The Analects of Confucius and Laozi’s Daodejing present polar views of the order with which one should regiment his/her life. In the Analects, goodness consists in following the appropriate rituals in all matters. To his disciple, Confucius explains, “If it is contrary to ritual, don’t listen to it. If it is contrary to ritual, don’t utter it. If it is contrary to ritual, don’t do it” (12.1). Ritual propriety, or li, as the Confucian would call it, begins with one’s family, through which the superior inculcates the values, manners, and customs passed down over generations into the inferior. This is the emperor who exerts his moral authority over his followers, the microcosm of which consists in the parent exerting a similar influence over his or her children, who may then upon interacting with others behave according to what they have been taught as proper.

Wuwei is the antithesis of this. It translates, literally, to effortless action, meaning that one must act without effort and behave harmoniously, and, hence, unintentionally with nature. The water analogy from the Daodejing describes this aptly: “The highest excellence is like water; Water excels at benefiting the ten thousand living things while not competing against them…That is why water is close to the Dao” (8). Both philosophies claim to lead its followers to a life of goodness. However, ritual propriety is the more persuasive path to goodness because it is compatible with human deliberation, and considers humanity to be the most important aspect for achieving virtue.

In practicing wuwei one lives spontaneously, unintentionally, and without reason or deliberation. The Daodejing makes this clear when it says of the sage that, “He brings those with/knowledge not to dare to act. Acting non-intentionally, nothing is not in order” (3). This poses an immediate problem. If one can extricate the rational element from the mind, one feels as if wuwei demands s/he live in a Rousseau-like state of nature that is primitive and in accordance with his/her instincts. This would mean having to compete with other animals for survival in a severe and cutthroat kind of social Darwinism.
However, it is because of the ability of mankind to reason far more proficiently than any other species that it has hitherto survived and achieved reproductive success. Discarding its ability to reason would surely threaten its survival, as people would be made easy prey without their cleverness. Could one live, in the interim of such a loss in reason and his or her death, a life of goodness? No. A Darwinian society is a stressful society, in which the need for one’s over-sized adrenal glands, a necessary adaptation for humanity’s primitive and stone-wielding ancestors, would become far more pressing than in a society which allows for humans to reason.

Confucius take a completely opposite attitude towards human reasoning. Everything that the Confucian does is in accordance with a ritual propriety s/he constructs and learns through reason, practice, and intention. The writer discusses the problems of ritual propriety later, but it is evident that with ritual propriety social Darwinism is not a valid criticism as it most clearly is for wuwei. Furthermore, the passivity that wuwei encourages conflicts with findings of modern science, and Taoism, as a result, becomes unfeasible.
One must imagine the Taoist who practices wuwei as analogous to the natural flow of water as it maneuvers and evades the obstacles obstructing its path, while sustaining its flow and the force of its current. Thus, when adversity strikes one must adapt passively as the Daodejing makes clear when it states: “The pliant and supple are companions of life… pliancy and softness occupy the superior position” (76). According to wuwei, one must maintain a submissive and non-resistant attitude towards nature. This follows directly from the Taoist conception of nature: the Dao represents a natural harmony with which the Taoist becomes unified when s/he aligns his/her life with its natural current. Two important perspectives from modern science shed light on the problems of this attitude when one takes it to its logical extremes. The law of entropy states that all things tend towards disorder. Particulars within the universe may be highly ordered relative to the universe itself, but the general tendency over time is towards disorder. Living creatures are such particulars, which are highly ordered and need sustenance in order to maintain this precarious order. The sustenance from which these creatures survive is scarce, and this scarcity forces different organisms that draw sustenance from the same resources to compete for survival. The law of entropy and the theory of natural selection are in this way linked. Thus, the order that living creatures require in order to exist proves, according to the laws and theories of modern science, that their very existence resists the current of nature that is becoming increasingly disordered.

For the Taoist to preach passivity with respect to nature poses an immediate and dire consequence: do nothing and let the body naturally whither away (despite what the human impulses may motivate, as these are programmed to resist the disorder of nature). This analysis may seem unfair, but it is taking the most probable interpretation of passivity in the Daodejing, and drawing from this its logical conclusions. The closest feasible approximation to passivity with respect to nature comes through the practice of meditation, which the Daodejing hints at when it describes how channeling one’s qi, or breath, brings one unity with the Dao.

Through meditation one may feel as though s/he were one with nature and absolved of any sense of self, but it is also the case that meditation requires mastery over the very faculties that the Daodejing admonishes mankind to
do without. A Zen-like intentionality is necessary not only during the process of meditation, but also in the realization that channeling one’s qi in order to become one with the Dao so as to avoid the misery of unending desire is something one should do. Wuwei must tolerate some degree of intentionality in order to be compatible with meditation, so that one may at least feel as though s/he is in a flow with a supposed harmony. Taoism must make not only an allowance for deliberation in the case for meditation, but also in order so that s/he may live with his/her Taoist friends in a noncompetitive environment in which they allow themselves to reason and communicate in order to sustain their lives with food, shelter, and clothing. Without intentionality, wuwei is unethical and impractical; it results in social Darwinism and/or the entropic ruin of the body. With intentionality, it is no longer wuwei.

If one is to accept wuwei, one must prioritize living in accordance with nature over living in accordance with humaneness. Unlike the Daodejing, which values nature more than it does humanity, the Analects regard ritual propriety as simply a means to humaneness, and not the end in itself. Hence, the Confucian emphasizes ritual propriety so long as it works to the benefit of humanity as the Master says, “A human being who lacks humaneness—what is ritual to someone like that?” (3.3)

Nevertheless, ritual propriety as a way to virtue faces at least two strong criticisms. The first is that the Confucian presumes that the tradition of his ancestors and the morality one derives from it and from the mandate of heaven are good. If not, then there is no criticism or scrutiny that one may place these under, and so must take them as infallible and absolute. One realizes now the consequences society faces from those who claim to hold such divine revelations, exclusive only to those who entitle themselves as the privileged, and one must look upon such persons not with submission and naiveté but with suspicion and incredulity. In other words, one must recognize a sense of morality within him or her that does not depend on any mandates or external sources set in scrolls or tablets.

Loyalty to tradition without critical reflection ensures credulity and the submission of the mind; that perpetuates not only the memory of one’s ancestors but their dominance over those who still have breath to spare. A quick
glimpse at North Korea, where a celestial Big Brother resides hovering over his blind followers, reveals the gravamen of this threat to a free culture. The second criticism attacks the rigidity of ritual propriety. One would look upon ritual propriety more favorably if it could allow for the modification of traditional and customary methods when it would be efficient to do so. It should not be necessary to uphold outmoded rituals simply by virtue of their having been part of tradition. Hence, one must relax the strong tone of conservatism that underlies ancestor worship and the rigorous inculcation of past values so that s/he may promote a society that demonstrates the free expression of ideas along with a propriety that the culture allows itself to modify.

In this way, ritual propriety loses the rigidity for which one often harshly criticizes it, and presents itself instead as a set of habits and behavioral tools that facilitate life rather than constrain it. Despite these criticisms, ritual propriety values thinking, learning, and the innate pleasures and desires of human beings that add depth to life and give it meaning beyond its mere existence. It encourages interference with worldly affairs, and though suffering is concomitant with this, if one wishes to love then one must also be willing to struggle and suffer for that love. It is because the Daodejing prefers a false harmony without this necessary struggle, and imposes, in its nostalgia for unity, its own framework onto nature, that the philosophy of Confucius is the better for humanity.

ANALECTS OF THE CORE

Walt Whitman: A morning-glory at my window satisfies me more than the metaphysics of books.