintain the whole. No law is needed to protect others, for one *is* others, and to become willful about it by trying to get clear about when and when not to do something will only destroy this original spontaneity and lead to a contrived series of regulations which will never be detailed enough to handle all possible circumstances and situations in a constantly changing world such as ours. Compassion is the natural way, and for one who glimpses the interconnectedness of things it is inevitable. To act compassionately is to act in accordance with the “suchness” of the cosmos. To Buddhists, the cosmos is “radiant” with infinite compassion. Great compassion and a great pitying heart is termed “Buddha-nature,” and is seen to be natural to us. What we call “good” actions spring naturally as expressions of who one really is, without calculation, for no reason, for no

gain, as expressions of our suchness. Freedom is to do spontaneously what it is one’s nature to do. As always, from most Eastern perspectives, such spontaneity arises only after intensive discipline and training, and certainly not automatically as we grow in years. Spontaneity comes after discipline, not before, and it is in our nature only in that it is what we are capable of expressing and experiencing as masters in the art of living and acting. The necessity of freedom is an internal necessity, and expresses a truly good nature. It is true that this inherently good nature must be “cultivated,” and can be warped and diseased by an unhealthy environment. Yet if you and I are still lost in discrimination, rather than in the emptiness of things, then we must be taught the traditional Buddhist virtues. But if, as Nakamura writes, “we allow the virtue of compassion to grow in us, it will not occur to us to harm anyone else, any more than we would willingly harm ourselves.”⁴⁶ We can access this outlook, this way of being in the world, through meditation. Now meditation is not a firm aspect of Western cultural traditions, although it is far from unknown, but it is ubiquitous in the East. The effects of meditation are, writes Nakamura,

... to abolish our deep-rooted egoism in our own existence: it aims at cherishing compassion and love towards others. By dissolving our human existence into component parts, we can get rid of the notion of ego, and through that meditation we are led to a limitless expansion of the self in a practical sense, because one identifies oneself with more and more living beings.⁴⁷

CONCLUSION

Have we enough here for a full-blown theory of ethics? I think not, although I am willing to listen to one who thinks we might. Everyone is not enlightened, and so walking within a world which is dualistically perceived, it remains necessary to carve out a system of distinctions, rules and regulations, political and social conventions, etc., in order for us to coexist reasonably well. Yet it is possible to view these as empty necessary conveniences and delusions that allow us to coexist with less harm than might otherwise be the case, the Taoists notwithstanding. Moral rules are empty because we now know that they are but rules of thumb, rough and ready approximations at best, which miss the mark far more often than we would like to admit—and when they do hit the mark, they often do so for the wrong calculated reasons, and can do so without compassion. But for those who do not know that they are

empty, they are useful guidelines, and may lead to eventual recognition of their inherent inadequacy. Yet, I am unwilling to abandon rules and regulations in a cultural tradition that does not even recognize the possibility of non-dualistic enlightenment, and that is unaccustomed to meditative peace and quiet. Far Eastern thought, and feminist thought as well, do much to transform our hyperaggressive and hyperactive meddlesome ways into life-patterns which are considerably more interrelational and adaptive. Nell Noddings, in her provocative book *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, defends an understanding of human nature as characterized by relatedness rather than separation or isolation in the world. She describes the "ethical ideal" as arising from two sentiments: "the natural sympathy human beings feel for each other, and the longing to maintain, recapture, or enhance our most caring and tender moments."⁴⁸ What is distinctive about the Far Eastern perspective on ethics, and is echoed, although no doubt for quite different reasons, in the feminist West of today, is the fundamental assumption that we are from the beginning *in relation*, and only secondarily and dependently individuals. We are individuals, and yet we are individuals only insofar as we are individuals-as-foregrounded expressions of the background whole, which is the family, the social group, society at large, humankind, or the entire cosmos. It makes no sense to speak of an individual except as the individual stands out from the whole of which s/he is a part. Of course, to speak of the whole is to be an individual who stands out from it and reflects back on it, as well. We are individuals only as we recognize that we are individuals related to the social whole, and there is the social whole only as there are individuals who both constitute it and stand apart from it, in reflection, in order to assess its worth, and to direct it. What results is a relational unity of opposites, for we conclude that we are not only part of the social whole, and not just individually distinct, but we are also related to the other person because we are one in communal existence. The group is more than the sum of the individuals who make it up. We are always already related, as well as individual, and this double structure, or double aperture, or stereoscopic vision, is needed in order for us to be able both to account for human individuality and for human relatedness.

Speaking as a comparativist, I think it can now be stated that Danto sees with one lens only. He understands relatedness as an atomistic activity among individuals who must set about to control their wills, lest selfishness prevail. But relatedness can also be glimpsed as the sense of interconnection from the family to the cosmic expanse, which sidesteps the willful need to establish and maintain morality and civili-

zation by instead knowing, feeling, and spontaneously willing that the magnificent whole with which we identify, even to the point of selflessness, be left more or less as it is to wander on in its own seemingly spontaneous and timeless way. The dualistic calculating mind has not brought us a healthy environment, an altogether healthy soul, or nearly as much agreement in the world as one might have thought after several thousand years. I am far too Western to want to abandon the good it has wrought, but too Eastern to ignore the bad. I think it would do us a world of good to breathe feeling back into our ethical theory, and to rekindle the sense of relatedness both to each other, and to the natural environment. The East does not give us "the answer," but I think it does provide us with a part of it. Danto condemns Taoism for recommending that the individual not allow himself to be disturbed by the state of happiness, or its lack, in others. He adds, "no man could be counted moral who did not have that minimal concern for others that permits his own felicitude to vary as theirs does."⁴⁹ Here he is right, but it is Taoism, and Zen Buddhism, and Buddhism that teach us that we are intrinsically interrelated, and the ground of ethics and the foundation of ethical sentiment is the selfless recognition that we are each other's hopes and aspirations, sufferings and disappointments. The Taoist and the other stances from the Far East can answer why we do and ought to care about the universe, but can Danto answer why we ought to be moral? I think he can do so only by expanding the circle of caring concern (and not just bare intellectual seeing) from smaller group to large, and then to larger still. But that is exactly where the Far Eastern vision of being-in-the-world *begins*. Shintōism, Confucianism, and Buddhism all emphasize the centrality of human heartedness, or compassion as the foundation of ethical theory and practice. An analysis of these ways of thinking and feeling is requisite for a proper understanding of ethics in Japan, where all three of these traditions continue to contribute to that subtle weave which is Japanese cultural consciousness.