



NANYANG TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY

The *Gongfu* 功夫 Approach to *Cheng* 誠 and *Ziran* 自然: A Confucian- Daoist Complementarity Perspective

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Abstract

This thesis will consist of three chapters exploring the value, practice, and implications of ethical spontaneity. Ethical spontaneity in this paper refers to the philosophical notion that one can act morally through spontaneous action instead of preset or deliberate moral principles, a notion that differs across Confucianism and Daoism. Chapter one will begin by outlining Peimin Ni's proposed *gongfu* ethics to more fully explain what it means to be a *gongfu* master by acting through ethical spontaneity. Ni's proposed *gongfu* ethics relies heavily on Confucian "cultivated" spontaneity, or the long-term application of habituated action and ritual resulting in a natural disposition to act morally. Although Ni's notion includes and is also motivated by Daoist versions of spontaneity (自然 *ziran*), there is ample room to explore and compare the differences between the two methods. Daoist notions of *ziran* in the *Laozi* rely on what is naturally within us from birth by looking to an infant as the model sage; and the *Zhuangzi*'s concept of "forgetting" expresses a similar retreat from learned customs and conventions. I believe the *gongfu* practice can be best expressed by putting equal emphasis on Daoist spontaneity in parallel to Confucian spontaneity. These two ways of practicing spontaneity are often thought of as opposing and incompatible, but I intend to demonstrate the ways they complement one another. This will become clearer in chapter two by exploring the connection between heaven and human through the notion of *cheng* 誠. The grand evolution of the term *cheng* 誠 has evoked many different interpretations, but I argue that *cheng* entails *ziran*, thus demonstrating how Confucian and Daoist notions of spontaneity function together harmoniously. Chapter three will then use the

Zhuangzi to address whether our actions will be anything like morality if our spontaneity relies on what is natural, to which the answer seems to be negative. However, this is actually not a problem when viewed through the amoral standpoint stemming from the *gongfu* perspective.

I will refer to my methodology in this thesis as a Confucian-Daoist comparative approach which will broadly explore key points of spontaneity from the two schools as they appear across varying texts. By this, instead of consistently focusing on a specific Confucian or Daoist philosopher or text (i.e. the *Lunyu* or the *Laozi*), I will be extracting from various texts from each camp to give a comprehensive description of the general view of spontaneity since my aim is not only textual analysis, but also to demonstrate how this kind of ethic can work in the world. This is not in ignorance of the variances between Confucian and Daoist texts, but rather in an approach that draws from the key points across each tradition. Then, instead of advocating for one tradition over the other, I intend to demonstrate the complementarity between the Confucian and Daoist approaches to ethical spontaneity. I will use the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi* as my primary sources for Daoist notions of *ziran*, and the *Zhongyong* and *Lunyu* as my primary sources for Confucian notions of *cheng*. This is because I see the notion of *ziran* and the notion of *cheng* as having similar properties across the various texts: 1) they both demonstrate the connection between heaven and human; 2) they describe a transformative process; and 3) they are both self-completing. It is because of these three characteristics that I chose to use the *Laozi* the *Zhuangzi*, the *Zhongyong*, and *Lunyu* since we can see these characteristics most clearly displayed demonstrating the intrinsic connections between the texts.

Chapter One

The idea of spontaneity and its relationship to morality has pervaded Chinese intellectual history almost from its infancy, and most notably during the *xuanxue* (“dark learning” or metaphysics) movement during the *WeiJin* period (“Self-So” 511). This chapter will begin by defining and expanding on the idea of *gongfu* ethics proposed by Peimin Ni by outlining what it means to be a *gongfu* master and how one can benefit from the practice. This will create the platform for the philosophical issue of ethical spontaneity to which this thesis will address by drawing from traditional Chinese ethical theories, and then demonstrating their practical significance of today. The *gongfu* approach will give us a modern picture of how the Confucian and Daoist classics can be applied in current ethical theories. The shared characteristics between *ziran* and *cheng* described above will be substantiated from textual analysis in order to ground my argument that an amoral standing will promote the overall harmony of our world and flourishing lives.

1. What really is *gongfu* ethics?: An Overview

While the term *gongfu* is commonly associated with martial arts by the Western audience, in ancient Chinese philosophy it rather describes “the art of life” as a whole. Humans, as ethical agents are artists of life that have the ability to create and cultivate the ways that lead to a good life, just as a painter brings life to a canvas. Although the term is not used in early Confucianism, *gongfu* instruction is widely accepted as implicit in the teachings of Confucianism today. *Song* 宋 and *Ming* 明 Confucian scholars frequently used the word *gongfu* (工夫 or 功夫, formerly and still popularly written as *kungfu*), to describe the instructional manner in which Confucian teachings were projected (Ni, “Can Bad” 2).

The *gongfu* approach does not rely on a set metaphysics as justification for an ethical theory. Ni explains, “the *gongfu* orientation has no intrinsic admonition against metaphysical speculation, and it can accept different interpretations of the world, measured by their constructiveness to and effectiveness for the given objectives”. This perspective does not look to objective or *a priori* validity but instead takes Confucian teachings as a system instructing *how* to conduct one’s life. The search is not for factual knowledge of *what*, absolute truth, nor for categorical rules like we commonly find in the Judeo-Christian tradition, Kantian ethics, or utilitarianism. As such, moral duty dissipates because there are no exact rules to be followed nor obligations to fulfill, instead they are in constant transformation and dependent upon the discretion of the *gongfu* master. One does not have the obligation to uphold any certain precept under all circumstances so that ethical instruction can be evaluated qualitatively and not as matters of fact or as true and false. The agent is allowed freedom from the restrictions of moral obligation. Ethical arguments are then also valued as *good or bad* in respect to how they function in creating a flourishing life, where flourishing just means whatever is good for the constructiveness of worldly harmony and creating overall happiness. In other words, ethical questions are evaluated by asking: does it lead the ethical agent to living a good life or not? Good has no definition here because the goodness in *gongfu* is amoral. In this way, the *gongfu* perspective is very practical and rooted in experience. Simultaneously, it allows the *gongfu* master to use her upmost level of personal creativity rather than conformity.

Following the general notions of Chinese cosmology, the *gongfu* master also characteristically views the world relationally and in the context of its continual transformation. We are intimately interconnected to the flux of the world around us. Instead of a principle, this idea of interconnectedness can be used as *gongfu* knowledge. With this understanding of oneness

at the foundation of the *gongfu* perspective, the agent recognizes how her actions can affect others making ethical decisions steer away from harm. The oneness noted in the Chinese cosmogony of the world forming out of *qi* 氣 creates a robust sense of inclusivity. This inclusivity and impartiality is a reflection of the natural patterns of heaven (*tian* 天). Like *tian*, the *gongfu* master in her ultimate manifestation does not actually have to think about her actions at all, for she has taken the time to cultivate her “spontaneity”, and as such she transcends morality by abandoning the need for contemplation or deliberation and so her actions can be carried out *amorally*. *Tian* does not have to choose, and this is her model; not to follow or conform to, but as a spontaneous agent within nature, as a part of nature, and by allowing her actions to be elicited from her natural dispositions.

This kind of spontaneity still entails that the *gongfu* master follows her natural inclinations after having attuned them to particular skills, views and virtues. This allows the agent to act on her *cultivated* natural dispositions for exactly that reason, because they have been habitually practiced and embodied, allowing her to act spontaneously and not cause harm. In this way, acting for the sake of morality is avoided, and one can act based on a responsiveness to her circumstances and natural affects. Ethical decisions once made out of duty or faith in ritual transform into instincts and are performed spontaneously while simultaneously leaving room for the agent to use her own creativity to accommodate specific circumstances. Thus, reliance on ultimate doctrines and rituals are eventually abandoned, or as described in the *Zhuangzi*, “forgotten”. Because the spontaneity of instinctual and habituated actions is amoral, the *gongfu* master, through such self-cultivation, has the opportunity to guide her spontaneity with her own creativity over time. This allows her to practice discretion when following rules and norms brought about from the natural functioning of a harmonious society.

This description of the *gongfu* master reveals four main components: 1) Skillfulness or effectiveness 2) Acting without having to think about it (spontaneity) 3) Creativity, and 4) Not having to follow rules. We will discuss these four characteristics more clearly through an analysis of Peimin Ni's article *Can bad guys have good gongfu?— A preliminary exploration of gongfu ethics*.

2. Can bad guys have good *gongfu*?: The Specifics of *Gongfu* Ethics

There is a philosophical problem that arises out of the notion of *gongfu* ethics. We can imagine a person who we would not consider moral or ethical, but who still maintains an excellent skill, or *gongfu* virtuosity. This is what makes the goodness in *gongfu* amoral, for one could have any *gongfu* skill but potentially still behave unethically or immorally in other areas of her life, or even abuse her *gongfu* skill to cause harm. Ni's current scholarship in *gongfu* ethics illuminates the relevance of Confucianism today by demonstrating to the Western audience a novel conception of morality through the lens of a *gongfu* master. His analysis of the question "can bad guys have good *gongfu*?" leads him to three answers: yes, no, and an insightful third alternative explaining how a *gongfu* master, insofar as "they still have to invoke morality, are not true *gongfu* masters" (1). Instead, a true *gongfu* master transcends morality because her actions become amoral, exemplifying the value of a cultivated natural disposition to act with ethical spontaneity. Lastly, I would like to acknowledge that although Ni's article is unpublished, he is a leading scholar for *gongfu* ethics, and it is his specific line of thought on the matter to which I intend to develop. Of course, the history of the term *gongfu* throughout Confucianism has its own valuable account, but for the purposes of this paper, Ni's picture is fully comprehensive and

sufficient in my endeavor. Therefore, this paper will address his proposed account of *gongfu* ethics as the main source.

Skillfulness and Effectiveness

An important line of thought throughout this thesis will lie within the separation of *gongfu* ethics and morality. That is to say, we can easily see where *gongfu* and morality do not overlap by understanding that *gongfu* reflects every aspect of life, whereas morality does not. Morality comes from duty, rights and wrongs, and preconceived principles of what it means to be good or bad. For example, we do not hold one without the *gongfu* skill of an articulate vernacular as morally bad. *Gongfu* action is skillful and effective. This amorality allows the agent to make ethical decisions by choosing constructiveness over duty. Ni gives the example of how the martial art skills of Jet Li and Jackie Chan may remain uninterrupted by their moral judgments because the *gongfu* skill and the moral character of a person belong to different categories (2). These two different categories supply the positive response to the question: that yes, bad guys *can* have good *gongfu* because *gongfu* has to do with the art of life whereas morality is about duty. We can be skillful, or have a good *gongfu* virtuosity in almost any aspect of our lives, but that does not necessarily reflect who we are as moral agents. In this way, Ni explains that we understand the “goodness in *gongfu* as amoral, meaning that it is neutral with regard to morality” (2). If Jet Li is not skillful in his personal relationships, assuming we regard personal relationships as a part of the art of life, we might nonetheless still say that he has good *gongfu* in the form of martial arts skills.

Although Ni acknowledges that some do overlap, *gongfu* virtuosities in themselves are still describing only the skill of the action as it is separate from moral implications. Through this

lens, we can see why we would distinguish between one who does something morally “right” for a desired outcome and one who does it because that is just who they are. Regarding the former, we would still say there is an imperfection in her moral character, like one who does volunteer work for praise and glory instead of the goodness of the work itself. Comparatively, we can look to Kant’s distinction between a moral imperative-- an unconditional duty as an end in itself-- and a hypothetical imperative-- a consequential decision done for some other end. According to Ni, the latter, like the amorality of certain *gongfu* skills, also evades any moral implication as we would neither label a person morally good nor bad if, for example, one used the instruction “to be honest” as only to gain another’s trust. “One who uses honesty in this way can be said to be smart, but not morally good, though neither is it morally bad --it is simply amoral, or morally neutral” (3). This example illustrates one sense in which *gongfu* and morality do not overlap, allowing us to distinguish between two different motivations. It separates the instrumental, or the skillful and effective value, from the moral value. However, this categorization is only on an abstract level, whereas in reality and practice we find a different answer.

The negative response to Ni’s question then follows from understanding that just because the good or bad in a *gongfu* skill is theoretically separate from its moral value (it is amoral), it would still seem there are not any moral issues that do not also coincide with a certain *gongfu* skill or virtuosity. This explains the second answer to Ni’s question: that no, bad guys cannot have good *gongfu* because *gongfu* virtuosities and moral virtues are intrinsically connected. He explains, “not only is it hard to think of any moral virtue that does not constitute a *gongfu* virtuosity, it is reasonable to say that all moral virtues are *gongfu* virtuosities that enable a person to live a better life” (5). However, the fact that morality requires *gongfu* does not mean that *gongfu* requires morality. Returning to the example of honesty, we can understand one to have

this characteristic both as a moral virtue and also as the *gongfu* virtuosity to gain another's trust, the latter remaining amoral. In this way, *gongfu* virtuosities and morality are intrinsically connected, but nonetheless still remain separate in two ways.

First, as we have mentioned, there is a level of duty involved in morality that is not present in *gongfu*, this being the reason for the positive response to Ni's question. Second, Ni argues "questions about what is moral will be extensionally equivalent to the amoral question about how to gain respective *gongfu* abilities, but they are still intentionally different" (6). For example, one could shift their perspective of the statue of liberty to be seen as either a landmark or as a work of art. This distinction could also be compared to Kotarbiński's distinction between felicitology (a study of whether an action is conducive to a happy life) and ethics in the strict sense (3).

Ni's sophisticated third alternative is explained through an understanding of the traditional Confucian philosophy of self-cultivation. When one has achieved sagehood, she transcends morality by becoming amoral through ethical spontaneity. This is achieved through cultivating a natural disposition to act spontaneously through embodying certain *gongfu* skills combined with an appreciation for harmonious human relationships. In this way, when one embodies the *gongfu* knowledge that "hurting others is hurting oneself" then she no longer behaves according to any imposed moral doctrine can act spontaneously without causing harm to others (6). Moral actions are performed instinctively because they have been habituated over time, and thus all values of right and wrong are "forgotten". Ni interprets the *Zhuangzi* to conceptualize "forgotten" as meaning the cultivation of one's natural disposition to the level where she no longer considers moral principles and can act spontaneously and creatively without imposed imperatives (7). Similarly, Confucianism's highest aim is "to follow one's heart's

wishes without overstepping the boundaries” and “wandering the arts” (7). Although the means are different, the *Zhuangzi* and Confucianism both advocate the view that acquiring skills can be cultivated to be spontaneous, or acting without having to think about. Further, both views take this to be good. The subtleties and differences between the two views will be discussed further in the coming chapters.

Acting Without Having to Think About It

Now that we have all of Ni’s answers to the question “can bad guys have good *gongfu*?” let us expand on the significance of the third response. The first aspect to be recognized is that our intentions *do* matter, but not in a traditional Kantian sense of good will determining the moral worth of an action. Rather, for the *gongfu* master, one should work to relinquish the need to intentionally do “right” or “wrong”, or in fact *any* forcing or deliberating over moral decisions. In this way, one’s intentions are dissolved on the level of moral duty because she is able to act sincerely and spontaneously. It is important to recognize where intentions play a role in the schema of *gongfu* ethics because it is often strong deliberation that can shift the agent’s perspective from doing good because it is truly who they are to instead only doing good just for the sake of doing good. That is to say, a shift from acting out of the goodness of one’s heart to acting for the sake of moral obligation or duty. The *gongfu* master’s spontaneity is what allows her scope of moral choice to be unadulterated by deliberation and instead reliant upon her responsiveness to her circumstances as an artist of life. She can “act without thinking” like an artist might lose herself in the spontaneous strokes of her paintbrush as she creates a new work.

However, because any character traits, or *gongfu* skills, on an abstract level are also intrinsically connected to their corresponding practical implications, it is reasonable to say that one who is not yet a *gongfu* master must also consider these potential consequences. Jackie Chan

has to understand the power of his martial arts skills on a moral level in order to keep him from causing harm. Thus, it becomes important to take the moral aspects of a *gongfu* skill into consideration when performing any action, even though the action itself is carried out spontaneously for the true *gongfu* master. For even if we take the act of honesty as a *gongfu* skill in gaining trust, those affected by our actions are what make questions regarding the action morally loaded. This is precisely why it is crucial to have the *gongfu* knowledge that hurting others hurts oneself, which is fundamentally an understanding of an interdependent self. This is different from a principle of knowledge because it is derived from constructiveness and effectiveness towards living a flourishing life, and does not claim any objective truth. It is *gongfu* knowledge one can choose to embody.

Ames points out that instead of our tendency towards linking morality as having to do with what is “right or wrong” and “good or bad”, from the Confucian perspective

instead of pre-existing norms we discover a phenomenology of experience that serves as a resource for determining what it would mean to act in such a way as to enhance our relations. That is, we have to ask: What will make this situation comprised of these particular relations better, and what will make it worse? Confucian role ethics takes the substance of morality to be nothing more or less than positive growth in the constitutive relations of any particular situation. (“Role Ethics” 258)

The *gongfu* master can take the knowledge of an interdependent self and excel at it because oneness is a metaphysical claim, and *gongfu* instruction can take on different metaphysical claims, meaning that a metaphysical theory can be used as a *gongfu* device in the pursuit of creating a flourishing life. From this, the *gongfu* knowledge that follows is that morality becomes intrinsically involved in everything we do because our actions are constantly connected to the world at large as a relational self. This idea that morality is an aspect of every part of our lives has long been a critique of Confucian ethics, and one which has motivated the Confucian-Daoist complementarity approach of this paper.

This intrinsic connection may also suggest something like an Aristotelian version of ethics where one cannot clearly distinguish between the amoral and the moral. However, through the *gongfu* approach, there is relief from the need to tread carefully or overthink everyday decisions. A relief from deliberation and worry of intent is precisely where the agent opens the opportunity of full creativity as an artist of life. Ni points out that the etymological evolution of the term “virtue” has caused it to be loaded with moral implications in modern times, but the literal translations for the Greek terms “*ethike*” and “*arete*” are “artistic skill” and “excellence in function” respectively (3). Thus, he concludes “the connection between *arete* and moral obligation is, in the case of Aristotelian ethics, supplied by Aristotle’s teleological metaphysics: “we have a moral obligation to cultivate our virtues because they help us to live the life that, given our metaphysical nature, we are supposed to live” (4). Through *gongfu* instruction though, this does not entail always deciding what is right or wrong in any absolute way. Rather than fulfilling our highest purpose or “telos”, the *gongfu* master navigates through ethical choices by noticing which paths create the most flourishing life, and allowing for constant transformation.

Understanding morality as a part of every action we take is a way to improve the quality of one’s life with the respective *gongfu* skills, not a means to cause stress. Instead, it is a means to lead the ethical agent to an amoral understanding because there is nothing to distinguish moral actions from non-moral actions, shifting what might first sound like a burden to a relief. Channeling traditional views of morality through the scope of *gongfu* instruction allows one to see morality as different from just choices between good or bad, and right or wrong. By centering on the quality of life, morality becomes a part of the oneness we share with all things. It might sound like a lot of pressure to think of morality pervading throughout our everyday choices, but that may only be because most moral discussions in ethics tend to be associated with

heavy cases like murder, theft, and torture. However, morality does not have to be so daunting, it can be light, enchanting, and certainly motivating when involving matters of less gravity.

This mood is most clearly expressed throughout the *Zhuangzi*. Skepticism in the *Zhuangzi* seems to be in line with an amoral perspective, although some might argue that the text is not even about morality at all. While I won't argue for one side or the other, I will say that the *Zhuangzi* is at least full of stories that can aid in our conversation about ethical spontaneity. We can find a good example in chapter 33 of the Miscellaneous Chapters recalling Shen Dao who was able to follow the wind of the ancient Art of the Course. He is described as:

Unconstrained and unattached, undertaking no moral practices, he critiqued the world's high regard for the sages. By pounding and hammering off all his sharp protuberances, rounding himself off, he was able to roll and swirl along with anything that came his way. Abandoning both right and wrong, he managed to avoid entanglement. Unguided by cleverness or calculation, ignoring the before and after, he simply towered alone in his place. (Ziporyn 122)

The *Zhuangzi* clearly has an uncanny way of making the daunting world of morality an enchanting one. Awareness of the interconnectedness between ourselves, all others, and nature also softens the gravity of viewing every action as having moral worth and thus consequences. This realization in the *Zhuangzi* 2:31 assumes the same kind of oneness with all things that is grounded in Chinese cosmology. It is stated "heaven and earth are born together with me, and the ten thousand things and I are one" (Ziporyn 15). The *Zhuangzi* here is not imposing moral doctrines on our everyday decisions, but rather recognizing the self as interdependent with all, and acting accordingly. In this way, morality becomes as Ni advocates, a natural disposition created by embodying the *gongfu* knowledge that hurting others in turn hurts oneself (while this of course is not a direct interpretation from the *Zhuangzi*). Although this may on the surface appear as just a self-interested motive, it is a fundamentally different understanding of the self, it is an understanding of oneness and correlative thinking. This oneness is crucial for the *gongfu*

master in order to act spontaneously. Understanding the self in this way allows for one to act with creative spontaneity while also avoiding harm because, at the core, it is who she is.

Returning to Ni's paper "can bad guys have good *gongfu*?", we find another example of acting without thinking about it from chapter 38 of the *DaoDeJing* 道德經. This passage also illuminates the difference between one who acts for the sake of morality and one who acts morally because it is just who she is. The passage goes:

A truly virtuous person is not aware of his virtues,
and is therefore virtuous.
A not so virtuous person tries to get hold onto virtues,
and is therefore not virtuous. (7)

This quote emphasizes the importance of spontaneity, or lack of *intentionally* embodying certain virtues for the sake of morality. Ni subsequently mentions the emphasis advocated by both the *Zhuangzi* and the *Great Learning* to understand the cultivation of *gongfu* through decreasing our implementation of morality in our actions and in turn increasing "the realm in which our *gongfu* cultivation can generate harmonious human relationships" (7).

Through cultivating one's natural disposition as such, acting morally becomes as instinctive as one may "hate a bad smell and love a beautiful color" (The *Great Learning* 6, Ni 6). This leads us to better understand and appreciate the value of this natural disposition which lies in the ease of circumstantial responsiveness. Even though morality on a conceptual level could be considered as involved in all of our actions, the *gongfu* master is not burdened by constant doctrines of right and wrong that could lead to acting morally merely for the sake of morality itself. In the long term, the understanding of morality being a part of everything we do could actually lead to morality becoming obsolete because there will be nothing to distinguish it from our everyday actions, as mentioned above. This is the true culmination of the *gongfu* master; one in which she has the freedom to creatively act with sincerity and spontaneity.

Creativity

Now that we have a clearer picture of the *gongfu* master and *gongfu* ethics, I want to concentrate on the idea of what it means to cultivate *gongfu* spontaneity. One of the most important aspects of the kind of spontaneity emphasized in the *gongfu* approach is the creativity available to the ethical agent. This idea stems from the Confucian reliance on *li* (禮 ritual propriety) which emphasizes the importance of rituals and embodiment of virtues. The *gongfu* master then applies her creativity as an artist of life to cultivate *li* and eventually live through ethical spontaneity. Ni incorporates both Confucian and Daoist notions of spontaneity in his *gongfu* ethics, however we see most of his influence coming from the Confucian side where one works over a long period of time to embody certain virtues and perform them spontaneously. I would like to expand on both Confucian and Daoist versions of spontaneity in order to demonstrate that there might not indeed be an absolute division of “sides”. Moreover, the differences are especially blurred when applied through *gongfu* instruction. The subtle differences between Confucian long-term cultivated spontaneity and Daoist infant-like spontaneity are rather a distinction in emphasis, and herein lies one aspect of their complementarity explained by the notion of *ziran*.

Unlike relying on cultivating virtues to the level where one can act spontaneously, the Daoist version models the spontaneity of an infant. Chapter 28 of the DDJ says:

知其雄，守其雌，為天下谿。為天下谿，常德不離，復歸於嬰兒。

雄，先之屬；雌，後之屬也。知為天下之先也，必後也，是以聖人後其身而身先也。谿不求物而物自歸之，嬰兒不用智而合自然之智。

Know its masculinity, protect its femininity, act as the world's valley. Act as the world's valley, and constant De (virtue) will not leave you, and you will return home to the state of infancy.

Masculinity, the category of being first; femininity, the category of being later. To know how to act as the world's first, you must be last, therefore the sage puts himself behind and then himself first. A valley does not seek things, but of themselves-so the things return to it. Infants do not employ wisdom, but rather complete their wisdom of themselves. (My translation)

We see the Daoist notion of *ziran* 自然 used here, commonly translated as spontaneity, but literally translated as “so of itself”. It is a concept frequently presented throughout texts like the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*, often describing the spontaneous characteristic of one's original state in the context of nature as a whole. *Ziran* is an aspect of nature that we can embody to become more harmonious with the natural flux of the world. Instead of a spending one's lifetime working towards the embodiment of certain virtues so that one may act with ethical spontaneity, *ziran* in the *Laozi* relies on a return to one's natural affects prior to cultivation, or a “fasting of the mind” as it is referred in the *Zhuangzi*. This is why examples of an infant and uncarved wood untainted by the constructs of convention and norms describe the Daoist sage. This line of thought demonstrates how instead of opposing one another, the creativity exhibited by the Confucian “artist of life” practicing with the *gongfu* perspective can complement the creativity of the Daoist infant-like sage by embodying *ziran*. We will come to understand this through further exploration of this notion of spontaneity.

Ziran can be taken as relating to both nature and spontaneity and is translated as both depending on the interpreter. Liu Xiaogan points out that we cannot rely on one single English or Chinese term to fully express what is meant by *ziran*, and advocates for its translation as “humanistic naturalness” which he describes as “neither the nature of Heaven and Earth, nor the nature of physics, nor the nature of zoology, nor a state in which beasts devour each other, nor a primitive epoch, nor something that opposes culture and civilization” (71). While I do not disagree with than of these defining characteristics, I find the term “humanistic naturalness”

lacking. Within its usage as spontaneity, the term seems to more comprehensively encompass Daoist thought as a whole by understanding its specific connection to nature. Karyn Lai explains that “*ziran* as spontaneity focuses on one particular aspect of the natural world, the uncontrived movements and changes that occur within the natural environment” (330). For example, passage 51 of the *Laozi* says,

Therefore
 the ten thousand things honor the Dao
 and cherish the De [efficacy].
 Honoring the Dao,
 cherishing the De:
 none is rewarded for this,
 so it happens constantly “self-so.” (Moeller 121)

If we were to interpret *ziran* (self-so) as nature, it would suggest a separation between what stimulates Dao and De, and the stimulator. However, Dao and De are honored by the ten thousand things because it is their *spontaneous* condition, it is their “self-so” disposition.

In 德充符 - The Seal of Virtue Complete of the *Zhuangzi*, he and Huizi share in a conversation about the potential for man to act without passions or desires (*qing* 情), a question to which Zhuangzi affirms is indeed possible. When Huizi asks how this can be so, for we deem man as man precisely because of these passions and desires. Zhuangzi replies,

道與之貌，天與之形，惡得不謂之人？[...]是非吾所謂情也。吾所謂無情者，言人之不以好惡內傷其身，常因自然而不益生也。

The Dao gives him his personal appearance (and powers); Heaven gives him his bodily form; how should we not call him a man? [...] 'You are misunderstanding what I mean by passions and desires. What I mean when I say that he is without these is, that this man does not by his likings and dislikings do any inward harm to his body - he always pursues his course without effort, and does not (try to) increase his (store of) life.'

We see the use of 自然 here describing the Dao that connects heaven and man, and that which allows man to disregard his personal likes and dislikes (*hao* 好 and *e* 惡) in order to pursue his

own unique course spontaneously (*ziran*). This connection between heaven and man is central to understanding *ziran* as spontaneity instead of nature. Nature alone fails to capture this connection, and falls short of expressing man's potential to find this link. The self that embodies *ziran* in ethical terms is interdependent and one with all things while maintaining originality and uniqueness. That is to say, we express ourselves organically as unique individuals, but our interconnectedness remains a filter on our ethical scope—we may behave according to our inner heart and natural affects, but those upon which we act can only be those which occur spontaneously as a reaction to our circumstances. Because of this link, we can act out of our natural affects and remain harmonious with others and the rest of nature. Embodying *ziran* allows one's actions to avoid disrupting social relationships and even beyond the human realm. In this way, one has complete freedom to take ethical deliberation as an expression of one's creativity.

The embodiment of *ziran* preserves what Ni calls following the path of morality “simply because this is who you are” because it is grounded in one's individuality (7). It emphasizes the value of one's natural affects within the realm of ethics. This link is also what is essential for the *gongfu* master to cultivate spontaneity and conceptualize the self as interdependent while still employing artistry and creating one's own unique path. For if the *gongfu* master does not have the fundamental relational self, then her natural inclinations might instead guide her to acting selfishly, ignorantly, and destructively. This very point is also pivotal in recognizing the complementarity between the Confucian and Daoist notions of spontaneity. Note that the relational self here is used as a *gongfu* device. The *gongfu* master himself would not dispute about whether we are indeed relational or individualistic, this is the job of a metaphysician. Instead, he might ask how would either conception shape our way of life and what kinds of

effects would they lead to. The *gongfu* approach allows us to view metaphysical claims and evaluate them accordingly. Therefore, a *gongfu* master could embody *ziran* and thus the relational self that is foundational to it, using it as a tool for creating a flourishing life. Our conception of *ziran* as spontaneity here can in turn allow the *gongfu* master to practice the utmost creativity by taking on the *gongfu* skills that come naturally to someone prior to the influence of one's environment.

One who has embodied *ziran* is presented with myriad creative possibilities in the same way Ni emphasizes the creative power of the *gongfu* master. For both, the ways in which these possibilities are expressed is grounded in respect for others and all things. Harmonious human relationships create the crux of both the Confucian and Daoist versions of ethical spontaneity as a *gongfu* master and one with an embodied *ziran* respectively. Further, the emphasis on allowing the utmost freedom for the spontaneity of others expands the individual's ability to deliberate without boundaries and beyond norms while still maintaining those that arise spontaneously. This extends one's platform for creativity into all dimensions of life including the social, political, scientific, and metaphysical realms. In this way, how each individual views the world can be drastically different yet intimately connected and harmonious

Not Having to Follow Rules

The *gongfu* approach in Confucian ethics uses examples and rituals as key for the *gongfu* master, such as those learned through music and poetry, mourning rituals, or how to dress for a particular occasion. *Li* 禮(ritual propriety) is one of Confucianism's greatest assets and clearest

guides to ethical deliberation. It is especially important that these rituals be performed with reverence and in recognition of their inherent worth so as not to blindly obey. “The Master said, “When we say ‘rituals, rituals,’ are we merely speaking about jade and silk? When we say ‘music, music,’ are we merely speaking about bells and drums?” (*Analects* 17:11, Ni’s translation 266). If a ritual or a duty was performed without truly understanding the significance, its meaning is lost and remains only a form of expression. In ethical deliberation, this means that the agent looks at which rituals or actions might bring about the most flourishing life. However, in the early stages of one’s cultivation prior to sagehood, the agent is to trust tradition and follow it without using their own judgment as much.

It is not until further cultivation and deliberate embodiment of virtues that she can act upon her natural dispositions spontaneously. In fact, Confucius himself did not reach this stage until the age of 70 (*Analects* 2.4, Ni 80). From this, Ni draws the conclusion that boundaries are necessary for cultivation. He explains,

Once the instruction becomes embodied abilities, the person will reach a stage where she can use her discretion about whether or not to follow the standard protocols. While a *rule* is *imposed* upon the agent (whether by others or by the agent’s own will) as a standard of right and wrong in itself, the *gongfu* approach takes it as a *method* of cultivation, which becomes the very condition for the agent to master the art of living. (“Can Bad” 9)

What separates those on the path of self-cultivation from those who have already achieved it is the privilege to use discretion (*quan* 權) as a *gongfu* master when it comes to these norms, boundaries, and conventions. The uncultivated person then does not, at least in the beginning, rely on their own judgment about what promotes a flourishing life because ritual takes precedence.

The Daoist alternative is through embodying *ziran* as spontaneity. This way, one is less focused on ritual and more on the natural flow of the self within nature, connecting the moral agent to all things, and thus “forgetting”. Forgetting in this sense is expressed in the *Zhuangzi* 2:45 as returning to our natural state. “Forget what year it is, forget what should or should not be. Let yourself be jostled and shaken by the boundlessness—for that is how to be lodged securely in the boundlessness” (Ziporyn 20). However, it is important to address the deeper distinction at hand, that being the underlying conceptions of human nature at work between Confucianism and Daoism. When I refer to following the natural flow of the self within nature, I am not making a claim of whether human nature is naturally good nor bad. If that were the case, then a Confucian like Xunzi would argue that since human nature is bad, one needs moral cultivation in order to avoid harm. However, the skills of a *gongfu* master embodying *ziran* are amoral, which is what avoids this challenge to my argument. This will be further elaborated on in chapter three in my discussion of how the skills presented in the *Zhuangzi* are also amoral *gongfu* skills.

It is important not to confuse a focus on the natural flow of the self within nature as akin to *following* or *conforming* to nature, for then it would be no different from morality. Nonetheless, this approach does not suggest that there is no room for rules, laws, or rituals. It is actually quite the opposite. As Lai explains, “the value of the Daoist insight on virtue lies in this fundamental emphasis on recognizing the other’s distinctiveness, separateness, interdependence, and spontaneity” (336). This kind of respect allows norms to arise spontaneously as they are conducive and effective to the harmony of human relationships. Within this dynamic social harmony is created through trusting the norms that arise naturally to maintain social harmony. In this way, norms arise by respecting our differences. This is what I mean by a difference in emphasis or priority of spontaneity over ritual showing the complementarity in this Confucian-

Daoist approach. Norms that arise such as shaking hands as a greeting or giving way to alighting passengers on a train happen spontaneously out of a natural responsive respect for others. We do not have to give up ritual for spontaneity. Instead, it is precisely because of recognizing and promoting the spontaneity within others to flourish that allows this ethic to have room for the kind of norms, laws, and rituals that promote a flourishing life for all. Nonetheless, there is a strong emphasis on questioning these norms and accepting their transformation over time.

This kind of ethic is described by Lai as a “*ziran-wuwei*” (自然—無為) ethic. *Wuwei*, literally meaning “non-action”, is another central tenant of the *DaoDeJing*. Lai explains that the ethical significance of the term lies in its “open-ended challenge to promote spontaneity” (333). In regard to rules, she explains “although the *ziran-wuwei* ethic encourages stepping outside the square, it is not incompatible with moral norms and principles. It may be combined with principles such as that of non-maleficence, or even incorporate consequentialist considerations” (336). This is right because it would seem that our social world is incapable of functioning harmoniously without them. As long as it is equally important to continuously challenge, question, and allow for the evolution of such conventions, or their own unique *ziran*, we can continue to use them. I would even go as far as to say that human trust may dissipate without such norms, and may instill fear for social interaction. To live without any principles or norms would be akin to a blind faith just as those critiqued for believing in an all-powerful, omniscient and omnipotent God.

Furthermore, *ziran* and *wuwei* are two notoriously difficult practices to embody, as Edward Slingerland has explored in his book *Trying Not To Try*. We cannot rely on the entirety

of humanity to be able to fully embody such an ethic since spontaneity has no clear path for individuals to follow.

All of these thinkers [Confucian and Daoist] tell us that, if we can just get into a state of complete spontaneity and unselfconsciousness, everything else will work out. We will be in harmony with Heaven. We will possess *de* [德], a charismatic power that brings social and political success, and we'll move through the physical world with supernatural ease. They all confront us with the problem, though, of how we can consciously try to be sincere or effortless. We are being lured to get into a state that, by its very nature, seems unattainable though conscious striving. This is the paradox of *wu-wei*—the problem of how you can try not to try. (168)

In the final chapter, Slingerland tells us that this paradox is very real, and that is why there is no absolutely foolproof solution to the problem. We are a diverse species and different strategies suit different temperaments. One's age and circumstances play a role in which strategy might work best. "For instance, some believe that our present cultural moment calls for a healthy dose of Confucianism. Perceptive thinkers throughout history have seen the Confucian strategy of creating a new, artificial nature as crucial for civilized life" (200). Slingerland is right, different people require different solutions at different times, and people may even fall in and out of *wuwei*. This paper only intends to demonstrate one of the ways in which many of these approaches can be connected and complement one another.

For the Daoist, the ideal moral standpoint coming from the perspective of an infant on the surface sounds great. There is a charm in the innocence and naivety of children which arouses the adult mind that has been convoluted with norms and convention. Choosing which conventions or ethical doctrines are right can cause stress which leads towards a tendency to desire a fixed perspective wherein one finds security and stability. The infant, on the other hand, doesn't have to deal with this. However, it is very difficult to imagine an infant who has a fully embodied a relational sense of self or correlative view of interconnectedness. An infant's world

is simply too small, and it is not until later in life that one can have a grounding of the self as part of a bigger whole. Arguably, the infant needs guidance and examples in order to understand themselves as interconnected to others and the natural world, including non-sentient beings. While we might often be in awe of the natural compassion demonstrated by children, it is also generally just as evident that their selfish desires can control their decision-making processes. Even if we can say children do tend toward a compassionate demeanor most of the time, the kind of interconnectedness grounded in *ziran* doesn't seem to be fully consummate at birth. Without this foundation, one cannot "transcend" mortality in the same way that a *gongfu* master can.

For this reason, it would seem a Confucian cultivated spontaneity would be of more use during infancy and throughout adolescence. For example, one growing up in a country torn by civil war may experience a rift in their view of oneness that needs repairing. Similarly, children growing up in a sheltered environment without the exposure to cultural diversity may also have difficulties accepting oneness with those who seem so radically different from themselves. Moreover, it might seem natural for a child to choose immediate gratification, like bingeing on a box of candy in gluttony instead of eating a bowl of rice for sustainment. As such, with education, the natural desires of the child will mature to help them flourish through an understanding of relational thinking. This kind of cultivation demonstrates the value of the Confucian spontaneity.

Nonetheless, it seems then that both versions of spontaneity are necessary and desirable for one to truly embody *ziran*. Because *ziran* is grounded in allowing for one's inner affects to be one's guide (those affects that arise spontaneously), and knowing that our inner affects as a child are at least sometimes selfish and limited, each approach holds its place. A sage grounded in the

kind of oneness understood through *ziran* will be able to question and use her discretion through *gongfu* instruction to make ethical choices.

3. The Importance of Oneness in *Ziran* 自然

The conception of oneness grounded in most Chinese philosophies demonstrates the value of a relational sense of self. As Roger Ames explains, the Confucian vision of the consummate person is

grounded in a distinctive, relational conception of role-bearing persons—an understanding of person that stands in stark contrast to the foundational individualism that began in classical Greece and, evolving over the centuries, has in one guise or another grounded and underlies much of current ethical, social and political theory. (“Role Ethics” xiv)

Along the same vein, *ziran* also developed out of a robust sense of oneness. I will briefly outline this idea of oneness within the context of Chinese cosmology, and demonstrate its importance and influence on *ziran* to show the overarching theme of a relational self as foundational knowledge for the *gongfu* master.

The Relational Self in Chinese Cosmology

Early classics such as The Book Of Changes (易經 *Yi Jing*) present the idea that the universe as we know it formed out of an undifferentiated reservoir of *qi* 氣 that eventually separated and coalesced into distinct patterns, images, and shapes, until there were individual things (*qi* 器). The Daoists developed a similar evolutionary theory emphasizing the world emerging from an original state of nothing (*wu* 無), or rather “no-thing-ness”—what Ivanhoe deems “a state in which there were no discrete and individualized entities” (234). Alongside

these views arose the conception of the world as a web of *li* 理 (principles/patterns) that describes everything as an interconnected system akin to that of an ecosystem. The heavy influence of Buddhism on neo-Confucianism then brought these metaphysical beliefs a step further by seeing each individual thing in the world as containing all of the *li* in the universe—or the “all in each” idea (Ivanhoe 235). It is important to note the non-anthropocentric foundation of this view. We are not only all one as humans, but one with all things including non-human creatures and non-sentient things. Likewise, unlike traditional Western conceptions of spontaneity *ziran* does not presuppose a human/nonhuman dichotomy (Bruya 207).

Because of the evolutionary process of this cosmology, Chinese philosophical inquiry is inseparable from an idea of oneness. Whether it be that we all came from *qi* 氣, were all at one point undistinguishable entities, or that we are all connected by *li* 理, the point is that we are deeply interconnected and this has significant implications for the self and ethical theories that follow. Ivanhoe explains,

From the perspective of *li*, our oneness with the world is complete and universal and expresses a particular structure and order; from the perspective of our physical embodiment, this unity gets manifested in our being “one body” with the world... We are moved by aspects of Nature because in a fairly direct and intricate way *we are one* with it; we are committed to and admire various cultures and traditions because *these are parts of* individual lives and the common heritage of humanity. (237- 241)

Here Ivanhoe expresses our oneness as connected to the way we are “moved by aspects of nature”. It is exactly that we are *moved by* nature, and not that we *follow* nature, that allows the self to remain original and unique while still acting under the paradigm of interconnectedness between the self and all things. Without this oneness at the foundation of an embodied *ziran*, the self deliberately strives and moves by force instead of moving with ease when acting in accordance with the norms, principles, and conventions that harmonize all things. Oneness

allows the self to perform and deliberate as its own unique entity while not conforming or following any preset version of what nature might mean. The norms and conventions I am referring to here and those that simply arise out of cultural and social interactions, like shaking hands and understandings of personal space. These norms can also be in constant flux and evolution.

We can look to the concept of *ganying* 感應 to better understand the self as relational, or coextensive with the universe. As Lai explains,

The phrase *ganying* captures the philosophy of correlative thinking, which posits intrinsic relatedness between all things and beings, covering a wide sweep of all existence including cosmic forces, all species, and natural objects, and even aspects of human life such as government. (Lai 327)

Correlative thinking as such grounds ethical spontaneity by allowing the agent to act spontaneously without disrupting the harmony of nature. *Ziran* within the *Daodejing* extensively emphasizes that we as humans should not interfere with the spontaneity of others, both human and non-human. Nonetheless, for the interdependent self, ethical choices hinge on one's immediate responses, and so long as the embodied *ziran* is predicated with oneness, these choices should unfold with respect, sensitivity, and compassion for others. This allows the individual to navigate through the world harmoniously as one with it. As discussed above, the problem with this embodied *ziran* during infancy is that it doesn't seem immediately evident in the behavior of a child, making the cultivation of an embodied *ziran* something that comes as one learns to also understand herself relationally. This is not claiming that all children are not *ziran*, maybe they are and maybe they are not. It seems that the spontaneity of a child is just constrained by a lack of a full understanding of oneness, but it could be that they have lost it due

to their environment. Without this relational self is at the foundation of spontaneity, one is not able to act upon her natural dispositions without potentially causing harm.

This requires a further shift in how one sees causal relations more broadly. Bruya points out,

the difference between *ganying* and straightforward efficient causality is that *ganying* presupposes a sensitivity that can be aroused. The wind is not drawn unilaterally by an external force; rather, the holes respond to the wind by helping them flow along. Perhaps it is best to say that there is simply a draw, and both the wind and sounds arise as a result. (216)

What Bruya is referring to here is a kind of fluid mechanics where the world is viewed in terms of dynamic systems rather than discrete objects. One who is *ziran* acts based on and as a co-creator in these natural systems. Actions are elicited from the agent according to specific circumstances and one is moved by the uniqueness of each situation.

Imagine a world without absolute principles and instead an ethic of spontaneity that arises out of natural dispositions as we have begun to explore. Would the resulting society be chaotic and full of individuals acting only for themselves? I don't think it would be. Although *ziran* promotes a high level of freedom and non-interference, it does not advocate complete self-determination (Lai 335). Self-determination refers to one acting only for oneself and without a relational view of the self. It is precisely because of the grounding of the self as interdependent and oneness that this freedom can be executed without complete chaos. With this understanding, respect for others as an extension of oneself limits the possibility of the agent's spontaneous actions to tend towards destruction or harmfulness.

The self that is referred to is never divorced from a wider, interactive context; it is always assumed to persist within an organic web of mutual influence, and because of this one cannot conceive of an egoistic or deviant form of Daoist self-causation. There is no sense in Daoist context, of either atomistic or individualistic perspective of agency. (Bruya 211)

If one's regard was only for her benefit, and she had no sense of being part of a greater whole, then her natural affects might not be a reliable resource from which to make ethical choices. It is because of correlative thinking, *ganying*, and oneness that the agent is free to act spontaneously within the dynamic system of fluid mechanics.

It is important to note, however, that this is not suggesting there is a set metaphysics behind *gongfu* ethics. Although this may seem contradictory as oneness is a metaphysical claim, we are describing the self here as it is understood with an embodied *ziran* where oneness is at the foundation. *Gongfu* instruction is different. As was explained earlier, the *gongfu* orientation can take on different metaphysical interpretations as different ways for achieving the same goal, such as Mengzi and Xunzi who were both considered Confucians with opposing views about human nature. This again demonstrates the priority of *gongfu* ethics to explore deliberation based on “how” rather than “what”. *Ziran* here is a *gongfu* virtuosity that can be embodied by the *gongfu* master as an essential skill to cultivate and interpret through her creative path in life.

4. How *Ziran* Manifests Itself—How Will People Actually Act?

Another aspect of Lai's interpretation of *ziran* is that it entails *wu-wei* 無為 (non-action), which takes *ziran* from the metaphysical to the practical. In other words, to embody *ziran* explains the abstract process, and then to be *wuwei* is completing it in practice. Since this section is taking into consideration the ways *ziran* can manifest in the world, *wuwei* is essential to our discussion. Lai explains, “the commitment to augment the spontaneity of individuals necessitates the application of methods that are sensitive to it. This is the Daoist ethic of *ziran-wuwei*” (334). Although Lai uses examples about applying this ethic in the political world, my approach in this paper is to confront common ethical problems one might run into when in search of living a good

life. If we understand spontaneity to include avoiding interference with the spontaneity of others, with an emphasis on reevaluating conventions and norms, then the active aspect of *wuwei* brings one to an ethic without deeming anything as morally right or wrong.

The point of the *Daodejing* is to reject all forms of “deeming” that are conditioned by conventional values and norms. According to this argument, to *wuwei* is to act without deeming—to act in a manner that is not conditioned by, or restricted to, conventional norms and values. This applies both to one’s treatment of others as well as to one’s own expressions. (Lai 333)

For this reason, Lai’s interpretation of *Daodejing* 63 is right: 為無為 *wei wu wei* as “act in a way that does not require others to adhere to convention” (333).

This section will explore specific examples and problems that arise from cultivating this kind of spontaneity through the scope of a *gongfu* master. I will attempt to answer the question, how much should the spontaneous reactions of *gongfu* be cultivated? Let’s begin with a quote from Lai expressing some of the practical implications,

At the practical level, *wuwei* ethical action is a response to the immediacy of the situation and to the needs of the interdependent other in situations. The implications arising from this concept of ethics are exciting and profound. Allowing for spontaneity in the other is a much riskier exercise than one that relies more substantially on norms and expected behaviors. Yet, a spontaneous response—and the allowance for it—is a true exercise in ethical behavior, as compared with one which works within the boundaries of convention. (336)

While spontaneous reactions are a true testament to one’s natural ethical dispositions, this kind of an ethic poses the risk of inconsistency and the clashing of differing views. When making ethical choices, one relies far less on prior knowledge and experience, or shared principles. Instead, the agent could behave in whichever way he or she naturally reacts for that specific situation at that specific moment in time. She will be moved by the natural flux of the world and react to the current situation with ease, leaving her guilt-free for whichever consequences come about. But, how can she really *trust* her natural dispositions not to lead to harming herself and/or

others? How can she know they will guide her to a good life? Ni's approach to answering this question is through the metaphor of *gongfu* as an art—how does an artist trust her natural dispositions for the creation of art? The artist may feel stress or pressure from external factors like money or time, but an ideal piece should flow from her inner heart. The artist then has no choice but to just trust whatever results from her natural motivations and inclinations, allowing her work to almost create itself. This is similar to the skill stories found in the *Zhuangzi*, namely Cook Ding's mastery of butchery, and will be discussed further in chapter 3.

Another part of resolving this issue lies within one's perspective of time. Taking the patterns of nature as cyclical puts one's perspective of time into question. Maybe you have heard someone say "all we have is right now" in an effort to demonstrate our inability to change the past as well to know the future. Time, though, is a socially constructed concept. We have created organized time in order to make sense of the patterns of the world and manage our social interactions. All that we really know is that the past is gone and the future is unknown. So, if we are spending our lives worrying about what could happen or basing all of our decisions off of what has happened, we are losing the opportunities of the present moment by not recognizing its potential. Another common phrase for staying present goes "life happens while you're making plans". If we can at least accept that each circumstance is unique, and moreover constantly changing, it makes sense to let ethical deliberations be guided by the present, however fleeting it may seem.

This is also an aspect of the kind of fluid mechanics referred to previously, as well as intricately woven into the concept of the self in Confucianism. Roger Ames' work in explaining Confucian role ethics describes the self in terms of the sum of one's roles in consonance with

those around him, and also as a process—thus coining human beings as human *becomings*. He explains,

with human nature, as with principles and virtue, we are inclined to default to a retrospective causal or teleological explanation rather than provide a more holistic prospective, contextual, and processive account of what it means to *become* a human... It is believed by some scholars that free agency and moral responsibility require the isolation of individuals from their relationships by positing such a definition of what it *is* to be human, a ready-made definition of human *being* or guiding teleological hand that in fact truncates any robust existential notion of agency or responsibility. (“Role Ethics” 122)

Nonetheless, I will certainly admit that our inner hearts may not always lead us to act in a way that allows our lives to outwardly flourish, namely because it is so difficult to correctly identify and interpret one’s true natural affects. There are certain instances when what one *really* wants or how one *really* feels are highly complex deliberations and uneasily determined. There is a famous story in the Mencius about King Xuan of Qi. The king is horrible at his job and full of selfish desires, causing his people to suffer the consequences. He initiates wars only for the praise and glory of a triumph, he spends too much time hunting in his own personal game park, and he enjoys partying with excessive alcohol and women. Mencius strategically advises the king by demonstrating that what he believes are his natural spontaneous affects are, in fact, not his *true* natural spontaneous affects. Mencius learned of a time when the king experienced compassion for an ox who was supposed to have been slaughtered. Upon seeing the terrified look on the ox’s face, the king couldn’t bear to see it slaughtered and demanded it be saved with a lamb in its place. Mencius explained to the king

the feeling that you had when you saw the ox—this feeling alone is sufficient to enable you to become a true king. The common people all thought that you begrudged the additional expense of the ox, but I knew for certain that it was because you could not bear to see its suffering... The motive behind your action is the very means by which one attains compassion. You saw the ox; you never saw the lamb. The attitude of the gentleman toward animals is this: having seen them alive, he cannot bear to see them die;

having heard their cries, he cannot bear to eat their flesh. That is why the gentleman keeps his distance from the kitchen... That the common people are not cared for is because your kindness is not directed toward them. Therefore, your failure to become a true king is due to a refusal to act, not an inability to act. (Mencius 1A7, Slingerland 123-25)

The king is brought to better understand his natural affects through the guidance of Mencius, but it is still hard to determine whether or not he really came to that realization spontaneously, or came to it in order to save face.

In his article “The *Mengzi* in the Context of Recently Excavated Texts” Perkins explains,

King Xuan of Qi is an excellent example of someone without a fixed commitment, reacting erratically to whatever he comes across – feeling compassion for an ox led to slaughter because he happens to see it, but feeling nothing for the unseen sheep sent in its place, or the people living in misery (1A7). The fact that *Mengzi* emphasizes extending the affects themselves rather than forming a stable commitment probably reflects his greater reliance on natural reactions over deliberate effort. (“Excavated Texts” 8)

This story is an expression of how our environment and social norms can be a part of the *ziran-wuwei* ethic as they are naturally elicited from what is already within us. For even if the king did not really want let go of his party lifestyle and other selfish desires, it is probably at least what he thought he wanted at the time he was speaking with Mencius, and moreover, what preserved social harmony. Along the same lines, Manual Im thinks that it is a mistake to think that Mencius is similar to Aristotelian virtue ethics in assuming the perfectibility of emotional responses through habituation; a claim in contrast to Nivison (1). Further, Im argues that nor does Mencius *require* this perfecting in order to deem an agent virtuous. Then, like Perkins, Im argues that “on the Mencian view of emotions, one is able to feel compassion at will in certain circumstances” (3). This falls in line with the considerations in this paper where human nature, as mentioned above, are not of direct concern. The skills of the *gongfu* master as an artist of life are amoral. An interesting look on this from Allinson stems from the metaphysical standpoint arguing that “every nature must be itself. Its essence cannot be not to be itself or it would net even be in the

first place” (33). If we take this to be the case, then again, our nature can be just as it is without judging it morally. He also points out the arguments against Mencius claiming that human’s natural inclinations are good only because they have been conditioned by culture.

Through the nurturing of our parents, society, and our environment as a whole, we are shaped to embody certain dispositions that may either help us or harm us. As Allinson points out, in any study of human nature, the “problem of culture” arises, such that “every human nature taken as a datum is already influenced by some culture. Every investigator is influence by some culture even if she or he could come upon any pure experimental datum” (32). Further, how are we to distinguish between what was originally within us and what has been developed over time? The nature versus nurture question is too vast to fully address in this paper, but we can talk about how a *gongfu* master might decide which of our dispositions promote a flourishing life and which do not. This priority of effectiveness is central to the *gongfu* perspective. Whatever current dispositions we have at a given moment might be all that we know, and as such are the only guide to ethical spontaneity. We must then also ask to what extent we should cultivate our *gongfu* spontaneity?

The way we look at the consequences of our actions may change how we answer this questions. In gauging the extent to which we should or should not cultivate our current dispositions, we can either say that our natural affects are sometimes unreliable and thus cause unfavorable outcomes, or we can alternatively say that our expectations are just misguided and that the outcomes are just as they are *supposed* to be. For the latter, we can look to a story from chapter 13 of the *Zhuangzi*,

When they came in, Zi-lu said, 'Your present condition may be called one of extreme distress.' Confucius replied, 'What words are these! When the Superior man has free course with his principles, that is what we call his success; when such course is denied, that is what we call his failure. Now I hold in my embrace the principles of benevolence

and righteousness, and with them meet the evils of a disordered age - where is the proof of my being in extreme distress? Therefore looking inwards and examining myself, I have no difficulties about my principles; though I encounter such difficulties (as the present), I do not lose my virtue. It is when winter's cold is come, and the hoar-frost and snow are falling, that we know the vegetative power of the pine and cypress. This strait between Zhan and Cai is fortunate for me.' He then took back his lute so that it emitted a twanging sound, and began to play and sing. (At the same time) Zi-lu, hurriedly, seized a shield, and began to dance, while Zi-gong said, 'I did not know (before) the height of heaven nor the depth of the earth. (*Ctext* 讓王 - Kings who have wished to resign the Throne, Legge Translation)

This viewpoint is fatalistic in nature. It tells the agent that as long as one is to act virtuously, whatever outcome arises is not only what is “supposed” to happen, but is also *good*. According to the *Zhuangzi*'s critique, a proper Confucian acting virtuously cannot but bring about a flourishing life. This means that the extent to which one should cultivate her current dispositions is guided by how they align with virtue, thus diminishing some of the creative aspects that arise from an embodied *ziran*.

The Confucians in this story, as with any group sharing a common goal, are only taking into consideration the kind of spontaneity advocated by Confucian teachings, that being long-term cultivated spontaneity. That is to say, they all share the same prior interpretation of spontaneity wherein specific rituals and shared principles based on tradition can be cultivated over time to become embodied. At least within their group, these virtues are all agreed upon as *good* prior to judgment of their actions. In turn, they are not (at least in their final evaluation) deliberating upon their actual immediate feelings about their current situation as much as they are relying on the intrinsic goodness they believe lies in ritual propriety. They are shifting their perspective to accommodate a shared dissatisfaction with their current circumstances. By doing this, whatever the consequences of their actions might have brought about, they will always be ideal so long as they have acted virtuously. In this way, their lack of contentment with their

current circumstances can easily be relinquished by their shared belief that virtuous actions are always preferable to non-virtuous actions. They are then comforted by the peace of mind that they did the right thing, and so their circumstances are in fact ideal.

The Daoists could employ a similar version of this argument by calling their shared principle “to embody *ziran*”, such that as long as one is practicing such an ethic their actions will avoid harm and promote vitality. However, this is different from affirming any outcome as good by means of deeming it the result of acting virtuously. The interesting point is that within the *ziran-wuwei* ethic, the consequences *do* matter insofar as a Daoist can make a case for his reasoning after having acted upon it; but do *not* matter for the agent during the act of deliberation. The distinction is that the Daoist can look at the effectiveness of the action after it has taken place and evaluate its inherent *ziran*, but this is not a factor in the sage’s process of taking action. That is to say, if the Daoist said “this action is *ziran*” before having acted, and did it so based on having deeming it as such, then the act wouldn’t have been completed spontaneously. The Confucian decides on a virtue, acts upon it, and knows that whatever consequences come about are good. The Daoist acts through *ziran* which relinquishes the need for ethical deliberation and evaluation. In fact, virtues and examples of how to act may indeed hinder the agent from employing true spontaneity. For if the agent looks at examples of decisions made by previous employers of this ethic, then they may tend toward following these examples instead of following their own inner affects according to their specific circumstances. Similarly, Confucius’s disciples were even at times discouraged to ask “why”, because “without trying to experience what is to be understood, a verbal answer could easily mislead the student to think he has already understood the answer only from words” (Ni, “*Gongfu Vital*”13). That being said, I want to preface the following examples with the warning that they are not to influence the agent

to act in the same manner, but only to provide further insight and understanding into how the *ziran-wuwei* ethic might function in the real world.

Let us explore the example of trust. Trust, and its corresponding virtue of honesty, seem to be fundamental to our social harmony. In section one, we briefly explored the separation between honesty and its intrinsically connected corresponding *gongfu* virtuosity of efficiently employing honesty to gain trust. Trust functions as a prime example when exploring how much to cultivate our *gongfu* spontaneity because we seem to need it at a basic social level. We need to trust that when we give a cashier our money, they are not going to pocket it and run. We need to trust that when we sign a contract with a company, it will not be breached. Without these basic principles and cooperation, our social harmony and progress would seem nearly impossible.

We can look to the specific example of monogamy. When two people are in a monogamous relationship, they ideally put trust in each other to remain faithful. But how can an individual reconcile spontaneity and commitment? For Esther Perel, a popular practicing psychotherapist and licensed marriage and family therapist, these two dimensions create extreme tension in many relationships. She believes that trying to reconcile our need for security and stability with our need for spontaneity and adventure under one roof is more of a paradox that we manage than a problem that we solve. However, her definition of spontaneity here is referring to Western conceptions of the word which have very different functions and implications than Daoist and Confucian spontaneity. The spontaneity Perel is referring to is that of an unusual occurrence, something surprising, or a circumstance we might describe as “taking our breath away”. This interpretation can be traced back to the term “automaton” coined by Aristotle which is usually translated as spontaneity, but rather describing an unexpected and rare incident instead of one happening with the natural order of things (Bruya 219). Because one with embodied *ziran*

would conceive of both the self and causation in drastically different ways, such a problem may not even arise.

This is primarily because the hindrance of choice does not arise. In its ultimate manifestation, the *ziran-wuwei* ethic allows choices and changes to be elicited and drawn out of one's circumstances. However, as previously mentioned and explored by Slingerland, this is notoriously difficult to do. So let us explore this scenario through the lenses of an agent in learning. The first step would be for the agent to understand correlative thinking and oneness. In the situation of monogamy, this might mean to respect the other's *ziran* by starting a dialogue with one's partner about her desires and dig deeper into their roots. This doesn't necessarily come naturally or spontaneously to those unfamiliar with the *ziran-wuwei* ethic, but one cultivating this ideal might start here. After all, while we are all one in some sense, we generally feel a closer oneness to those with whom we share more intimate relationships. For the Confucians, love extends outwardly beginning with the family. A Daoist is more inclined towards impartiality and inclusivity. The complementarity of these two views are illuminated in this example.

Starting a dialogue with one's partner about her desire to step outside of the agreed boundaries of monogamy could open up an opportunity for the relationship to grow. Alternatively, it could allow the couple to see that their relationship is no longer serving their wellbeing. Regardless of the outcome, it is for the agent to explore the origins of her desires with her partner to decide whether or not they should continue in the relationship. We can imagine that if she is grounded in oneness though, she will understand how a betrayal will significantly hurt her partner and so the act of the betrayal itself could probably *not* take place with ease, preventing her from even acting with an embodied *ziran-wuwei* ethic.

As described above, fluid mechanics shape self-causation to be a flow with one's circumstances rather than an impelling force (Bruya 214). To embody *ziran* is a return to the responsiveness and simplicity of our original state like what we experienced during infancy. The impulses of a child come with the upmost ease, but probably without the foundation of correlative thinking on a large scale. As the child develops, these ideas are cultivated throughout learning how to interact with the world. Eventually she can build the capacity to act upon her own unique spontaneity grounded in oneness, showing the complementarity of both the Confucian and Daoist versions. In the situation of one monogamous partner having the urge to be unfaithful to her significant other, the origins of said urge are key. If the desire to be unfaithful is elicited and drawn from one's natural affects because she is lacking what she desires from her current partner, then she may indeed be able to commit the betrayal with ease, or spontaneously. However, if it is only a superficial desire brought about by negative feelings like jealousy or vengeance, the act itself will be forced rather than happening out of fluidity.

The complementarity lies in acknowledging that a child cannot have a sense of oneness just yet, and that it takes the cultivation and embodiment of this sense of self in order to act spontaneously. As discussed, the oneness at the foundation of *ziran* is what allow the agent to act without causing harm. While a child may have certain aspects of oneness, those specific to certain virtues that correspond to social harmony, like trust, seem like they come later after having learned norms and customs. That is why a Confucian view on extension of love from the family and a Daoist impartiality and inclusivity are complimentary. They each have their proper function depending on circumstances.

By cultivating the notion of oneness and exploring *ganying*, one is able to conceptualize the self as coextensive with all things. Once this is embodied, the subsequent embodiment of the

ziran-wuwei ethic can follow. This may not be the necessary order for each individual, but the latter cannot exist without the former. In being sensitive to the tensions that arise with one's natural dispositions, the agent can explore their roots and use the *gongfu* orientation of valuing "how" rather than "what" to gauge which actions will promote a flourishing life. That is to say, one does not make a decision because it is the "right" one. In fact, this does not even go into the decision making equation. In recognizing the uniqueness of each circumstance, one is able to cultivate and attune their *gongfu* virtuosities according to their own unique *ziran*. The *ziran* of the self is connected with all things and thus keeps the harmony (*he* 和) of one's actions in flux with the rest of nature.

Chapter Two

Now that we have set the stage for what it might mean to have a *ziran-wuwei* ethic in the real world, let's take a deeper look into its complementarity with Confucian notions of spontaneity. As discussed in chapter one, within the *ziran-wuwei* ethic lies a connection to heaven, or nature. This chapter will explore the notion of *cheng* 誠, commonly translated as sincerity, to demonstrate this connection between heaven and human in another way. By illustrating that *ziran* is necessarily entailed in *cheng*, we will further elaborate on the complementarity between Confucian and Daoist ethics in terms of spontaneity, sincerity, and creativity. I will begin by briefly outlining the history and evolution of the notion of *cheng* to create the platform for exploring how Ni's proposed *gongfu* ethics can be greatly enhanced by including *cheng* (and likewise *ziran*) as not only a *gongfu* skill, but also as intrinsic to the method of cultivating a natural moral disposition.

The concept of *cheng* has a long, complicated, and ongoing history in Chinese philosophy that has preoccupied scholars for centuries. Zhang Dainian admits that it "is the most unintelligible concept in Chinese philosophy" (An, "Concept of *Cheng*" 117). It is also important to note that there are drastic differences between the Western concept of sincerity and the Chinese concept of *cheng*, creating many disagreements in its translation, and leading some scholars to advocate for the term to remain in mere transliteration. "As Isaiah Berlin observed, 'Integrity and sincerity were not among the attributes which were admired... in the ancient or medieval worlds, which prized objective truth in matters of theory, and getting things right in matters of both theory and practice' (Berlin: 581)" (An, "Concept of *Cheng*" 123). During this

time sincerity was not a virtue in itself, it was evaluated in terms of how it served a higher objective truth, and then later changed during the era of romanticism.

Fortunately, An Yanming has provided a comprehensive outline of the evolution and history of the term in the Chinese philosophical context. He explains,

It is mainly because of the continuous pouring of new intellectual elements from the three schools [Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism] that, for a rather long period, the idea of *cheng* has been in a process of perpetual construction, and accordingly has acquired many diverse components, such as ‘sincerity,’ ‘reality,’ ‘principle,’ ‘transformation,’ and ‘change’’. (An, “Concept of *Cheng*” 132)

An’s analysis brought him to translate *cheng* as “consistency” (An, “Idea of *Cheng*” 3). Because of the various influences and translations to the term, there is a great opportunity to more deeply explore the concept and expand on its significance to our discussion about *gongfu* spontaneity.

Let us briefly explore some of the most prominent uses and interpretations. Then, by considering each I will draw on my own conception of *cheng*.

We will begin with the traditional Confucian notion of *cheng* where both “sincerity” and “reality” come together. An describes this as Confucianism’s most important contribution to the notion. He explains “in form, it is similar to ‘sincerity,’ meaning ‘to be true to oneself’. In content, ‘true’ refers to a true feeling possessed universally by humans, while ‘self’ refers to human nature or reality” (An, “Concept of *Cheng*” 123). In the *Analects*, *cheng* is usually used to describe a quality or attribute of one’s personality in virtue of which he is praised and admired by other people (An, “Concept of *Cheng*” 119). In Ni’s translation of the *Analects*, he explains “if *xin* or trustworthiness is a feature of one’s conduct, *cheng* is more a feature of one’s disposition and motivation behind the conduct. A person of *cheng* could be sincere when not telling the truth or sticking to their words. In contrast, a person who always tells the truth or sticks to his words may be *xiangyuan*, ‘village worthy’ or ‘village honest,’ who the Master

condemned as the ‘enemy of virtue (Analects 17.13 and Mencius 7B:37)’ (215). In the *Mencius*, on the other hand, *cheng* is conceptualized as an inner state that is naturally pure and good, like that of human nature (*xing* 性) (An, “Concept of *Cheng*” 125). However, it does not follow that Mencius meant that the concept was to be taken without a sense of duty, that is, *cheng* is also a choice that one has a sense of obligation to connect with. In this way, *cheng* encompasses both an inner state and a pursuit of self-cultivation.

The *Zhongyong* (The Doctrine of the Mean) and Zhu Xi’s commentary are traditionally taken as the standard texts for the position of *cheng*. According to these texts, *cheng* takes the regularity of Heaven to explain the transformation and causality of things. Thus, Zhu Xi deemed it the “principle of reality (*shili* 實理)” and “sincerity” in different contexts throughout the *Mean* (An, “Concept of *Cheng*” 122). Similar to the ethical disposition of a *gongfu* master, one who is *cheng* is described in the *Zhongyong* as such:

Like heaven (*tian*) is able to be “sincere” (be truthful to itself) effortlessly, and yet always hit the right spot without needing to make choices, the highest perfection of a person’s cultivation is “being centered (*zhong*) without coercion, succeed without reflection, freely and easily traveling the center of the Way—this is the sage”. (Ni’s Analects translation of *Zhongyong* 20, 130)

By demonstrating the drastic differences in translations we can come to understand *cheng* more holistically and from different perspectives. An interesting example lies in an excerpt of a translation of the same passage from above in *Focusing the Familiar* by Ames and Hall: “Creativity is the way of *tian*; creating is the proper way of becoming human” (62). Ames and Hall use creativity as the translation of *cheng*. It is important to make this comparison of *cheng*’s translation as creativity as it reveals an important aspect of the *gongfu* approach as well. The emphasis on creativity for the *gongfu* master is also an essential aspect of *cheng*. We will discuss this approach further after finishing the outline of the different translations.

In 1988, Donald Munro offered this interpretation: "My translation of *cheng* as 'integrity' rather than 'sincerity' comes from the term's sense as a completeness that contains all natural attributes, none of which is fraudulent or missing" (An, "Concept of *Cheng*" 133). An concludes that "roughly, we can divide all the above translations of *cheng* into three groups: "(1) sincerity (as "sincerity"); (2) reality (as "truth," "realness"); and (3) the integration of sincerity and reality (as "perfection" and "integrity")" (An, "Concept of *Cheng*" 134). However, the Daoists employed a slightly different interpretation and usage of *cheng* to signify either the "reality" of a thing or things, but that portrayed a force causing desirable external changes (An, "Concept of *Cheng*" 131). For example, "the Neo-Daoist, Guo Xiang (died 312) regarded it as a natural process through which a great man is 'engaging in no artifice, and yet realizing his self-fulfillment'" (An, "Idea of *Cheng*" 2). Although it appeared only once in the inner chapters of the *Zhuangzi*, it was used to mean "true" or "real" (An, "Idea of *Cheng*" 61). It also appears in the outer chapters as "an energy that oozes out the body of the immortal Lie Yukou as a powerful radiance, prevailing over other people's minds, and altering their behaviors" (An, "The Concept of *Cheng*" 130). For the purposes of this paper and for the sake of focus and length, I will be exploring *cheng* as it is presented in the *Zhongyong* because of its specific relation to heaven.

Fortunately, we can also find Ni's interpretation of *cheng* in the context of the *Zhongyong* in his article "Reading *Zhongyong* as a *Gongfu* Instruction: Comments on *Focusing the Familiar*". Ni describes *cheng* as more than subjectively understood, but rather realized through both self-consummation and consummation of everything around (Ni, "Reading *Zhongyong*" 196). This means that *cheng* is not just what is within us nor just what heaven has, but rather what connects us to heaven as the completion of the self. He critiques Hall and Ames' translation of *cheng* as "creativity" for its inadequacy to capture the full meaning of the term. Creativity is

just a *part* of the process of *cheng*, but too narrow to be used as the final translation. Instead, Ni proposes to keep the traditional translation as “sincerity” and then use “creativity”, as well as other descriptions, to explain *cheng*’s usage within the specific context (Ni, “Reading *Zhongyong*” 199). He points out that

on the one hand, it serves as a metaphysical term to indicate the way of *tian*. On the other hand, it serves as an instructional term to guide human practice, so that humans can model after *tian*. It seems to me that the word is deliberately and carefully chosen to serve the double function in order to show a connection between the two. (Ni, “Reading *Zhongyong*” 196)

As such, in order to become more fully human, one aims for the cultivation that connects her with the *cheng* of Heaven (*tian* 天). Heaven and its characteristic *cheng* do not have to choose between right and wrong, but can rather move effortlessly much like one with an embodied *ziran-wuwei* ethic. Ni’s critique of creativity as the translation for *cheng* is right, and I also will choose to keep sincerity as the translation.

Hall and Ames’ argue that process understanding is foundational to the Chinese world, and that *cheng* is indeed a process of “becoming”, hence the translation of creativity follows. While I agree with this, it doesn’t seem sufficient to prove that sincerity is also not a process of becoming. Sincerity surely involves one’s relationships both outwardly within social interactions, and also inwardly as one’s expression of self. *Zhongyong* 25 states

But *cheng* is not simply the self-consummating of one’s own person; it is what consummates events. Consummating oneself is authoritative conduct (*ren*); consummating other events is wisdom (*zhi*). This is the excellence (*de*) of one’s natural tendencies (*xing*) and is the way of integrating what is more internal and what is more external. (Ames and Hall 106)

With *cheng* being the connection between the realm of heaven and the realm of human, sincerity describes both human interaction and one’s sincerity towards the larger whole. Incorporating both fields is how one completes true sincerity, and the connection is found. Sincerity describes

the completion of one's connection to heaven, whereas creativity is a more like a skill and characteristic employed by the agent as a way of being sincere. Sincerity is what makes a person's actions unique within the unfolding of her potentiality, it gets to the deeper level of creativity.

As Hall and Ames recognize in *Focusing the Familiar* “*cheng* 誠 like “sagacity (sheng 聖)” is another term that expresses the dynamic process of fostering “true relations” through effective communication, the character itself being etymologically constituted by “to speak (*yan* 言)” and “to consummate (*cheng* 成)” (33). Based on this breakdown of the character, it seems to further suggest that creativity is insufficient to describe *cheng*. Although creativity and sincerity work together, sincerity better portrays the *yan* 言 aspect of the term that makes it so important in relationships. Sincerity better describes both one's connection to heaven and the transactional process between self and other.

Nonetheless, creativity is still an important aspect of *cheng* and for the *gongfu* master. Unlike heaven, humans need to make ethical decisions and also have the room to do so creatively. For the *gongfu* master, this creativity is essential because her skills or virtuosities are not used to describe everything she might do, but instead just the difficult or special acts (Ni, “*Gongfu* as Vital” 2). Thus, the *cheng* of *tian* might be taken as the model by which the link between heaven and humans is reached in order to cultivate one's talents needed to accomplish these special abilities, or *gongfu* skills (Ni, “Reading *Zhongyong*” 196). Still, Ni considers *cheng* itself as a *gongfu* skill allowing the moral agent to “make the most of their natural tendencies of other fellow human beings and things, and thus participate with heaven and earth in the transformation of the universe, as a creative force in this triad” (Ni, “Reading *Zhongyong*” 198). In this paper, I would like to instead advocate *cheng* as working with equal force alongside and

parallel to *gongfu* ethics; as though they are two essential perspectives of what it means to be a *gongfu* master. This is different from Ni's understanding of *cheng* as a *gongfu* skill. Ni does recognize *cheng* as more than a just a method of cultivation by also labeling it as a "source of creative and transforming power" that builds on the oneness between heaven and humans who create the universe united (Ni, "Reading *Zhongyong*" 200). However, he left a lot of room for the opportunity to further expand on this idea. Ultimately, the notion of *cheng* is not necessarily a Confucian or Daoist concept, but rather a notion conceptualized differently depending on the interpreting force. So here I attempt not to necessarily alter the translation of *cheng* as sincerity, but to examine what this sincerity means through demonstrating how the different interpretations work together and allow one another to progress.

1. Confucian-Daoist Approach to *Cheng* 誠

By taking into consideration the history, evolution, and different interpretations of *cheng*, I propose a Confucian-Daoist notion weighing heavily on the link between heaven and human. Throughout its history, *cheng* itself has been largely associated with Confucian thought because of its frequency in Confucian texts as compared to Daoist texts. But its Daoist usage compliments Confucianism's approach by demonstrating an ethical agent who embodies true spontaneity within sincerity, or *ziran* within *cheng*. *Ziran* and *cheng* share the characteristics of connecting the realms of heaven and human, they are both transformative forces, and they are both self-so or self-consummating. While we know Zhu Xi's commentary on the *Zhongyong* traditionally holds the standard, Qian Mu pointed out the heavy influence of the *Zhuangzi* and the *Laozi* on the author of the *Mean* (An, "The Concept of *Cheng*" 132). This suggests that Daoist ideas must have also had a considerable influence on the idea of *cheng* presented within the *Zhongyong*. With this in mind, my interpretation of *cheng* reflects the complementarity

between Confucianism and Daoism by showing the interaction between the Dao of Heaven and the Dao of humans as it emulates the connection between self-cultivation and spontaneity.

Because pre-modern Chinese thinkers did not seek for a kind of deity or omniscient being to explain the regularities between heaven and human, to possess *cheng* came to link these two dimensions. This can be further understood in Confucius's reference to a kind of "silence" of Heaven. He claimed "heaven does not speak; yet the four seasons run their courses thereby; the hundred creatures, each after its kind, are born thereby" (An, "Concept of *Cheng*" 127). This extends the ethical *cheng* from the human realm to the natural realm, or vice versa. It is a progression from the natural regularities of heaven extending to the realm of the human. An Yanming describes this progression of *cheng* to have evolved as such: "since human "regularity" comes from *cheng*, and since similar regularity exists also in natural phenomena, then there must be an element in Nature that functions in a manner similar to what ethical *cheng* does in humans" (An, "Concept of *Cheng*", 128).

Throughout the evolution of *cheng*, the idea that heaven does not have the burden of choice because it has a form of goodness, consistency and/or impartiality that is unavailable to humans has thus pushed philosophers to seek for the same virtues so that humans can also relinquish the need to choose, thus allowing for spontaneity (An, "Idea of *Cheng*", 74). This idea is widely represented throughout both Confucian and Daoist texts, but the two differ in their view of heaven. For the Confucians, heaven represents what is good and is the source for correct actions. The Daoists are more inclined towards an impartial and all-inclusive view. However, the differing views do not necessarily matter when taken from the perspective of the *gongfu* approach, for they are two perspectives aiming toward the same end of allowing nature to be immanent within us. The subtleties that differentiate the two are still important to note.

In the *Zhongyong*, the Dao of heaven is described as the model for the Dao of humans. “Such being its [cosmological *cheng*’s] nature, without any display, it becomes manifested; without any movement, it produces changes; and without any effort; it accomplishes its ends” (An, “Idea of *Cheng*”, 75). An describes cosmological *cheng* here to be “an ethical-moral concept, which our term ‘ethical *cheng*’ identified. Later, through a process of being ‘read into’ nature, it gains a cosmological and metaphysical significance” (An, “Concept of *Cheng*” 133). Likewise, if the Dao of humans can possess such effortlessness, there will be no need for moral authority and the embodiment of the natural disposition to act morally will follow, creating harmony. This passage is also akin to a *ziran-wuwei* ethic. If you did not take the above passage into the greater context of the *Zhongyong*, one could even mistake it for a passage from a Daoist text.

This same idea can also be brought to the level between the nature of the sage and the oneness shared by all things. An explains, “concretely, the *Zhuangzi*’s assumption, which is accepted by the *Mean*, is based on a Daoist doctrine that I call the “reconciliation between individuality and universality”” (An, “Idea of *Cheng*”, 69). This reconciliation likens “individuality” to the nature of the sage, and “universality” to the nature of all things including the sage in order to recognize that the development of the sage’s own nature is also the development of the nature of all things. The sage’s nature here is to be understood as his *cheng*. To use an English counterpart, the sage’s *cheng* is his sincerity as an individual. It is his unmanufactured creativity of the relational self. We can liken this to the individuality of one who is *ziran*; a relationally spontaneous and non-conformist self. This connection of the nature of the sage to the natural world is shared by both the *Zhuangzi* and the *Zhongyong*, further

demonstrating the complementarity the between Confucianism's and Daoism's approach to *cheng* and the commonalities it shares with *ziran*.

While we will dive deeper into the etymology of the term in the next chapter, it is important to note here the aspect of *cheng* regarding the fostering of true relations. While this view is taken out of the *Zhongyong*, we might be easily reminded of the oneness at the foundation of embodying *ziran*. It is further explained by Hall and Ames that,

integrity [*cheng*] is more than being true to oneself. Since all selves are constituted by relationships, integrity means being trustworthy and true in one's associations. It is effectively integrating oneself in one's social, natural and cultural contexts. At a cosmological level, integrity is the ground from which self and other arise together to maximum benefit. It is not what things are, but how well and how productively they are able to faire in their synergistic alliances. This sense of "abundance" or "plenty" is evident in *cheng*'s cognate, *sheng* which means "ample," "to prosper," "to flourish..." ("Focusing the Familiar" 33)

With relationships constituting what it is that identifies the unique self, being sincere means to extend that quality throughout our relationships. It is not only within our relationships to other humans, but within our relationship to *tian*.

Franklin Perkins offers an interesting alternative to this relationship with *tian* as expressed in the *Wuxing*, one of the recently excavated texts written on bamboo strips during the mid to late Warring States Period. There is a consensus that the *Guodian* bamboo strips are estimated to have been buried around 300 BCE and so already in circulation during Mengzi's time. In his paper *The Mengzi in the Context of Recently Excavated Texts*, Perkins explains,

In WX [*Wuxing*], the way of heaven is simply the human way when grounded internally. Heaven becomes immanent in human beings themselves. Mengzi continues this view, saying explicitly that the way to know and serve heaven is by developing one's natural dispositions (7A1). In fact, when Mengzi distinguishes the way of heaven as involving authenticity or genuineness (*cheng* 誠) from the way of human beings as requiring attentive thinking about authenticity (*sicheng* 思誠) (4A12), he is almost certainly not contrasting heaven and human but contrasting two ways that human beings can act. The way of heaven follows when our actions are genuine and internal; the human way requires deliberate effort. (13-14)

On this view, the key distinction is not between heaven's way and human's way, but rather two ways of being human. This interpretation resonates with our idea of the *ziran* as an aspect of nature (or *tian*) that can be embodied and grounded internally in humans. However, the *Wuxing* does not use the term *xing* 性 to describe our natural affects as the source. Instead, virtues can be internal or external, but it is grounding the virtues internally that achieves *de* (13). Correct actions come from heaven and are expressed when heaven is immanent within us, and this is when we will behave with virtue.

The *Wuxing* describes that it is through anxious concern, *you* 憂 and attentiveness, *si* 思, that one is able to recognize the way. The end goal of connecting to heaven is maintained, and this is the achievement of happiness.

But for being acted on, good could never be approached. But for being aimed for, virtue could never be brought to completion. But for being reflected upon, wisdom could never be attained.

If one does [not] cut to the essence in reflecting on a thing, then one cannot have insight into it. If one is not circumspect in reflecting on a thing, then one cannot attain it. If one is not direct in reflecting on a thing, then one cannot give form to it.

If one cannot give it form then one will be unsettled. If one is unsettled then one will be unhappy. If one is unhappy, then one will be without virtue. (MWD Translation C 4.1-4.3, Csikszentmihalyi 315)

The general approach of the *Wuxing*, as we see in this passage, is to give a progression describing how to find the way and ground the virtues internally, that which connects us to heaven. To think less by implementing the *ziran-wuwei* ethic, and returning to what is already within us, the ethical agent finds an alternative to achieving this connection. The end goal of achieving happiness is the same, but virtue comes from correct actions in the *Wuxing*, whereas embodying *ziran* does not necessarily align with any correct way.

This return to what is already within us is an expression of our natural tendencies, and a reflection of what is our “human nature”. Tang Junyi describes the Confucian notion of human nature as in flux and in reference to one’s roles.

Within Chinese natural cosmology what is held in general is not some first principle. The root pattern or coherence (*genben zhi li* 根本之理) of anything is its ‘life force’ (*shengli* 生理), and this life force is its ‘natural tendencies’ (*xing* 性). Anything’s natural tendencies are expressed in the quality of its interactions with other things and events. ‘Natural tendencies’ or ‘life force’ then entailing spontaneity and transformation have nothing to do with necessity... The emergence of any particular phenomenon is a function of the interaction between its prior conditions and other things and events as external influences. So how something interacts with other things and events and the form of this interaction is not determined by the thing itself... Thus the basic “nature” of anything includes this transformability in response to whatever it encounters. (Ames “Role Ethics” 129).

Likewise, *ziran* as spontaneity understood within sincerity (*cheng*) maintains the description of the self as interdependent and as our connection to *tian*, just as it is taken to be from our discussion of the *Zhongyong*. While this spontaneous self is interdependent with all things, it is restricted within the limits of the environment of the *cheng* of heaven, but nonetheless possesses the capacity to express itself and create a unique identity by embodying the way internally and without force. In the words of Zhu Xi, “the point is not to use ‘principle of reality’ (*cheng*) for certain purpose, but that if there is ‘principle of reality’ (*cheng*) people must be moved” (An, “Concept of *Cheng*” 129). This describes precisely what I mean by understanding *cheng* as more than a *gongfu* skill. The motivation to be sincere cannot be associated with a certain purpose, for then the entire premise of what it means to be sincere is lost. This is also exactly why spontaneity is necessary for an action to be sincere. To be *cheng* is a way of behaving and essentially also to be spontaneous. If one deliberates or premeditates their action, they lose all sincerity, making spontaneity the prerequisite for embodying sincerity.

The other key point in this comment from Zhu Xi is that the people must be *moved* by nature rather than *follow* nature. We can say the same for being moved by *cheng* or the Dao, it does not matter which label you choose to define that vital force. It is through allowing your actions to be elicited from your inner affects that an individual is connected to *tian*, the *cheng* of heaven, *ziran*, or the Dao of heaven. This is expressing the mainstream Confucian idea that the sage should not have to enforce governmental measures to promote or deter the people, but that instead just by cultivating *cheng* the ideal society will follow (An, “Concept of *Cheng*” 129). This idea coupled with the room for individual creativity available to the moral agent who embodies *ziran* as a part of *cheng* can in turn open up the opportunity for her to find the link between heaven and human while maintaining the artistry by which she can conduct her life, including her moral choices.

She can do this because her individual *ziran* as individual spontaneity allows for the upmost level of creativity for the self to be “as it is” flowing within the regularities of nature. Conversely, the “reality” aspect of the Confucian notion of *cheng* follows the spontaneity of nature and heaven in a more conformist way because it focuses on *following* the Dao of Heaven as a model, much like ritual. However, it seems unlikely that we could ever evade the persistent plague of choice from human deliberation and action in all situations, especially in those regarding ethics. It is more plausible that we might be able to alleviate that pressure, or find ways to allow choices to come with ease. By understanding *ziran* as a concept entailed in the notion of *cheng*, we can maintain the link between the Dao of Heaven and the Dao of Humans to be realized, but with less emphasis on a conformity to Heaven, and instead more of an emphasis on the way we can be moved *by* it. We mentioned previously that Confucianism’s most important contribution to the notion of *cheng* is having combined sincerity (as being “true to oneself”) with

reality. Thus, understanding *cheng* to entail *ziran* takes “sincerity” and being “true to oneself” to *cheng* as “reality” is to *ziran*. In other words, the two are mutually entailing. The moral agent creates this link by following with the regularity of the Dao of Humans in being true to oneself, and embodies also the spontaneity of the Dao of Heaven (or nature) as the unique self. This is placing the emphasis on the spontaneity of the self within nature as the model; a model not to follow, but to allow and embody.

2. *Ziran* Entailed in *Cheng* Within the Texts

This section will further explain why *ziran* is entailed in *cheng* using the *Zhongyong*. That *ziran* is entailed in *cheng* is distinct from showing the complementarity between Confucianism and Daoism because the terms are distinct from the traditions themselves. While each term has quintessential roles in their respective traditions, and that is how they are being interpreted and defined within this paper, I am trying to demonstrate the entailment and the complementarity as different concepts. That *cheng* entails *ziran* notes the overlapping characteristics between the two notions and that to embody *cheng* is also to embody *ziran*. What this means practically is illuminated in *how* one is to embody such characteristics, and as we have mentioned above (and as was also explored by Slingerland), there are different times and different situations in one’s life when the cultivation of spontaneity may be better from the Confucian approach, and other times when it’s better for one to take a Daoist approach. The point of showing the complementarity is to illuminate that the two traditions don’t have to be in stark opposition, and one does not need to choose to always follow one way over the other.

One of the most significant textual illustrations of the way *ziran* might be necessarily entailed in *cheng* is found in passage 25 of the *Zhongyong* which was mentioned earlier. Let us take a look at the passage in its entirety with the Chinese included.

誠者自成也。而道自道也。誠者物之始；不誠無物。是故君子誠之為貴。誠者非自誠己而已也。所以成物也。誠己，仁也；成物，知也；性之德也。合外內之道也。故時措之宜也。

(One who is) *Cheng* is self-consummating (*zicheng*), and its way (*dao*) is self-directing (*zidao*). *Cheng* is a process (*wu*) taken from its beginning to its end, and without this *cheng*, there are no events (*wu*). It is thus that, for exemplary persons (*junzi*) it is *cheng* that is prized. But *cheng* is not simply the self-consummating of one's own person; it is what consummates events. Consummating oneself is authoritative conduct (*ren*); consummating other events is wisdom (*zhi*). This is the excellence (*de*) of one's natural tendencies (*xing*) and is the way of integrating what is more internal and what is more external. Thus, whenever one applies this excellence, it is fitting. (Ames and Hall 106)

This translation comes from Hall and Ames where creativity functions as the translation for *cheng*, but I have removed creativity and just left *cheng* in transliteration to be clear. The connection between *cheng* and *zi* 自, the same *zi* 自 of *ziran* 自然, is what is especially important to note first.

The first two lines use *zi* 自 to describe the way one is *cheng*, and how, or the way (Dao 道) one gets there. *Zi* is reflexive, meaning from oneself or of oneself. As an adverb here, it describes the action of consummation as done by the subject, (one who is) *cheng*. That is to say, one who is *cheng* is complete of herself, or rather without external aid or influence. That is not to say one who is *cheng* has always been *cheng* or will always be *cheng*; *Zhongyong* 26 says “the utmost *cheng* is ceaseless (*zicheng wuxi* 至誠無息)”, and so to be self-consummating is the aim or journey of transformation (Ames and Hall 107). In this way, consummation is a function of *cheng*. Wing-tsit Chan puts it like this: “*cheng* is not just a state of mind but an active force that is always transforming things and completing things, and drawing man and Heaven together in the

same current” (Ames and Hall 35). It is by allowing one’s spontaneity to be the guide that self-consummation becomes possible, and the way to get there is by also allowing one’s potential to unfold as circumstances evolve. Very much like our understanding of the *ziran-wuwei* ethic, one who is *cheng* is able to allow her natural affects to guide her without following any certain or absolute path. The path is just her own as her actions are elicited from her inner heart. This is why it is especially difficult to describe scenarios where one acts in this way, because it is very a specific and unique experience for each being at a given time.

The passage then goes on to explain the processional dynamic of that path, or way: “*Cheng* is a process (*wu*) taken from its beginning to its end, and without this *cheng*, there are no events (*wu*)” (誠者物之始；不誠無物). Within this line is an expression of the fluid dynamics mentioned in chapter one. Instead of an atomistic outlook on the world with distinct entities and efficient causation, *cheng* is described as a transformative process, just like *ziran*. While it is a state that one embodies, *cheng* is not fixed or something that we should think of as striving to achieve and then be finished with. That is to say, the transformative process between the self and the path is not causally linked but rather mutually entailing. The aim is the stage of *cheng*, and there are many different ways of achieving it. The *gongfu* master has myriad options to hone in on skills and/or virtues to embody, however the stage of being *cheng* is different than these because it is constantly evolving as the path unfolds. Among other capacities, the *Zhongyong* prescribes “holding on to the good” as the means of achieving *cheng* (Ni, “Reading *Zhongyong*” 197). However, that does not mean that one who is good is necessarily *cheng*. Along the same vein, in *Zhongyong* 20 we read “if one does not understand goodness, one is not sincere to one’s person” *cheng* (Ni, “Reading *Zhongyong* 198). It might make sense to think that one who is *cheng*

understands goodness, but that does not mean that one who understands goodness is necessarily *cheng*.

Like one embodying *ziran*, one who is *cheng* is so-of-themselves by having the foundation of correlative thinking. These are not lofty ideals, they are fundamental possibilities. *Ziran* and *cheng* identify what is already present in the natural world and heaven, and our link to it is by embodying these spontaneous reactions through ease, creativity and responsiveness to our circumstances. In Ames and Hall's "Focusing the Familiar" introduction, they also mention that "a processive, transactional world is one of mutuality. Creativity [*cheng*] as self-actualization requires a co-creative world characterized by a field of actualized (or better, actualizing) selves, each a focus of transactional realization" (14). Similar to how we described *ziran* as manifest in the world, we think of those who are *cheng*, as well as those who are dedicated to being so, as understanding the value of this process as it is unfolding and spontaneously occurring within them. This vitality brings the focus to the aim and journey of *cheng*, and not just the final stage itself.

Zhongyong 25 then introduces *cheng* as extending to others and events. "But *cheng* is not simply the self-consummating of one's own person; it is what consummates events; 誠者非自誠己而已也。所以成物也". To consummate events here means to be a part of the greater whole by taking the self as one with all things. This extension is twofold. First, it demonstrates the interdependence between individuals, all others and heaven. It recognizes that our harmony as individuals is not complete unless realized as harmony at large. Second, it further reinforces the notion of fluid mechanics. Regarding the former, we are reminded of the oneness that is foundational to a *ziran-wuwei* ethic. Hall and Ames explain, "*cheng's* primary value... is in insuring that fully functioning human beings are more than merely reactive agents overwhelmed by their overall environing conditions (*tian*), or, more specifically, by their natural tendencies

(*xing*). They are, on the contrary, co-creative beings that have a central role in realizing both individual selves and the eventful worlds around them” (34).

This line of the passage also further expresses the link between the Dao of Heaven and the Dao of Humans through *cheng*. The character for consummate 成, is entailed within the character *cheng* 誠. That is to say, part of being *cheng* is to be self-consummating and self-completing, or in other words “so-of-itself” (*ziran* 自然). To embody *cheng* is also to embody *ziran*, the two are not mutually exclusive. The reference to the self here does not separate it from other things, but instead unifies them together. It demonstrates their interconnectedness, not so that they become one thing, but so that they are all singularly themselves. Not only does this apply to human life, it applies to all non-humans creatures, non-sentient beings, and the events of heaven. The use of *wu* 物 here is slightly obscure. While Hall and Ames translate it to be events, *wu* can mean things in general, or more commonly “the ten thousand things” (萬物).

The passage goes on to say “this is the excellence (*de* 德) of one’s natural tendencies (*xing* 性) and is the way of integrating what is more internal and what is more external.” *De* 德 is describing the efficacy that follows from connecting the *cheng* of the self to the *cheng* of *tian*, or specifically in this passage, *wu* 物. *Xing* 性 is describing the same kind of tendencies we discussed in chapter one regarding the embodiment of *ziran* and acting based on one’s inner heart. The Confucian view is that these natural tendencies should be cultivated over time until the virtues are embodied and one can act spontaneously and without deliberation. It should be noted though, that the Confucian view does recognize the negative consequences of forcing this cultivation, although they would probably not consider true cultivation to ever be *forced* (i.e. Mencius’ four sprouts).

While the Confucian focus is to *engage* in social life in order to create ideal social order, the Daoist approach is rather to *detach* from society in order to return to our natural tendencies before social norms corrupted us. If we emphasize a more Daoist version advocating for a cultivation as a return to our natural infant like *ziran*, then we might feel less pressure to search for the virtues we need to cultivate by knowing they are already there within us. Understanding that the state where we were already perfect (as infants), perfect in the sense of self-consummating, brings us to look back upon the innocence of our *xing* 性 prior to the influence of societal norms. It doesn't mean we should not abide by norms, for there are certainly many that will align with our own unique *ziran* and promote the overall harmony of our world, thus leading us to a flourishing life. These norms are constantly evolving and changing with our circumstances, so what we might feel at one time may not hold true for the next time. Also, this is assuming one was not able to maintain the same kind of *ziran* from infancy to adulthood, but surely that could be possible. A sage could have been *ziran* and maintained *ziran* without having lost it after infancy, it just does not seem likely considering how our selfish desires conflict with our *ziran* as a result of lacking an understanding of oneness. Furthermore, through the *gongfu* approach we can trust in what is innately within us that has worked and brought about a flourishing life in the past. The passage then ends with the reassurance that, “thus, whenever one applies this excellence, it is fitting”.

3. Cheng Alongside Gongfu Instruction

We have briefly mentioned how these observations of *cheng* could prove highly useful within the approach to a *gongfu* ethical spontaneity, but this section will elaborate further on that notion. Ni's conception emphasizes such characteristics as creativity and discretion (*quan* 權) as vital to *gongfu* self-cultivation (“Can Bad Guys” 10). An understanding of *cheng* as a Confucian-

Daoist notion linking heaven and human through sincerity, creativity, and spontaneous action can allow the moral agent to follow her true heart-mind in the process of cultivating a natural disposition. The difference is putting less emphasis on the cultivation of virtue through rules and rituals by looking at *cheng* in a non-conformist way, and thus both “forgetting” and reevaluating through a *gongfu* approach. Ni does acknowledge the value of spontaneity and consistently illuminates the significance of the Daoist *gongfu* approach. Thus, this is all the more reason to expand on the incorporation of *ziran* within *cheng*, and *cheng* as more than a virtuosity. Likewise, to embody *ziran* is also not only a skill, but integrated into being harmonious with the world.

Let us briefly return to Ni’s paper “Can Bad Guys Have Good *Gongfu*?” He quotes a passage from the *DaoDeJing* to illuminate the difference between one who acts for the sake of morality and one who acts morally because it is just who they are (8).

A truly virtuous person is not aware of his virtues,
and is therefore virtuous.
A not so virtuous person tries to get hold onto virtues,
and is therefore not virtuous. (8)

This quote emphasizes the importance of spontaneity, or lack of *intentionally* embodying certain virtues for the sake of morality. That is what sets apart embodying *ziran* from embodying certain individual virtues specifically, such as honesty or benevolence. *Ziran* itself is not a doctrine or virtue, it is a way for us to cultivate acting as we truly are in order to create harmony with the self and all things. Unlike the *Zhongyong* which advocates holding onto goodness, or good virtues, this passage of the *Daodejing* instead tells us this is not the way of a truly virtuous person.

Ni subsequently mentions the emphasis advocated by both *Zhuangzi* and the *Great Learning* to understand the cultivation of *gongfu* through decreasing our implementation of

morality in our actions and in turn increasing “the realm in which our *gongfu* cultivation can generate harmonious human relationships” (7). Ni’s acknowledgment of *gongfu* ethics in Daoism is still supported by the Confucian requirement of rules and rituals. He argues that practically speaking, most people are not capable of evading morality “because people are not cultivated well enough to make morality obsolete” (7). According to this paper, we might say that they lost this ability which was within them at birth; the *ziran* of an infant before the infringement of social norms and rituals. From a Mencian standpoint, it is up to us to cultivate these roots because they are what is already naturally good within us. Alternatively, for Xunzi, our *xing* is not naturally good, and we must cultivate our “sprouts” in a different way. In either case, the Confucian view requires long-term self-cultivation to embody an ethical spontaneity. While these two philosopher’s views oppose each other, they are still both considered Confucian. This reveals the *gongfu* dimension of reading a text as *gongfu* instruction; each view is a way to reaching the same end (Ni, “*Gongfu* as Vital” 6). In either case, eventually one reaches the ability to use “discretion”, or *quan* 權. It is the stage of one who has reached sagehood through embodying virtues. One with discretion (*quan* 權) has cultivated the wisdom to bend moral rules when needed depending on circumstances. From this, Ni draws the conclusion that there is a necessity for boundaries.

This is what separates those on the path of self-cultivation from those who have already achieved it, for they have the privilege to use discretion as a *gongfu* master. While we have explored the idea of boundaries and rules already, we can now look at it in the context of *cheng* and *ziran* through the scope of a *gongfu* master. Ni explains,

Once the instruction becomes embodied abilities, the person will reach a stage where she can use her discretion about whether or not to follow the standard protocols. While a *rule* is *imposed* upon the agent (whether by others or by the agent’s own will) as a standard of

right and wrong in itself, the *gongfu* approach takes it as a *method* of cultivation, which becomes the very condition for the agent to master the art of living. (9)

Our Confucian-Daoist notion of *cheng* accompanies and complements this idea in parallel. To take the Dao of Heaven as a *guideline* rather than a path to which we conform allows the self to be understood as interdependent while maintaining originality. This is different from an external rule because it allows more flexibility and the opportunity for creativity. Through embodying *ziran* as a concept within *cheng*, one is less focused on rituals and outcomes, and more so on the natural flow of the self within nature. This connects the moral agent to all things, and thus “forgetting” learned behaviors that clash with harmony. The *cheng* of heaven is not absolute, perfect, or unchanging. Although it lacks the burden of choice, we must notice its willingness to transform, and allow that to be the focus. This is a difference in emphasis or priority of spontaneity over ritual which shows the complementarity in this Confucian-Daoist approach.

If the *gongfu* master embodies *cheng*, the link between the Dao of Heaven and the Dao of Human can be stronger by employing her connection to nature as more than a mere model by which to conform or treat as a skill. Instead, the harmony between heaven and human is elicited from each individual’s willingness to allow it. That is, *cheng* and *ziran* cannot be forced, the agent must be willing to allow them to unfold as her circumstances evolve and as a product of her natural inclinations. This preserves what Ni calls following the path of morality “simply because this is who you are” (7). It illuminates each individual’s unique spontaneity and what makes that person who they are. That spontaneity, in its purest form, is what creates the harmony between the *cheng* of humans and the *cheng* of Heaven.

This link is also what is essential for the *gongfu* master to cultivate spontaneity and conceptualize the self as interdependent while still maintaining originality. One will instead “transcend” mortality in the same way that Ni’s *gongfu* ethics describes. The addition of

understanding *cheng* working alongside *gongfu* in this Confucian-Daoist context eases the moral agent from much of the pressure of the decision-making processes of self-cultivation and the modeling that follows from conforming to preset rules. Central to this is emphasizing the spontaneity required within a sincere action. Not only is spontaneity required for an agent to act sincerely, but the two are mutually entailing. It is by embodying *ziran* that one can become *cheng*, or true to oneself and reality/nature; and likewise one who is *cheng* has an embodied *ziran*.

Chapter Three

This chapter will bring in a discussion of the *Zhaungzi* in order to illuminate two points. First, the text is full of captivating tales regarding the employment of spontaneity both on the front of skillful activities and as a spiritual state. Second, these stories also demonstrate the *gongfu* approach. A concern of both the *ziran-wuwei* ethic and the *gongfu* approach is that our actions may not be moral through the employment of spontaneity. The *Zhuangzi* helps us to explore this problem and brings us full circle to Ni's original question, can bad guys have good *gongfu*?

1. How Can *Gongfu* Spontaneity Rely On What Is Natural?

Heaven lacks the burden of ethical deliberation, or choice, that humans are plagued with. Because we must make choices, Chinese philosophers have historically looked to nature as the key model to finding spontaneity while maintaining harmony. But what if humans were to really act as nature acts? Would the resulting society be ethical? First, it is important to recognize that the answer to that question relies on one important presupposition, an anthropocentric ethics. By this, I mean that our ethics as humans tends to also privilege humans, and so our view of what is

good cannot but be bias. While we certainly do consider our impact on the environment and the treatment of animals, we nearly always will value a human life over that of an animal or plant. Heaven, on the other hand, does not have such a bias; it is all inclusive and impartial. Confucians describe our human love as starting with the family and extending outward, so as to create a kind of “hierarchy of concern”, otherwise known as “love-with-gradation”. Nonetheless, there is always the underlying idea of oneness which fully extends to all things including non-human and non-sentient beings.

We can look to Wang YangMing who captures this view of oneness:

Great people regard Heaven, earth, and the myriad creatures as their own bodies. They look upon the world as one family and China as one person within it. Those who, because of the space between their own bodies and other physical forms, regard themselves as separate from [Heaven, earth, and the myriad creatures] are petty persons. The ability great people have to form one body with Heaven, earth, and the myriad creatures is not something they intentionally strive to do; the benevolence of their heart-minds is originally like this. How could it be that only the heart-minds of great people are one with Heaven, earth, and the myriad creatures? Even the heart-minds of petty people are like this. It is only the way in which such people look at things that makes them petty. This is why, when they see a child [about to] fall into a well, they cannot avoid having a sense of alarm and concern for the child. This is because their benevolence forms one body with the child. Someone might object that this response is because the child belongs to the same species. But when they hear the anguished cries or see the frightened appearance of birds or beasts, they cannot avoid a sense of being unable to bear it. This is because their benevolence forms one body with birds and beasts. Someone might object that this response is because birds and beasts are sentient creatures. But when they see grass or trees uprooted and torn apart, they cannot avoid feeling a sense of sympathy and distress. This is because their benevolence forms one body with grass and trees. Someone might object that this response is because grass and trees have life and vitality. But when they see tiles and stones broken and destroyed, they cannot avoid feeling a sense of concern and regret. This is because their benevolence forms one body with tiles and stones.
(Ivanhoe 237)

This exhibits the Confucian view of the human hierarchy of concern; we care for all things, but not equally. Conversely, *tian* has no hierarchy and does not favor anything in the world over anything else. Because of this, comparing our ethics with the way nature behaves might be

obscured because it is comparing two different paradigms: our human anthropocentric ethics and nature's inclusivity and impartiality. However, it is important to note that inclusivity and impartiality does not necessarily mean disorderly. The Confucian of li 理 (principles/patterns) describes everything as an interconnected system akin to that of an ecosystem. This is similar to the norms and rules that we discussed can arise spontaneously.

If we want to maintain an ethical system that preserves some kind of following along with nature, it would need to shift away from anthropocentrism. This view is advocated both in the *Zhuangzi* and the *DaoDeJing*. Chapter five of the *DaoDeJing* says,

Heaven and earth are not humane.
 They regard the ten thousand things as straw dogs.
 The sage is not humane.
 He regards all the people as straw dogs. (Moeller 15)

Instead of focusing on the human, heaven and earth are impartial. To regard the ten thousand things as straw dogs is to say that they are just as everything else; no different than straw or dogs. Thus the sage, who has reached the same level is also not humane, or rather not privileging the human. The inclusivity and impartiality of such an ethic is difficult to imagine. *Tian* creates hurricanes, fires and volcanoes that destroy homes and take lives. *Tian* grows bacteria and disease causing illnesses, disabilities, and death. *Tian* moves and transforms ceaselessly, it does not hold the door for strangers, or donate money to cancer research; it does not offer a smile during dark times, or a blanket to a sick child. *Tian* does not love nor hate, it does not favor nor prioritize, it does not give nor take. *Tian* is persistently in flux, endlessly growing and destroying. It is hard to imagine a human behaving as such and still being considered moral.

The question becomes then, have we got it right or does *tian*? Should we privilege humans? This brings us back to our original problem, we have to make choices, which makes it seem like there must be a certain way of deliberation that will bring about better results than the

other. Obviously if we could just act without deliberation and fear of consequences, that would result in a much easier decision making process, but a much riskier social dynamic. If we change our ethics to be non-anthropocentric and can then behave as *tian* (at least in this respect), would the world be a place we would like to live in? The answer to that question is complex and is difficult to imagine. While I think our world could stand to be less anthropocentric, putting that standard into practice would take a lot of time and bring about extreme changes in our behavior and progress. Nonetheless, putting humans on the same level as animals and earth could also possibly allow us to achieve greater overall harmony, which seems to be ideal. That is not to say we should treat all things *the same*, for certainly we don't need to open restaurants or hold funerals for wildlife out of respect. In fact, that's probably not even respecting their individual *ziran*. Instead, respect would follow from a kind of *ziran* that recognizes the distinctiveness, individuality, and effective interest of other things. To allow things to be fully themselves without infringing on that space could allow more lives to flourish and prosper, creating more harmonious relationships between heaven and human.

A less anthropocentric ethics might mean focusing more deeply on how our desires and progress as humans effects the environment when making choices. Enacting these changes in our ethics could have significant consequences for the quality of life for humans, and it is important to consider the material virtue at play. It might mean traveling less and shorter distances to avoid harmful emissions; taking more time out of our day to recycle and reuse; living more off of the land and less from factory processed foods that cause illness and disease, etc. This could seriously slow down, and possibly suspend the trend of technology that has been making life easier for us throughout human history. Our constantly evolving and fast-paced life might be

significantly decelerated, and our scope of the future much less idealized, at least technologically speaking.

To consider all of the consequences and processes of such a change escapes the scope of this paper, so I bring this topic to a close by briefly reiterating that regardless of the hindrances, a shift to a less anthropocentric ethic could bring about greater worldly harmony, which is ultimately more desirable. By allowing *all* lives to flourish without human progress infringing on that process, all things would experience a more peaceful and easy life. I would lastly like to mention that I am not advocating for a halt to technological progress, only that this progress be focused on our world at large and not favor the lives and comfortability of humans at the expense of other living creatures or the environment.

For the sake of this argument, let us assume this is a good premise, and that a non-anthropocentric ethics would indeed bring about greater overall harmony and a more flourishing life for all. The next question becomes then, how much can *gongfu* spontaneity rely on what is natural? One aspect of *gongfu* is to cultivate our virtuosity over time, while another is to allow them to be our connection to heaven; this combines both artificial and deliberate action with allowing our natural affects to be our guide. If we have to make choices because we are not all sages, and some of us might indeed never get there, which aspects of nature do we express? We can start by remembering that *gongfu* spontaneity is about taking into consideration *how* rather than *what*. Thus, the aim in answering this question is not to describe a certain path, or any pillars or cannons to abide by. Instead, it is to focus on the things that bring us to living a good life.

The use of words is a significant aspect of this. As Robert Eno points out, “Confucianism was at core a *dao*-practice: the validity of its doctrines could be fully confirmed only through

mastery of the ritual skills of sagehood” (131). Daoist wisdom, most notably evident in the *Zhuangzi* and *Daodejing*, likewise shuns the use of words because of their inauthentic way of intellectualizing the Dao (Eno 130). However, when speaking of how to achieve embodied skills without the use of words, misconceptions and gaps are a great risk, but looking to *cheng* as our connection to heaven can bring about a clearer picture. Hall and Ames remind us that “the speech element of *cheng* mentioned above suggests that creativity [sincerity] involves a dynamic partnership between the living human world and its natural, social, and cultural contexts, achieving consummation through effective communication in family and community” (63). In this way, ethical deliberation is not necessarily about making a choice that only brings about vitality and avoids destruction, but rather about making the choice that follows from our specific circumstances and natural tendencies; spontaneity within sincerity. And since we are human, that might lead to actions that still are to some degree anthropocentric, and that’s just fine. In fact, it is justifiable to say that cultivating this connection and embodying a *ziran-wuwei* ethic can only work when it is in harmony with one’s natural tendencies.

In chapter one, we discussed the story from Mencius about King Xuan who neglected his people because of selfish desires. It was not until the king saw the cow with his own two eyes that he felt unable to slaughter it. This allowed him to better understand his own natural inclinations. Prior to seeing the cow, he may have had the intellectual virtue to have sympathy for an animal in suffering, but it was not until his circumstances demonstrated this that he realized his natural affects (if we can agree to this reading of the story). Therefore, a choice to spare the cow only out of duty would not have been in harmony with his natural tendencies. Without this connection between our inner heart and action, we cannot be truly sincere and spontaneous. Psychologically speaking, Slingerland describes why we might find this kind of

ease in a person as an attractive quality. We pick up on it when observing others who have it.

“We are attracted to genuinely *wuwei* people—they have *de* [德]—because evolution has shaped us to hone in on signals of sincerity that are difficult to consciously stimulate and even harder to experience on demand and to do so in response to basic challenges inherent in cooperation” (195).

Let’s take a look at a more contemporary example. A married couple who no longer love each other might choose to stay together to avoid the difficulty of a divorce like the possibilities of losing friends, financial instability, or fear of being alone, etc. Let’s say they especially try to stay together for the sake of their children. It is possible that staying together is truly what they want and what feels best for them, but that is unlikely. If you’re no longer in love with someone, it’s probably not the case that you would like to remain in that relationship indefinitely. So, instead of adhering to the popular belief that a divorce can potentially have dire consequences for the wellbeing of the children, the parents could focus on taking steps to make it a smoother and more comfortable process for everyone involved. The point is to understand the harmony of the family as a whole unit when navigating through the difficult times. The parents staying together might create a facade that protects their children from realizing their unhappiness, but their unhappiness is sure to manifest in other ways, like with reckless behavior or abuse. If instead the parents chose to fulfill their own happiness in a way that respects the happiness of their children as well, then the harmony of the family would be better preserved. It does not mean that everyone remains completely happy throughout the process, but rather that the *ziran* of each individual does not violate the *ziran* of the other.

We can imagine a strong wind blowing through a dense forest. As it wisps by each tree, it follows the patterns created by each unique branch. That is not to say that some branches aren’t

swayed or that some leaves do not fall off, but that each tree is given the proper dose of pressure that its branches require so that the overall wellbeing of the tree remains strong and healthy. Some branches might be already deteriorating and ready to fall to the ground where they can fertilize the earth and create food for the insects below; and some leaves may need to be swept away so that new ones can grow. The wind does not choose which branches fall and which leaves are blown, it flows in and out as its circumstances guide it. The wind allows the branches to pilot its movement, and with each and every bend, turn, and break, the wind transforms itself to maintain the harmony of its crusade with that of its surroundings. It does not follow a certain pattern, but is moved by its dependence *on* and connection *to* the rest of the physical world around it, like the clashes of hot and cold air. It takes the patterns it creates as its own artistry of its course.

Like the wind, *gongfu* ethical spontaneity is about taking difficult situations and acting through sincerity, not only as a skill but as an artist of life. A *gongfu* master can look at how to navigate through a situation by understanding her own unique *ziran* in relation to that of all other things, and because of this can connect herself with the natural flow of the movements around her. It is by this that *cheng* and *gongfu* function hand in hand, with equal force, and as partners guiding to a better understanding of ethical spontaneity. Connecting our human *cheng* to the *cheng* of heaven allows our actions to be executed with ease, and *gongfu* ethical instruction allows them to be enacted with practical precision, both creating overall harmony. This is an expression of the practicality and constructiveness of the *gongfu* approach. As Ames explains,

what makes Confucianism more empirical than empiricism—that is, what makes Confucianism a *radical* empiricism—is the fact that it respects the uniqueness of the particular, and the need for a generative wisdom that takes this uniqueness into account in anticipating a productive future. Rather than advancing universal principles and assuming a taxonomy of natural kinds grounded in some notion of strict identity, Confucians process from always-provisional generalizations made from those particular historical

instances of successful living, the specific events recounted in the narrative of Confucius himself being a case in point. (“Role Ethics” 95-96)

Likewise, the *gongfu* master embodying *cheng* and *ziran* is focused on the elicited reactions that result from particular situations, while of course never straying from the larger context.

In chapter two of the *Zhuangzi*, Ziyou asks “so the piping of the earth means just the sound of those hollows. And the piping of man would be the sound of bamboo panpipes. What, then, is the piping of Heaven?” And Ziqi responds, “it gusts through all the ten thousand differences, allowing each to go its own way. But since one selects out its own, what identity can there be for their rouser?” (*Zhuangzi* 2:4, Ziproyn 9-10). This is the preserving of each unique *ziran* in all individual things, unnerved by whatever the causes and effects are. Movement is rooted in spontaneity, allowing the mind to proceed without calculation or deliberation. The Dao of each person is somehow dictated by their physical form, causing each of the Daos to be different, and to even sometimes conflict. This does not mean one is right and the other is wrong, it means that they are just different. With this perspective our possibilities for a Dao are endless because we do not limit ourselves in any way, and further encourage the unique Dao of others.

We can find another example of the ways we express nature by looking to passage 23 from the *DaoDeJing*,

A whirlwind does not last a morning.
 A downpour does not last a day.
 Who is acting in these cases?
 Heaven and earth—
 But even these can't make them last.
 How then, should humans be able to?
 Thus follow the task and
 The Dao is in accord with the Dao
 What takes accords with taking,
 What gives accords with giving.
 When the taking is in accord, the Dao takes too.
 When the giving is in accord, the Dao gives too. (DDJ 23, Moeller 59)

This passage is asking us to think about how we as humans can expect to make anything last when heaven and earth do not even have this ability. We can't expect for things remain the same, or to have control over them. *Héshànggōng*'s commentary explains,

天地至神，合為飄風暴雨，尚不能使終朝至暮，何況人欲為暴卒乎？

Heaven and earth complete the divine, they assemble the whirlwind and downpour, yet they still are not able to cause them to last a complete morning and night, how much less then are humans able to finish such a violent act? (DaoDeJing-Wang Bi Version)

If we understand this, and allow it to be a part of nature that we express, we will not tend to hold on to things without understanding their constant transformation. “Thus follow the task”, or rather allow what happens to occur, and the give and take of the natural order of the Dao will take care of the rest.

We find stories and characters displaying this kind of ease frequently throughout the *Zhuangzi*. Eno summarizes the *Xiayaoyou* chapter, or “Wandering Far and Unfettered”, as the “celebration of practical knowing by portraying a universe in flux, a natural world that is too protean to be known through theory based assertions of what is so and what is not” (139). Within this chapter is a story describing *Liezi*:

Now, *Liezi* rode forth upon the wind, weightlessly graceful, not heading back until fifteen days had passed. He did not involve himself in anxious calculations about bringing good fortune to himself. Although this allowed him to avoid the exertions of walking, there was still something he needed to depend on. But suppose you were to chariot upon what is true both to Heaven and to earth, riding atop the back-and-forth of the six atmospheric breaths, so that your wandering could nowhere be brought to a halt. You would then be depending on—what? Thus I say, the Consummate Person has no fixed identity, the Spirit Man has no particular merit, the Sage has no name. (*Zhuangzi* 1:7, Ziporyn 5-6)

While the idea of “riding forth with the wind” conveniently matches our previous example, the more important part of the passage is to note the prescription to not indulge in overanalyzing situations and following what is true (*zheng* 正) to Heaven and earth.

Guo Xiang, arguably the most influential commentator of the *Zhuangzi*, describes Heaven and earth in this passage as a blanket term used to describe all individual beings in the world as they are *of-themselves-so*. On his commentary of *Zhuangzi* 1:8, he says “Self-so [*ziran* 自然] means what is so of itself, without being done by anyone or for any purpose... If you can ride upon whatever you happen to encounter, what will you have to depend on? This is how the perfect Virtuoso, who vanishingly unifies self and other, wanders far and unfettered” (Ziproyn 132). The “Consummate Person” here is one that is self-so. With no fixed identity, all things are free to fulfill whatever function suits them; without particular merit, all things can be consummate in any circumstance. Without a name, one is free from labels and the fear of losing it. The tales of the *Zhuangzi* will be explored further in the next section by addressing whether our actions will be anything like morality if our spontaneity relies on nature.

In conclusion, it is important to recognize that when speaking about the aspects of nature that we express, we are not describing matters of fact, but rather recognizing metaphysical ideas (such as oneness) as recommendations. Ni explains,

a metaphysical statement or concept can serve the function of being the goal of *gongfu*, as in the case of the unity between heaven and human (*tianren heyi* 天人合一) or a *gongfu* method, as in the case of the concept of sincerity (*cheng* 誠), or both. In serving these functions, statements that contain metaphysical concepts would be neither subject to empirical confirmation or disconfirmation (as true or false), nor simply contingently created. Such statements can be acts of recognition or recommendation, rather than acts of cognition or arbitrary creation. (“*Gongfu* As Vital” 6)

If our goal is to embody *ziran* in order to be able to follow along with the *cheng* of humans that expresses the *cheng* of heaven, any literature on the matter should be read as *gongfu* instruction. By this, the practitioner is able to evaluate her actions based on their constructiveness and effectiveness towards living a good life, and hopefully transcending morality. It is all in an effort to transform and consummate the self as a transformative process, not an end.

2. The *Zhuangzi* as a Critique on Morality

The remainder of this chapter will continue our discussion about whether our actions will be moral if our spontaneity relies on nature. I will primarily use the *Zhuangzi* as a critique and alternative to the Confucian views cited earlier, although my ultimate goal is to further demonstrate their complementarity through the *gongfu* approach. It would seem that on both the Confucian and Daoist views, the answer is no, our actions will not be ethical if our spontaneity relies on nature. However, the corresponding anecdotes to fixing this problem are different. The Confucian way is to cultivate our *gongfu* spontaneity in order to be more like heaven (to cultivate our *xing* for Mengzi), or to the *cheng* of heaven, ultimately to promote a harmonious social order. Nonetheless, there is certainly room for artistry, discretion, and transformation. Daoism, on the other hand, would prescribe something more like removing oneself from society as the means. The *Zhuangzi*, while of course not prescribing any particular way, might also suggest something more like embodying *ziran*. This paper sides with the *Zhuangzi* in order to break down any kind of morality or certain preset notions of which aspects of our *gongfu* we need to cultivate. This will eventually bring us back to Ni's notion of *gongfu* ethics to demonstrate that the *Zhuangzi* is in line with such an ethic.

In the last section we spoke of the *ziran* expressed by the wind, and how a *gongfu* master in line with *cheng* might navigate a similar course; that is, through recognizing the individual unique *ziran* of the things in one's surroundings and beyond, and allowing ethical deliberation to be elicited by those circumstances through the connection between the *cheng* of heaven and the *cheng* of humans, which necessarily entails *ziran*. We then began to explore if our actions would be anything like morality if our spontaneity relies on or reflects the spontaneity of nature. The first problem is recognizing the limitations of our anthropocentric ethics and the issues that

follow from comparing human ethics with the way nature behaves. If we can start here by agreeing that an ethics less focused on humans would be beneficial to the harmony of all things, then we can begin to understand further how an ethic relying on nature might not be “moral” at all, and then why that’s actually not a problem.

Let us start by describing what I mean by morality. As we discussed in chapter 1, *gongfu* and morality belong to two different categories; morality is about duty and moral obligation whereas *gongfu* is about the art of living (Ni, “Can Bad Buys” 2). As Ni explains:

Duty is a thing which may be *exacted* from a person, as one exacts a debt. Unless we think that it may be exacted from him, we do not call it his duty.” Since we do not generally consider that you should be punished for not speaking fluent Chinese, so even though you fail to maximize your happiness in this way, we do not say you are immoral. We condemn morally wrong actions, but we feel sorry, pity, or disappointment for those who fail to follow a *gongfu* instruction or do not have the *gongfu* to bring more happiness. (“Can Bad Buys” 3)

Nonetheless, this only grasps the concepts theoretically because in reality there does not seem to be any moral trait that does not also correspond to a *gongfu* skill, or lack of it. “It seems reasonable to think that moral goodness and the opposing vice get their moral status exactly because of their important function in bettering or harming human life. In this sense then, the moral goodness of a person *is* the *gongfu* of the person” (Ni, “Can Bad Guys” 8). If we understand morality in this way, it seems difficult to call nature a moral force.

In fact, we might not think of nature as fulfilling any duties whatsoever, at least in the conscious way we think of a human fulfilling duties. Not only is nature impartial and non-anthropocentric, it also does not act according to preset standards or beliefs. As predictable as we make them to be, even our scientific theories are constantly evolving and changing. We can recall our discussion of fluid dynamics and *ganying* in the previous two chapters. The physicality

behind this idea has proven to be more consistent with the way things actually are than Western efficient causality, or force mechanics. As Bruya reminds us,

This “eliciting” is the “drawing forth” notion of causation mentioned above and, by the way, an accurate description of the actual physics involved in such a situation, in that wind is created by pressure and temperature differentials rather than an actual “blowing,” as we put it in common parlance. (216)

Nature moving and behaving in this way represents its unbiased *cheng* and so also *ziran*. The spontaneous unpredictable movements that we see in nature cause fear in the human which brings about defense mechanisms and attempts at controlling natural forces. For example, although technology continually brings us closer (or so it seems) to understanding the patterns of nature, we cannot predict the next earthquake, tsunami, or volcano eruption with certainty. We are chasing after consistency within an inconsistent force. The way that nature is in constant flux is a timeless flow. Events like natural disasters are considered unfair human tragedies, but in general humans do not blame heaven or label it as evil. Instead, we understand the spontaneity of these events and attempt to make progress in how we deal with future natural disasters.

If we imagine a human behaving with a similar spontaneity, we might consider her actions unethical. For example, someone who makes an agreement or a promise and spontaneously breaks it would generally be considered dishonest and untrustworthy. This is why we have laws and legal contracts binding humans to behave in a way that allows us to ensure (at least a greater extent) that certain agreements and promises will not be broken. This is also why Ni advocates for the use of laws to regulate those who have not yet cultivated certain *gongfu* skills that prohibits them from understanding that hurting others in turn hurts oneself. We often speak of the laws of nature, but it is also widely known that these laws are often arrived at by induction and by no means exempt from change. Nature makes no promises and its unpredictability is exactly why we strive so hard to understand it. We cannot sign a contract with

nature that binds it not to cause a devastating earthquake. Instead, we find ways to better anticipate and prepare for such events. If one were to behave with a similar unpredictability, impartiality, and non-anthropocentric view, we almost certainly would not consider her actions ethical. So why is it that Chinese philosophers were so keen to find a way to incorporate the movements of the natural world into their ethical systems?

This question can be better understood when looking at the historical context of the philosophers who were theorizing during this time. Most of the philosophical theories regarded in this paper come from in and around the Warring States Period. It was an approximately 400-year period of great tragedy for China from roughly the fifth century B.C.E to the Qin dynasty in 221 B.C.E. Seven states in China (the Qi, Chu, Yan, Han, Zhao, Wei and the Qin) were in a constant empire-building war and some of the bloodiest battles in history occurred during this time. As such, we can imagine the people of China starting to lose hope in the human. Thinkers that developed out of such a time, and even thereafter thus tried to overcome this problem by looking beyond the human and to the regularities of nature. Although Confucianism and Daoism precede this period, the two philosophies were elaborated upon by *Mencius* and the *Zhuangzi* thereafter (“Warring States Period”). Thus, Confucian ideas about connecting the *cheng* of human and the *cheng* of heaven began to develop alongside Daoist ideas of spontaneous action akin to that of nature. This context helps us to better understand the ways in which we can make comparisons with more modern ideas of morality.

When speaking of duties as we understand them in terms of morality, it is strange to think of nature as acting based on any dutiful premise. We might think of nature as fulfilling duties in the sense that it is “self-consummating” in terms of having recognizable patterns, but that still doesn’t seem to be the same as fulfilling duties. By self-consummating, I mean that nature does

not leave things undone in the sense that its movements are complete of themselves; we do not necessarily feel sad at the sight of a dead tree trunk knowing that the worms and insects below will make use of it and a new one will grow in as a part of nature's cycle. Whether we are labeling it as Heaven, nature, or *tian*, they all are behaving in a way that is neither striving nor lacking. We don't think of a drought as an imperfection or an evil act of nature; we understand that so is the cycle of the earth. We may even blame it on human influence like pollution or improper irrigation. Certainly, as we mentioned, humans have and continue to impose on this natural order and cause unnecessary disasters because of our anthropocentric ethics. However, we also understand the events which happen are out of our control or influence are not considered a flaw within nature itself, nor part of nature's evil plot to destroy humans. Instead, we know they are part of nature's responsiveness to its circumstances, like, for example, an earthquake as the result of moving tectonic plates.

We only perceive of these events as disasters because we are concerned with the human first and foremost. However, a group of trees in the forest might not view a naturally occurring giant forest fire as a disaster as it fertilizes the land and brings about the opportunity for new growth. We would not be able to have certain vitality and growth without corresponding destruction. It is that we find death and destruction negative or bad that we perceive of these events as disasters. As such, it is difficult to imagine not being upset by a high number of deaths and destroyed homes caused by an unforeseen natural event. In this way, it would seem that if we behaved as nature, or strived for some form of following nature, our ethical system would no longer make sense. We can now look to the *Zhuangzi* to better understand why following along with nature even though it might not bring about "moral" actions could bring about a flourishing and more harmonious world.

3. Skepticism and *Cheng* 成 in The *Zhuangzi*

In this section I will use examples from the *Zhuangzi* to introduce why our supposed problem might not be a problem after all. The *Zhuangzi* has been repeatedly referred to as a skeptic and relativist throughout modern philosophical scholarship (i.e.: *Essays on Skepticism, Relativism, and Ethics, in the Zhuangzi*). In many cases, especially in the Western philosophical tradition, this is often seen as a weakness. The *Zhuangzi* is full of mysterious stories about animals and mystical sages who are endowed with magical powers that allow them to defy their seemingly natural limitations and attain great spontaneous skill. The *Zhuangzi* also includes many stories comparing the perspectives held by different beings inhabiting this world, and in the end demonstrating our incapacity to say what anything really is. These stories also encourage us to open up our realm of possibility so that we do not limit our capacities and perspectives, which in turn allows us to achieve things we may have never thought possible. It is from these stories that we might find why relinquishing any system of morality and acting through *cheng* as a *ziran-wuwei* ethic would actually serve the overall harmony of the world.

Following from the last section regarding a non-anthropocentric ethics, we find another passage in the *Zhuangzi* 2:34 pointing towards this idea.

The great course is unproclaimed. Great demonstration uses no words. Great Humanity is not humane. Great rectitude is not fastidious. Great courage is not invasive. For when the Course [the Dao 道] becomes explicit, it ceases to be the Course. When words demonstrate by debate, they fail to communicate. When Humanity is constantly sustained, it cannot reach its maturity. When rectitude is pure, it cannot extend itself to others. When courage is invasive, it cannot succeed [*cheng* 成]. These five are originally round, but they are forced toward squareness. (Ziporyn 16-17).

This passage illustrates some of our earlier points, notably that words are not a sufficient means of demonstration. Interestingly, this passage goes beyond thinking about following along with

nature's impartiality, but even says "great humanity is not humane". Not only is heaven impartial and all-inclusive and its great course unproclaimed, but what it means to be a great human is to not be centered on the human. Further, by labeling "the course (the Dao 道) as any certain way, it can no longer remain as the course because we are now only following instead of allowing oneself to be moved.

The use of *cheng* 成 here is used to show how courage can be either successful or unsuccessful. This passage gives us an opportunity to take a virtue, that of courage, and explore it through the our *ziran-wuwei* ethic and *gongfu* instruction. To see courage through a *ziran-wuwei* ethic is to understand how your actions and ways of being courageous are only within the context of allowing them to come from within you, and by not necessarily striving for them. One who is in search of a way to prove their courage is immediately diminishing any real chance of successfully doing so because the act will not be stemming from their circumstances or natural affects, or in other words their spontaneity. Through *gongfu* instruction, one also understands the special opportunity to use their creativity when interpreting how to be courageous. The *gongfu* perspective can transform a traditional hero scenario of a superhero saving the damsel in distress and shape it into an artistic expression of bravery, maybe one less expected. For example, the *gongfu* master might use his courage to be vulnerable and express himself in a way that exposes his weaknesses because this will allow his human relationships to grow; maybe this is carried out by allowing for the damsel's demise because of an understanding that her natural cycle as a human is to live and die somehow.

Chapter two of the *Zhuangzi*, *Qiwu lun* "Equalizing Assessments of Things", is a compilation of stories of skillful sages and discussions demonstrating our inability to have any real knowing, mainly because of the myriad varying perspectives among all things. This chapter

is also sprinkled with further uses of *cheng* 成, which Ziporyn translates as either “succeed” or “fully formed”, and that we have previously translated as “consummate”. The only difference between this character and *cheng* 誠 is that the latter includes the character for “word”, *yan* 言. As such, we can think of *cheng* 誠 as signifying truthfulness (Ni 196). We can look at *cheng* 誠 and *cheng* 成 as mutually entailing; a person who is *cheng* 誠 must be *cheng* 成, or a person who acts sincerely must be fully formed, or self-consummating, and of course spontaneous. In order to simplify our inquiry into the use of both terms, I will use their English translations by continuing to translate *cheng* 誠 as sincerity and *cheng* 成 as consummation or “fully formed”, depending on context. By taking a look at the ways *cheng* 成 is used in the upcoming passages, we can better understand why taking on an amoral perspective by following nature, where right and wrong do not exist, might not be a problem after all.

The skepticism in the *Zhuangzi* refers to the myriad varying perspectives in the world as grounds for our inability to have any sort of concrete knowing, or moreover, our inability to assert one view as superior to another. While this makes a good case for why we might not be able to have that knowledge, it is left to us to figure out what is ideal about viewing the world with this skepticism. Why *wouldn't* we want to have a fixed perspective? Some might feel that with a fixed perspective and a foundational moral standpoint, the common ground among people will create social harmony, trust, and allow for moral progress. As we mentioned, the *ziran-wuwei* ethic certainly leaves room for rules, but only insofar as they naturally arise, and with a focus on the evolution, transformation, and flexibility of said rules. The *gongfu* perspective then allows us to use our discretion as artists of life to adapt these rules to our inner affects as constructive skills. A fixed perspective limits us from exploring these options and, while less complicated, also hinders our creativity to flourish. With a flexible perspective we are never left

searching, and we are content with the transformational process. This is why the *Zhuangzi* considers *cheng* 成 as negative; thinking you are already fully formed cuts you off from other possibilities.

Chapter two's early use of the term is introduced by speaking about the mutual dependence between the different organs and openings of our body as analogous to an all-powerful controller or doer (i.e. religiously speaking, God).

If you regard what you have received as fully formed [成 consummate] once and for all, unable to forget it, all the time it survives is just a vigil spent waiting for its end. In the process, you grind and lacerate yourself against all the things around you. Its activities will be over as quickly as a horse galloping by, unstoppable—hausted to the point of collapse never knowing what it all amounts to—how can you not lament this? What good does it do if others say, “To us he is not dead?” The body has decayed and the mind went with it. Can this be called anything but an enormous sorrow? Is human life always this bewildering or am I the only bewildered one? Is there actually any man, or anything in a man that is not bewildered? (*Zhuangzi* 2:10, Ziporyn 11)

Regarding our body as the doer, or a certain part or organ, and seeing ourselves as already fully formed (*cheng* 成) only limits our perspective of what we are capable of. Before we know it, life will pass us by and then we may have never lived. This gives us an interesting perspective on our take of *cheng* 誠 as an ideal way to connect to heaven as it demonstrates the Confucian-Daoist complementarity. By not limiting ourselves in the way described above, and allowing heaven to be our connection to our inner affects, our burden of choice is alleviated. A *gongfu* master aligning with *cheng* 誠 might take his work to become a consummate person as a limitless journey, and also as consummate in and of itself. By this I mean that the Dao we choose to follow as it is connected to the Dao of heaven will leave nothing undone (*zicheng* 自成) as long as we do not limit its possibilities. In this way, the Confucian notion of *cheng* 誠 and the *Zhuangzi*'s notion of *cheng* 成 become complementary.

Searching for something to “make sense of it all”, like a God, or any kind of all-knowing doer that dictates doctrines of right and wrong only lead us to “enormous sorrow”. That kind of expectation never allows us to really live as we are at all, instead we are always striving for this or that end, or to be a person that is not aligned with our natural tendencies, thus limiting us from achieving what might be our most useful assets. In reality, we all have different perspectives so trying to make any certain one be the almighty correct one only closes us off from possibilities we had never imagined. Once we consider ourselves to be consummate, *cheng* 成 we risk blocking room for certain other transformation and growth. As Wang Fuzhi comments, “Heaven spontaneously takes a certain form, transformations spontaneously operate, the vital energy spontaneously proceeds, and whether we understand it or not has no effect on it. Is it not the height of foolishness to seek a determiner of right and wrong amid all this?” (Ziproyn 143). Heaven itself is fully formed, it does not do right or wrong, and our understanding (or lack thereof) will not change anything about it.

This brings us back to our interpretation of natural disasters. Most people do not think that a hurricane happens as a punishment from heaven, but rather as part of the natural cycle of the earth. Likewise, we cannot expect everyone to treat us as though we all agree on one binding ethical arrangement, because when one breaks a supposed ethical agreement, we will find extreme sorrow, disappointment, and hurt. This is the where using our *gongfu* spontaneity comes in. If we are following along with *cheng* as a *ziran-wuwei* ethic, using the *gongfu* approach then achieves what is most useful in regards to a flourishing life. In this way, we will probably avoid causing pain to others in the first place by respecting and allowing for each individual’s *ziran*.

This eliminates the possibility of a *gongfu* master in her ultimate consummation being evil or able to cause harm. However, our discussion in this paper often refers to one on the path

dedicated to an embodied *gongfu* spontaneity, and until the ultimate consummation is reached the possibility for harm is only avoided, not eliminated. Robert Eno entertains the possibility of a *wuwei* torturer which is a similar question to “can bad guys have good *gongfu*?” Eno says, “dao-practices can be adapted to any end: the dao of butchering people might provide much the same spiritual spontaneity as the dao of butchering oxen—as many a samurai might testify. The *Zhuangzi*’s portrait of daos makes no selection amount the goals to which it might apply” (142). This paper argues, however, that the foundation of oneness within *ziran* avoids such possibility. This is also because instead of looking to moral duty or an ultimate doer, we are looking to our natural affects elicited by our circumstances as our guide

The *Zhuangzi* is encouraging us not to look for an ultimate doer to give us any kind of guidance, nor even look for that guidance in our *own* mind on any intellectual level. Moreover, even if it were possible to find that doer, or a genuine ruler within us, it makes no difference; it neither helps nor harms us. The subsequent passage of the *Zhuangzi* gives us further insight into this, and *cheng* 成.

If we follow whatever has so far taken shape, fully formed [*cheng* 成], in our minds, making that our teacher, who could ever be without a teacher? The mind comes to be what it is by taking possession of whatever it selects out of the process of alternation—but does that mean it is has to truly understand that process? The fool takes something up from it too. But to claim that any such things as “right” and “wrong” *before* they come to be fully formed in someone’s mind in this way – that is like saying you left for Yue today and arrived there yesterday. This is to regard the nonexistent as existent. This existence of the nonexistent is beyond the understanding of even the divine sageking Yu –so what possible sense could it make to someone like me? (*Zhuangzi* 2:11, Ziporyn 11)

It is by integrating our minds with the movements of Heaven that we come to take shape, what I would call our connection to *cheng* 誠 and means to consummation; consummation with the ability to evolve. By this we lose ourselves in the flux of nature, and become one with it. Believing that there are objective a priori principles preceding that is simply not possible in the

sense of ultimate knowledge. Instead, it is “to regard the nonexistent as existent”. Taking anything as fully formed, *cheng* 成, is limiting one’s perspective and not allowing for the transformation of things. The way to be consummate and not limit oneself is by not labeling good or bad.

If we come to agree with the *Zhuangzi*’s method of demonstrating our inability to have certain knowledge, one might worry that with such skepticism comes the reduction of harm or other good things. This is because by not labeling anything as good or bad, and living under such neutrality, our emotional attention and accuracy may be dulled. It means that when someone saves a life, they might not be rewarded, even with praise. It also means that when someone takes a life, they might not be punished, even with social ostracizing. This results in the worry that people will act on a whim and their selfish, destructive desires will cause them to do horrible things. Then there will not even be a way to punish them or enforce a system of laws to ensure others don’t do the same.

But how can we know the ways to act like heaven? Lu Huiqing comments on the *Zhuangzi* 2:11, “indeed heaven’s piping is so difficult to know, the genuine ruler so hard to see, that it is only by losing oneself, disintegrating to the point of making the mind merge into them, that they can be found” (Ziporyn 143). One way is by eliminating any real sense of loss or negative perspectives of death. Chapter 18 of the *Zhuangzi* tells of the death of *Zhuangzi*’s wife. His friend Hui Shih comes to visit him expecting him to be mourning, and only to find *Zhuangzi* happily singing and playing the drums. *Zhuangzi* was of course in despair at first, but came to a realization. Note here, that he was at least initially naturally sad, he felt those affects fully, and that is okay. The point is not to push away one’s natural affects as a coping method, but to come out of it effortlessly by understanding the natural cycle of things. *Zhuangzi*’s thinking of her

death as part of the constant transformation of the universe allowed him to see the transformation as akin to the changing of the seasons.

The second way *Zhuangzi* copes with her death is by understanding that our own personal perspectives are neither superior nor inferior to anything else's. What actually differentiates our perspective from that of a tree or mushroom? And moreover, what makes our perspective more valuable? For the *Zhuangzi*, there is an essential difference, but not in the way that makes one perspective better than another, or the right one versus the wrong one. We can look to the passage in chapter two where *Zhuangzi* dreamt he was a butterfly. He woke up and wondered whether he was actually *Zhuangzi* dreaming he was a butterfly, or if he was a butterfly now dreaming he is *Zhuangzi*. We see that he recognizes there is an essential difference in perspective and being between him and the butterfly, but not insofar as actual knowledge. We can't really be sure of anything, so it is better to keep our options open and not limit our perspectives. This too is the way that heaven behaves. It is impartial and unbiased, with no right or wrong, it just ceaselessly and spontaneously acts.

In exploring why this kind of spontaneity is even ideal, we have to think about exactly what *Zhuangzi*'s project was. His specific version of skepticism may not have only been to relinquish fixed beliefs, but to also have a therapeutic effect. Kjellberg explains,

Evidently he recommends skepticism not as an alternative to learning but as a method by which to interpret and apply what one has learned... Skeptical arguments might be thought of as "therapeutic" rather than as "conclusive," since their function is to cause a change in the listener rather than to prove a particular point. Aporetic skepticism of this sort, which deploys therapeutic arguments designed to generate uncertainty, is better understood as a philosophical practice, analyzed in terms of its methods and goals, than as a position in the usual sense. (16, 20)

Kjellberg's analysis emulates the *gongfu* approach of *Zhuangzi*'s project by reading the text as a method to cultivate "how" rather than "what". It is up to the agent to decide what is the right

path, not to tell the agent which one that is. This is also emblematic of the Confucian-Daoist complementarity in that the *Zhuangzi* is not advocating a kind of skepticism in order to turn his readers away from cultivation, but rather to see a version that pulls out from what is already internally within the agent. It is not clear whether the *Zhuangzi* is a critique on morality, but reading it in this way illuminates the amoral *gongfu* perspective and gives us insight into answering Ni's question.

Our appreciation of our emotions, and ability to properly identify with them might be in fact heightened through spontaneity. Our connection to heaven through *cheng* allows us to better distinguish our natural dispositions and allow them to manifest through the embodiment of *ziran*, bringing us to a keen awareness of our circumstances without being bogged down by anxious concern about consequences. The *gongfu* approach then takes this connection and allows us to target those natural affects that bring us to living a good life. If we agree with Kjellberg, the therapeutic aspect of the *Zhuangzi*'s approach to ethics seems to then also be a *gongfu* ethics. It allows us to take what is already within us, our unique *ziran*, and hones in on the aspects that allows us to thrive as an individual without interfering with the *ziran* of others. This kind of *gongfu* ethical spontaneity involves both the progressive Confucian cultivation and the responsive infant-like Daoist cultivation. The two work harmoniously for the same end, a good life. The seemingly irresolvable conflict between fate and human hope do not represent a tragedy. Instead, they connect us to what is natural both within ourselves and the greater harmony of the world.

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