

## Article

# “Non-Action” and “Assistance”: Laozi’s Thoughts on How to Treat Others

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**Abstract:** How to treat others is a key topic in Laozi’s thought. Laozi not only advocates “non-action” (*wuwei* 無爲), or not interfering with others, but also hopes that actors will take some positive responsibilities for others. He expects that actors can implement the instructions of Dao 道 and fulfill the role of “assisting others to achieve their self-so-ness but not daring to interfere” (chapter 64). He believes that “one person will become more abundant when he contributes to others” (chapter 81); that is to say, actors and others are always in the process of mutual attainment. What he claims can be summarized by the dual assertion “to do  $V_1$ , but not to do  $V_2$ ” ( $V$  means a type of action), containing two kinds of responsibilities: the situations represented by “not to do  $V_2$ ” are concrete manifestations of “non-action,” which refers to the negative responsibility of non-interference with others, while the situations signified by “to do  $V_1$ ” are essentially a kind of action of assisting others, which is a positive responsibility for others. There is a subtle cooperative relationship between “assistance” and “non-action.” In a nutshell, what Laozi expects is a responsibility to support others to actualize their authentic self on the premise of earnestly respecting the spontaneity and autonomy of others. When the focus on “non-action” is broken through, we can grasp Laozi’s thinking deeply and expand our understanding of his thought.

**Keywords:** Laozi; ethic; others; non-action (*wuwei* 無爲); assistance (*fu* 輔); self-so-ness (*ziran* 自然)



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## 1. Introduction

The ethical issue of how to treat others is often discussed in the *Laozi*.<sup>1</sup> The sages function as the text’s main subjects and ideal actors, and there are rich statements on the relationship between the sages and others, which contain Laozi’s deep thinking and fundamental propositions on the issue mentioned above. When we try to understand his claim on this issue, the first thing that comes to our mind is quite probably the famous concept of “non-action” (*wuwei* 無爲),<sup>2</sup> on which there is a basic consensus from researchers that it cannot be a negation of all actions, but only those improper actions or actions against Dao. Based on this, when discussing the issue of others, we will gain an opinion that what *wuwei* negates is interfering actions, and Laozi advocates that the actors should not interfere with others.

This kind of understanding is in line with Laozi’s thinking. However, only paying attention to *wuwei* is not enough to fully grasp Laozi’s rich thinking on the issue of how to treat others. In fact, “non-action” or not interfering with others is only one aspect of his proposition. He also advocates that the actors should take some positive actions directed towards others. For example, chapter 64 in the *Laozi* says: “The sages . . . assist the myriad *wu* to achieve their self-so-ness but not dare to interfere” (聖人 . . . 以輔萬物之自然而不敢爲).<sup>3</sup> This suggests that “not daring to interfere” as a manifestation of “non-action” is only one aspect of the sages’ practice, for at the same time they should also assist others to achieve their “self-so-ness” (*ziran* 自然). Laozi also talks about the positive actions that are even more forceful than “assistance.” For instance, chapter 37 says: “When their greed breaks out during their development, I will suppress it with plainness which is nameless” (化而慾作, 吾將鎮之以無名之樸). Another example appears in chapter 56: “Block up their

apertures, close their doors, dissolve their sharpness, and relieve their troubles” (塞其兌,閉其門,挫其銳,解其紛).<sup>4</sup> All these statements suggest that actors should take some kind of positive actions beyond “non-action.”

In previous studies on Laozi’s thought, although most scholars focus on the famous concept of “non-action,” some scholars have noticed that there are some theories of positive actions in the *Laozi*. A. C. Graham points out that Laozi describes the behavior of the sage as “doing nothing” (*wuwei* 無爲), though there are other contexts, however, in which it will be described not as “doing nothing” but as “doing but . . . ,” such as “to generate but without taking possession, to do but without presuming on it, to lead but without managing” (生而不有, 為而不恃, 長而不宰) in chapters 10 and 51 (Graham 1989, p. 232). Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall interpreted *wuwei* as “Noncoercive action that is in accordance with the *de* of things” (Ames and Hall 2003, p. 67), and Wang Zhongjiang 王中江 summarizes the sages’ activities following the rule of *wuwei* as a kind of “soft effect” (弱作用力) (Wang 2013). Both of two viewpoints have affirmed that some positive actions are allowed in Laozi’s thought. In addition, Li Ruohui 李若暉 inspects the terms *xing* 行, *dong* 動, *zuo* 作, and *wei* 為 in the *Laozi*, and emphasizes that Laozi advocates that all actions can be taken as long as they are in line with Dao (Li 2016). Ding Sixin 丁四新 points out that *wuwei* is a principle used to regulate *wei*, and *wei* is free and open on the premise of *wuwei* (Ding 2018). Both Li and Ding have noticed Laozi’s thoughts on how to “act” (*wei*) and believed that, premised on a certain rule, actions are totally free. All in all, compared with the researchers who only pay attention to *wuwei*, these researchers have noted Laozi’s theories of positive actions, providing important inspirations for understanding Laozi’s thought. Of course, it will be found that although the other aspect outside of *wuwei* has been noticed in these studies, Laozi’s theories related to it still need to be examined in more depth. Especially, the nature of those positive actions and the relationship between positive actions and *wuwei* have not been revealed in enough depth.

This paper intends to present Laozi’s thought on the topic of how to treat others, on the basis of the studies mentioned above, trying to advance our understanding of Laozi’s theory. It will show that *wuwei* and positive actions are two basic aspects of Laozi’s proposition on how to treat others, and there is a subtle cooperative relationship between these two. So, how does Laozi express these two propositions? In particular, how does he talk about those positive actions? Would not those positive behaviors—such as “assisting” and “suppressing” cited above—contradict the idea of *wuwei*? Furthermore, the concept of “self-so-ness” is usually understood as a situation where things can exist spontaneously and not be affected by external forces. When an actor has taken actions such as “assisting” or “suppressing” towards others, is the state of those others still “self-so”? All of these are important questions needing to be discussed in detail. In this process, we will be able to break through the focus on the concept of “non-action,” so as to gain a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of Laozi’s thought.

## 2. Two Situations as Background

In order to facilitate the discussion on the questions mentioned above, it is needed to explain two basic issues. The first concerns the relationship between ethics and politics in Laozi’s thought, and the second involves the terms Laozi uses to refer to “others.”

The treatment of others is by its very nature a kind of ethical activity. However, the actions towards others that Laozi cares about are often related to the practices the rulers take while governing the people. This then raises the question of the relationship between ethics and politics. We know that Aristotle divides human practice into two types, which are ethical practice and political practice, and what the former seeks is the good for a single man, while what the latter pursues is the good for a state (Aristotle 1984, p. 3).

The actions that Laozi addresses also involve these two fields, but he does not clearly differentiate them. In his view, the actions of sages as the ideal actors not only seek the good for the individual but also pursue the good for “the-world-under-heaven” (*tianxia* 天下) as a political place. Simply put, ethics represents a broader field that includes politics

in his thought. This is related to the purpose of Laozi's philosophy, i.e., to reorganize the order of *tianxia*. He hopes to guide people's actions through some influential actors, and the most influential actors are the sages as the rulers of *tianxia*, who are also called "nobles and kings" (*houwang* 侯王). Thus, his propositions on the issue of how to act focus on these men. In this system, politics, as a kind of field of ethics, should accept the guidance of ethical norms, and this situation can be called "the ethicalization of politics." Of course, it does not mean that the treatment of others belongs to the realm of political activities completely. Afterall, the role of the sages is not limited to politics.<sup>5</sup>

Laozi uses several terms to signify "others" when discussing how they should be acted upon, including *min* 民, *baixing* 百姓, *ren* 人, and *wu* 物. *Min* and *baixing* refer to "others" in the political context. *Ren* has a broader meaning than those two above and contains all other people toward whom sages act, not limited to politics. The usages of *wu* are a little complicated, and its meanings depend on contexts. Since the texts where this term appears are involved in the following discussion, let us examine the meanings of it here, so as to provide a background for the following.

The word *wu* appears frequently in the *Laozi*, and it is usually understood as all the existences in the world. A detailed inspection of the texts shows that this understanding is not clear enough, and the meanings of this term needs to be further analyzed. In Laozi's expression of *wu*, it always appears as a party of some relationship, including the relationship between *wu* and Dao and the relationship between *wu* and sages. From this, we can see that *wu* contains two basic meanings. One appears in cosmology, where it refers to all phenomenal things in the world originating from Dao, including human beings and natural things other than humans. The other appears in the context related to ethics, and signifies "others" with a broad sense, including other people and natural things toward which the sages act. Furthermore, it needs to be noticed that in the second situation *wu* sometimes has specific meanings, either referring in particular to natural things to which the sages face, or referring specifically to other people toward whom the sages are oriented. Chapter 27 provides an example of the former: "The sages are always good at saving other people, so other people will not be abandoned; The sages are always good at saving *wu*, so *wu* will not be abandoned" (聖人常善救人，故無棄人；常善救物，故無棄物). Additionally, the latter will be found in the following passage:

The sages engage in non-action, teach without words, and the myriad *wu* are prosperous though the sages do not initiate them.

是以聖人處無爲之事，行不言之教，萬物作焉而不辭。(Chapter 2)<sup>6</sup>

*Wu* may be disgusted by this, so the persons who follow the principle of Dao do not allow themselves to be in this situation.

物或惡之，故有道者不處。(Chapter 24)

As for the way of *wu*, some move ahead while others follow behind . . . It is for this reason that the sages eschew the excessive, the superlative, and the extravagant. 物或行或隨 . . . 是以聖人去甚，去奢，去泰。(Chapter 29)

If the nobles and kings can follow it, then the myriad *wu* will be able to develop along their own lines. When their greed breaks out during their development, I will suppress it with plainness which is nameless.

侯王若能守之，萬物將自化。化而慾作，吾將鎮之以無名之樸。(Chapter 37)

What the sages desire is no desire, and they do not prize property that is hard to come by. What the sages study is not studying, and they will remedy the masses when the latter are at fault. By these ways, the sages will assist the myriad *wu* to achieve their self-so-ness but not dare to interfere.

聖人慾不慾，不貴難得之貨，學不學，復眾人之所過，以輔萬物之自然而不敢為。(Chapter 64)

The mysterious virtue runs so deep and distant, turning back along with *wu* to reach the great concordance.

玄深矣，遠矣，與物反(返)矣，然後乃至大順。(Chapter 65)

In these examples, *wu* ostensibly refers to all others to which the sages face, but it can be seen from context what this word mainly signifies is other people: In chapter 2, the myriad *wu* as the object of education refers to men; in chapter 64, the myriad *wu* corresponds to “the masses” (*zhongren* 眾人) that appeared in the preceding statement; and in chapters 24, 29, 37, and 65, *wu* means the people who take those actions such as “being disgusted” (*wu* 惡), “moving ahead” (*xing* 行), “following behind” (*sui* 隨), “their greed breaking out” (*yuzuo* 慾作), and “returning back” (*fan* 返). In previous studies, some scholars have noticed that *wu* refers to people in a few sentences of the *Laozi*.<sup>7</sup> Here, I further illustrate this situation. First, in the preceding quotations, I try to show all the passages where *wu* might have this meaning. Secondly, I want to point out that, in these passages, it is not enough to recognize that *wu* signifies people, but more specifically, what *wu* signifies is other people toward whom the sages act, which is a critical part of “others” in Laozi’s thought.

It is worth noting that *wu* had already been used to refer to people before the *Laozi*, as in:

The monarch of Jin cannot get close to *wu*, so it can be inferred that Jin will be in trouble.

物以無親，晉之不能，亦可知也。(Du and Kong 1999, p. 1286)

A particularly beautiful *wu* is enough to make people’s minds change.

夫有尤物，足以移人。(Du and Kong 1999, p. 1493)

If he can follow the good *wu* and treat the people kindly, then his country will prosper for a long time.

若能類善物，以混厚民人者，必有章譽蕃育之祚。(Xu 2002, p. 105)

In short, the term *wu* is a key point needing attention when interpreting *Laozi*. It contains two basic meanings in this book. First, it signifies all phenomenal things originating from Dao in cosmology. Secondly, it appears in the context related to ethics, signifying “others” toward whom the sages act, and sometimes, *wu* as “others” refers specifically to other people. In modern Chinese language, *wu* usually signifies natural things other than humans. Thus, we should be especially careful to avoid the influence of the modern usage when understanding Laozi’s thought.

### 3. Two Responsibilities for Treating Others

Now, let us examine Laozi’s ideas on the treatment of others in detail. It has been mentioned in the Introduction that “non-action” is one of his basic claims, and as Graham has discovered, there are other contexts in which his claims will be described as “doing but . . . ” (Graham 1989, p. 232). Graham makes this point based on chapters 10 and 51. To be precise, chapter 51 speaks of the relationship between Dao and *wu*, while chapter 10 talks about the relationship between sages and others. Only the latter belongs to the domain of the topic we are concerned with. Of course, the situation described in chapter 51 is not totally irrelevant to this topic, and actually, it is a basis for the actions of sages described in chapter 10 (cf. Ye 2014). Since we are talking about how sages treat others, let us turn to the passage in chapter 10:

Grow them, but do not occupy them; work for them, but never control them; develop them, but do not dominate them.

生而不有，爲而不恃(持)，<sup>8</sup>長而不宰。

The translation here differs from that of Graham. First, the word *shi* 恃 has been given a different interpretation. Secondly, I think the two aspects—what should do and what should not do—can be more clearly reflected in this kind of translation. We can see that

“growing” (*sheng* 生), “working” (*wei* 爲), and “developing” (*zhang* 長) are the right actions advocated by Laozi, while “occupying” (*you* 有), “controlling” (*chi* 持), and “dominating” (*zai* 宰) are the improper ones rejected by Laozi. *Sheng* 生 and *zhang* 長 refer to providing various resources for others. *Wei* 爲 is a commendatory term here, differing from the word *wei* 爲 in *wuwei* 無為. What *wei* 爲 in this passage signifies is a right action that is similar to *Sheng* 生 and *zhang* 長. As for *you* 有, *chi* 持, and *zai* 宰, they belong to the actions that the claim of *wuwei* 無為 negates. Actually, they are three forms of *wei* 爲 that contains a special meaning in *wuwei* 無為.

Chapter 64 also provides a classic example, which Graham does not pay attention to. This chapter says: “The sages . . . assist the myriad *wu* to achieve their self-so-ness but not dare to interfere” (聖人 . . . 以輔萬物之自然而不敢爲). (For a full statement of this passage, see the quotation in Section 2). The way of expression in this passage—“doing but . . .”—is similar to chapter 10. Here, Laozi affirms the actions of “remedying” (*fu* 復) and “assisting” (*fu* 輔), while rejecting that of “interfering” (*wei* 爲). In terms of value of actions, there is a consistency between *fu* 復, *fu* 輔 in this chapter and *sheng* 生, *wei* 爲, *zhang* 長 in chapter 10. Additionally, the meaning of *wei* in this chapter diverges from the one in chapter 10, as it instead refers to improper actions. Having shifted roles, *wei* now enters the company of the criticized actions such as *you* 有, *chi* 持, and *zai* 宰 in chapter 10.

If we want to provide a generalization that can clearly reflect both the actions advocated by Laozi and the ones rejected by him, then I tend to sum up the expressions that appear in these chapters as “to do  $V_1$ , but not to do  $V_2$ ” ( $V$  means a type of action), rather than “doing but . . .” generalized by Graham. It reminds us that Laozi advises simultaneously both “to do  $V_1$ ” and “not to do  $V_2$ ” when actors are oriented toward others. Those actions advocated by Laozi, such as “growing” (*sheng* 生), “working” (*wei* in *wei-er-bu-chi*), “developing” (*zhang* 長), “remedying” (*fu* 復), and “assisting” (*fu* 輔), totally are concrete manifestations of  $V_1$ , while the actions rejected by Laozi, such as “occupying” (*you* 有), “controlling” (*chi* 持), “dominating” (*zai* 宰), and “interfering” (*wei* in *bu-gan-wei*), are just the situations represented by  $V_2$ .

Furthermore, it needs to be pointed out that both “to do  $V_1$ ” and “not to do  $V_2$ ” are responsibilities that actors should undertake when facing to others: the former as a positive responsibility means that actors should take some appropriate actions towards others; the latter reminds that actors must not do those intrusive actions towards others while undertaking the positive actions, and this can be called negative responsibility. A key point will be found in this generalization; that is, what “non-action” negates is exactly all actions signified by  $V_2$ , and as a concept, “non-action” is actually an abstraction of “not to do  $V_2$ .” This concept represents Laozi’s basic views of negative responsibility of actors. However, it is so prominent that we usually focus on the situations that “not to do  $V_2$ ” signifies and tend to ignore those to which “to do  $V_1$ ” refers.

In the passages quoted above, Laozi talks about both “to do  $V_1$ ” and “not to do  $V_2$ ,” while in other passages, he only speaks of “to do  $V_1$ .” These cases more clearly show his advocacy of positive responsibility:

The mysterious virtue runs so deep and distant, turning back along with *wu* to reach the great concordance.

玄深矣，遠矣，與物反(返)矣，然後乃至大順. (Chapter 65)

If the nobles and kings can follow it, then the myriad *wu* will be able to develop along their own lines. When their greed breaks out during their development, I will suppress it with plainness which is nameless.

侯王若能守之，萬物將自化。化而慾作，吾將鎮之以無名之樸. (Chapter 37)

Block up their apertures, close their doors, dissolve their sharpness, relieve their troubles, and make everyone simple and pure, so as to achieve the situation called the mysterious consonance.

塞其兌，閉其門，挫其紛，和其光，同其塵，是謂玄同. (Chapter 56)<sup>9</sup>



When governing the world, the sages should let the people live a rich life with a pure mind, weaken their desires, and make their bodies strong, so that the people can live a life free of ingenuity and greed.

聖人之治，其心，實其腹，弱其志，強其骨，常使民無知(智)無慾。(Chapter 3)

For the convenience of discussion, the sequence of the chapters here does not follow the original one in the *Laozi*. The ways of action mentioned in the above passages are various manifestations of  $V_1$ , such as “returning back along with *wu*” (與物返矣), “suppressing their greed” (鎮之), “blocking up their apertures” (塞其兌), “closing their doors” (閉其門), “dissolving their sharpness” (挫其), “relieving their troubles” (解其紛), “making everyone simple and pure” (和其光，同其塵), “letting everyone live a rich life with a pure mind” (其心，實其腹), “weakening their desires” (弱其志), and “making their bodies strong” (強其骨). By these actions, the sages will be able to lead everyone to the life called “the great concordance” (*dashun* 大順) and “the mysterious consonance” (*xuantong* 玄同).

Let us further explain the meaning of these passages. The passage in chapter 65 is programmatic among these statements. It tells us that a virtuous person will not only return to the state of “plainness” (*pu* 樸) himself, but he will also lead others to return to this way of life. The passage in chapter 37 asserts that the nobles and kings should follow the principle of Dao and allow the people to develop freely. There, it also states that the nobles and kings should suppress people’s greed during the latter development. The action of “suppressing” is a concrete manifestation of  $V_1$ , and its purpose is to cause everyone to turn from greed toward a plain life. This passage can echo the previous passage: The ideal actors will lead others to return to the plain life by some actions including the one of “suppressing.”

The passage in chapter 65 shows the goal and does not go into detail about the path to get there. The passage in chapter 37 depicts a key method called “suppressing,” while the passage in chapter 56 describes several ways, which can be regarded as the extension of “suppressing.” These actions target not only the faults caused by greed but also the troubles resulted by ingenuity. In addition, “the mysterious consonance” mentioned here is similar to “the great concordance” in chapter 65, both of which refer to the wonderful life Laozi expects. The passage in chapter 3 also speaks of ways of action that have similar meanings to those seen in chapter 56. The statement “free of ingenuity and greed” (*wu-zhi-wu-yu* 無智無慾) in chapter 3 is a very critical point. It is the essence of “plainness,” and also the concrete meaning of “the mysterious consonance” and “the great concordance.” In general, what the sages want to achieve by the actions mentioned above is to let people (including themselves) live a plain life free from greed and ingenuity.

There are actually quite a few statements about  $V_1$  in the *Laozi*, but they are easily overlooked because of the focus on “non-action.” There is a question here about the independence of  $V_1$ . For example, in the sentence “develop them, but do not dominate them” (長而不宰), we may think that not to dominate others is just to let them develop freely; therefore, the action of “to develop them” (長) is not an independent one. It should be noted that “not to dominate them” can be regarded as a way “to develop them,” but the meaning of the latter is not limited to the former. As an action, “to develop them” includes those ways providing positive conditions for others. The discussion above is for the texts where Laozi talks about both “to do  $V_1$ ” and “not to do  $V_2$ ,” while in those texts only talking about “to do  $V_1$ ,” the independence of such actions is more obvious.

#### 4. The Legitimacy of Assisting Others as an Action

There is a more important question needing discussion. That is, is there a contradiction between the  $V_1$  actors take and the state called “self-so-ness” (*ziran* 自然), which belongs to others? From the perspective of word structure, *ziran* means to achieve this by oneself, which is a spontaneous state not affected by external forces. For “others,” the actions of “remedying” (*fu* 復) and “assisting” (*fu* 輔) taken by the sages are kinds of external forces, and so why is the state of others still called “self-so-ness” (see the sentence in chapter 64 cited above)? Perhaps we might resolve this by saying that the actions of “remedying”

and “assisting” as the external forces toward others are not very forceful. Yet, how should we understand the ones like “suppressing their greed” (chapter 37), “blocking up the apertures of their greed,” “closing the doors of their greed,” “dissolving the sharpness of their ingenuity,” and “relieving their troubles” (chapter 56)? Can the state of others still be “self-so” under the influence of these relatively forceful actions?

The concept of *ziran* has attracted lots of attention from Daoist researchers in recent years, who have put forward many enlightening insights from various perspectives. Specific to the issue concerned in this paper, we can see that scholars hold different views. For example, Qiu Xigui 裘錫圭 says that Laozi advocates using measures like suppressing knowledge to force people to return to a childlike state and that those measures are actually contrary to the people’s state of being “self-so” (Qiu 2019). However, some scholars believe that there is no such contradiction within Laozi’s thought. Liu Xiaogan 劉笑敢 says that the concept of “self-so-ness” describes the situation that the internal motivations drive the process of an individual’s existence and development, and this situation does not by definition prohibit all influence by external forces but only excludes those involving strong forces or direct interference (Liu 2006, p. 211). It was mentioned in the Introduction that Wang Zhongjiang 王中江 summarizes the activities of sages as the “soft effect” (弱作用力). In addition, Mr. Wang also points out that the “soft effect” can lead people to the state of “self-so-ness,” which means they live and act according to their own internal natures and inner drives (Wang 2013). Mr. Liu believes that the state of “self-so-ness” allows for the application of some external force, and the “soft effect” proposed by Mr. Wang can just be used to generalize the type of force that is allowed.

There is no objection to Laozi’s advocacy about “self-so-ness.” Then, whether there is a contradiction between  $V_1$  and “self-so” is basically a question about whether the actions  $V_1$  represents are legitimate. On the whole, I agree with Liu and Wang, but there are still two points needing to be discussed further. One is that the statements of Liu and Wang can explain why  $V_1$  is feasible, but it is also necessary to be considered why  $V_1$  is even needed to properly engage with others. The second is that actions such as “suppressing” and “blocking up” appear to be quite forceful and seem to be beyond the scope of the “soft effect.”

Let us examine the first point now. In general, the reason why  $V_1$  is needed relates to the relative roles of the sages and ordinary people. Laozi’s appeals for action are mostly aimed at the sages, and he rarely says how ordinary people should act. It is very likely that he regards the sages as the persons of foresight (*xianjuezhe* 先覺者) and believes these persons should enlighten the others who, because of their greed and ingenuity, are not aware of Dao.<sup>10</sup> In this way, the question that how ordinary people should act has been indirectly answered by Laozi: They should, with the help of the sages, transcend greed and ingenuity and return to the plain life called “the great concordance.”

Literally, *ziran* refers to a spontaneous state not affected by any external forces, but this is not its exact meaning. At a deeper level, this concept means the actualization of the authentic self, which refers to the pure and simple self that is free of ingenuity and greed. Furthermore, the actualization of this authentic self not only does not completely exclude external forces but even requires assistance of external forces in some cases. For ordinary people, they are easily driven by their vulgar self and influenced by greed and ingenuity. Thus, they need guidance and enlightenment from the sages as the persons of foresight. This role of the sages resembles that of the person who first discovered the world outside cave in Plato’s theory (Plato 1997, pp. 1132–33). To borrow Plato’s metaphor, the situation mentioned above resembles that of those people inside the cave who have not yet seen the outside and need the guidance of someone who already made the journey to reach the outside.

Next, let us review the specific types of action that  $V_1$  includes, in order to explain the second point mentioned above. We will find that there are two levels of the sages’ behavior: in normal circumstances, the sages silently provide resources for others, allowing everyone to develop himself freely (such as the situations in chapter 10); when the others become

depraved because of greed and ingenuity, the sages will help them return to the plain life called “the great concordance” or “the mysterious consonance” (as depicted in chapters 37, 56, 64, etc.).

We can further find that those actions which seem to be strong belong to the second level. For this level, chapter 3 provides a more concrete example: “Let those things that easily stimulate people’s greed not appear, so that everyone’s mind will not be disturbed” (不見可慾，使民心不亂).<sup>11</sup> Ordinary people tend to be seduced by those things that easily arouse greed and thus to deviate from the state of being “self-so.” At this time, the sages should eliminate those things, so as to reduce the possibility of greed making people depraved. This is a way of “suppressing their greed” mentioned in chapter 37.<sup>12</sup> The expression of “suppressing their greed” does not mean that the sages will directly discipline or restrict other people, but that they will help others get rid of their greed by removing those things that easily stimulate their greed. Essentially, this means improving the environment in which others live, instead of directly restricting those others’ daily activities.

For others, these types of actions the sages take are the “soft effect” that is required so they can achieve “self-so” lives. Literally, expressions such as “suppressing their greed,” “blocking up the apertures of their greed,” and “closing the doors of their greed” may lead us to think that the actions the sages take are directly disrupt others. However, those actions in essence belong to a soft assistance, and its purpose is just to return along with others to a plain life without greed and ingenuity. Laozi uses these seemingly high-intensity words to emphasize the importance of assisting others, instead of expressing the intensity of actions.

Furthermore, there is no fundamental difference between the two layers included in  $V_1$ . They are just different ways to implement the basic principle called “assisting the myriad *wu* to achieve their self-so-ness” in various scenarios. No matter at what level, what the sages need to do is not to directly discipline or transform others but to play an auxiliary role by improving the environment and providing various favorable conditions for others. In this case, the other people can exert their own inherent powers to actualize their authentic self and achieve the life called “the great concordance” or “the mysterious consonance.” In short, the sages only improve the environment and provide the conditions, so their actions are called “assisting;” The lives of the others fundamentally depend on their own inherent capacities, so this state is called “self-so-ness.”

The above discussion on the legitimacy of  $V_1$  mainly focuses on “others.” Specifically, what I was concerned with is the reason why  $V_1$  is allowed and even required when treating others. In addition, I will examine the legitimacy of  $V_1$  from the perspective of “actors.” The actors’ assistance to others is not deliberately contrived, and it is not for the realization of the actors’ private desire, nor is it to show their ingenuity. The purpose of this kind of actions is just to support others in realizing their authentic self with their own inherent capacities, so that these actions are in line with the principle of Dao. On the other hand, assisting others is also how the actors need to behave if they want to fulfill their virtues and become sages. Between actors and others, an action not only affects others but also affects the actors themselves in turn. Actually, there is a mutual influence during the actions of treating others. Laozi says: “one person will become more abundant when he contributes to others, and he will get more and more when he gives to others” (既以爲人己愈有，既以與人己愈多) (Chapter 81). This is to say, a person who makes others successful also makes himself successful—this success is certainly not limited to material life and does not refer primarily to material life—so that actors and others are always in the process of mutual attainment. Laozi also believes that “they will not injure each other, and they will benefit from their interactions” (夫兩不相傷，故交歸焉) (Chapter 60).<sup>13</sup> It can be said that sages and other people need each other: The life of being “self-so” belonging to others needs the assistance of the sages, while the sages also need to fulfill their responsibility toward others, and only in this way can they become true sages.



### 5. The Nature of Interference and Educating with *Renyi*

The issue of the legitimacy of  $V_1$  is a key point in Laozi's thoughts on the treatment of others. In the preceding, we examined this issue from the perspective of both the others and the actors and thus could see the boundary between the assistance  $V_1$  represents and the interference  $V_2$  indicates. The fundamental reason why  $V_2$  is improper is that it is a kind of action that is driven by the selfishness of actors and destroys the state of being "self-so" of others. The concept of "non-action" is specifically designed to negate these interventional actions directed at others. Basically, this concept is an abstraction of the proposition of "not to do  $V_2$ ," while "assistance" can be regarded as a generalization of "to do  $V_1$ ."

Among the various  $V_2$  opposed by Laozi, educating the people with benevolence and righteousness (*renyi* 仁義) represents a classic case, which can help us identify the boundary between  $V_1$  and  $V_2$  and the differing views Laozi and Confucius hold on the role of the sages. It should be first noted that Laozi does not deny the existence of benevolence and righteousness in human nature, nor does he negate the value of actions that originate from these innate virtues. That is to say, the plain life he expects does not exclude benevolence and righteousness, and what he actually opposes is a situation where the sages use benevolence and righteousness as tools to educate the people. As he says: "When Dao is abandoned there is benevolence and righteousness" (大道廢，有仁義) (Chapter 18). The compound *renyi* 仁義 here refers to benevolence and righteousness used as tools for education, instead of benevolence and righteousness themselves. What Laozi wants to express is that the emergence of this type of education indicates a deviating from the principle of Dao.

Why would Laozi think so? I think there are two reasons for this. First, in terms of the way of education, benevolence and righteousness as political tools easily become external and superficial dogma, losing their original value as moral qualities. Secondly, education itself is very likely to destroy the life of being "self-so" belonging to the people, even if there is a possibility that such action is not driven by the selfishness of the educators. For the people, this education is a form of direct discipline or transformation, which falls within the scope of interference that surpasses the acceptable limits of assistance.

Of course, Laozi does not oppose education completely. What he advocates is "the teaching without words" (不言之教) (Chapter 2). Actions such as "remedying people when they are at fault," "assisting the myriad *wu* to achieve their self-so-ness," and "suppressing their greed" mentioned above are the manifestations of this kind of teaching. Laozi also says: "Abandon the education with benevolence and righteousness, and the people can return to filial piety and kindness" (仁棄義，民復孝慈) (Chapter 19). Actually, the process of people returning does not exclude assistance from sages, but this role of sages is not as an educator using benevolence and righteousness as tools.

In Laozi's view, compared to the sages as persons of foresight, ordinary people are limited in their capacities for self-actualization. Thus, the latter need the help of the former. However, compared to Confucius, Laozi still holds a relatively high confidence in the ability of human self-actualization generally, which is why he advocates "assistance" or "the teaching without words" rather than direct discipline.<sup>14</sup>

### 6. The Relationship between "Non-Action" and "Assistance"

Based on the previous discussion, we have found that Laozi stipulates two kinds of responsibilities for engagement with others. The concept of "non-action," as an abstraction of "not to do  $V_2$ ," refers to a negative responsibility whose essence is "non-interference" or "non-control," and this responsibility is an inevitable requirement for others' self-realization. Furthermore, as a generalization of "to do  $V_1$ ," "assistance" refers to a positive responsibility, which means that actors should improve the environment and provide various favorable conditions for others. In this way, they could help others achieve a plain life absent of greed and ingenuity.

It can be seen that, on a deeper level, there is a subtle cooperative relationship between “non-action” and “assistance.” For the state of “others,” what Laozi cares about mostly is letting them achieve their own “self-so-ness,” and in order to fully realize this goal, “non-action” and “assistance” from actors are both needed. The reason why actors must follow the rule of *wuwei* is that *wei*—those interfering actions—will destroy the “self-so-ness” of others. At the same time, those actions represented by “assistance” are not only a kind of activities allowed but also a kind of conditions required by others in the process of actualizing their “self-so-ness.” Those actions are premised on not destroying the authentic self of others and do not belong to interfering activities that *wei* signifies, so they are permitted. Additionally, for others, especially ordinary people, they are limited in their capacities for self-actualization, easily driven by their vulgar self which contains greed and ingenuity, and this is the reason why the actions represented by “assistance” are needed. To sum up, the purpose of both “non-action” and “assistance” is the “self-so-ness” of others, and what Laozi expects in the end is just a responsibility to support others to actualize their authentic self on the premise of earnestly respecting the spontaneity and autonomy of those others.

As far as these two forms of the responsibility are concerned, Laozi speaks more on the negative one. While this article has highlighted the positive side that we easily forget, the negative side actually appears more often in Laozi’s statements. This situation shows that Laozi pays more attention to negative responsibility, even though he likewise regards positive responsibility as important. The classic examples are his assertions: “Act according to the rule of non-action” (為無為) (Chapters 3, 63);<sup>15</sup> “Follow non-action and yet all the things are done” (無為而無不為) (Chapters 37, 48). These statements implicitly contain a message of positive responsibility, but in order to emphasize the negative responsibility of “non-action,” Laozi leaves it as subtext. Clearly, it is not without any rational basis that scholars nowadays focus on the concept of “non-action.” In particular, this specific vision is able to plainly reflect the characteristic of Laozi’s thought, when considered in the whole context of pre-Qin philosophy. However, this does not mean that Laozi’s advocacy of positive actions outside of “non-action” can be ignored. The subtle cooperative relationship between “non-action” and “assistance” is actually the deeper characteristic of Laozi’s thought.

It is talked about in the Introduction that some scholars have noticed Laozi’s theories of positive actions. The views of A. C. Graham and Wang Zhongjiang 王中江 have been discussed above. Here, I further offer responses to the views of other scholars. Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall give a unique interpretation of *wuwei*. It means that outside of the coercive actions, actors can take some appropriate behavior as long as they are in accordance with the *de* of things. This interpretation reminds us that there are actually some ideas of positive actions in the *Laozi*. In an indirect sense, we can say that *wuwei* does contain such a meaning. However, if the direct meaning of this concept is to be strictly interpreted, then we will see that it is essentially a negative claim, as an abstraction of all the situations “not to do  $V_2$ ” represents. That is, there is no direct indication of positive actions in this concept. In the *Laozi*, there are indeed quite a few theories of noncoercive actions, but they are not expressed by the concept of *wuwei*, but through the ideas represented by  $V_1$  discussed earlier in this paper. In addition, interpreting *wuwei* as “noncoercive action” only describes those correct actions from the negative side. If we want to define them from the positive side, then what is the nature of those actions? Furthermore, are those actions a kind of freedom for the actors or a kind of responsibility? These important questions were not resolved by Hall’s and Ames’ interpretation. Based on the previous discussion, these questions have been given answers by this paper. It clarifies that those actions are essentially a kind of assistance to others, which is a positive responsibility cooperating with that negative responsibility represented by *wuwei*.

The two key questions mentioned above are also not answered in the views of Ding Sixin 丁四新 and Li Ruohui 李若暉. Both of them emphasize that actions are open and free as long as the rule of *wuwei* is followed. Perhaps, there is such a background in their

views: It is impossible that Laozi negates all actions, either logically or in reality, and the claim of “non-action” only negates those improper actions, so that there is still a large space for actors to act freely as long as they follow the rule of *wuwei*. Compared with those studies focusing on *wuwei* only, the studies of Ding and Li can obviously expand our understanding. However, they are still not enough to fully present Laozi’s unique thinking. First, in the free space of action premised on the rule of *wuwei*, what Laozi mainly cares about is just the actions of assisting others, which has not yet been reflected in their views. Second, also crucially, in their views, only the nature of action as freedom has been presented, but the nature of action as responsibility has not yet been shown, and more specifically, the positive responsibility of assisting others is still ignored. This point is very important when understanding Laozi’s thought. For if we do not pay attention to the responsibility of assisting others, then we may draw a conclusion that Laozi believes that everyone can be indifferent to others. Everyone’s actions are totally free as long as the rule of *wuwei* is followed, so they can care about others and of course are allowed to not care about others, and the latter situation is precisely the manifestation of *wuwei* or non-interference. Yet, actually, this conclusion conflicts with Laozi’s thinking.

The research by these scholars go beyond the way of focusing only on *wuwei*, offering very important inspirations for understanding Laozi’s thought, but their insights need to be further developed. Only by grasping the nature of assisting others as a positive responsibility and the subtle cooperative relationship between it and *wuwei* can we gain fuller understanding of Laozi’s rich thoughts on how to treat others.

Laozi tends to give the impression that he supports being indifferent to worldly affairs, though this view actually results from our excessive focus on the concept of “non-action.” Yet, even if we have noticed the theories of positive actions, misunderstandings of Laozi’s thinking may still arise, just as mentioned earlier. A more comprehensive view, which pays attention to both the aspects of “non-action” and “assistance” simultaneously, does not weaken the unique character of Laozi’s thinking. In fact, this view can more fully present its deep characteristics. In short, there is a subtle cooperative relationship between “assistance” and “non-action,” and these two kinds of responsibilities combine into a single system prescribing how to interact with others. Thus, what we should do is grasp these two aspects at the same time, so as to reach a fuller understanding of Laozi’s thought.

## 7. Conclusions

This article has explored Laozi’s thoughts on the topic of how to treat others. Laozi’s propositions can be summarized by the dual assertion “to do  $V_1$ , but not to do  $V_2$ ”: The various situations that “not to do  $V_2$ ” represents are the specific manifestations of “non-action,” while the essence of the actions  $V_1$  indicates is “assistance.” In Laozi’s view, both “non-action” and “assistance” are responsibilities in regard to how actors treat others. The former is a negative responsibility of not interfering with others; the latter is a positive responsibility, which proposes that actors should actively provide favorable conditions for others to realize a life of being “self-so.” These two kinds of responsibilities combine into a unified way of behavior, and only by grasping both can we fully recognize Laozi’s vision. Any analysis that lacks either one will result in misunderstanding Laozi’s theory.

It can be said that what Laozi expects is just a responsibility to support others to realize their authentic self on the premise of earnestly respecting the spontaneity and autonomy of others. Laozi hopes that the sages as actors will follow the instructions of Dao to help others actualize others’ authentic self while realizing their own. From this point of view, we see that the situations “assistance” refers to are actions that can promote the authenticity of oneself and others, while the behaviors negated by “non-action” are those actions that destroy the authenticity of everyone.

We hope to present Laozi’s deep thinking on the issue of how to treat others by expanding our horizons. On a larger scale, we also hope to propose a possible new approach for understanding Daoist ethical thought generally. Daoist ideas might appear to suggest that inner peace is sufficient for our life and that worldly affairs can be disregarded.

The characteristic of Daoist thinking and the style of its speech do often lead readers to form such an impression, and the readers' intentional or unintentional focus tends to strengthen this even more. Yet, if we expand our horizons and grasp the essence contained in the ideas that seem to be against worldliness, the profound ethical concerns and rich practical wisdom contained in Daoist philosophy will become more and more apparent.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The *Laozi* cited in this article is based on the Wang Bi edition (王弼本; cf. Lou 2008), and only the chapter numbers are shown for the quoted sentences later. In addition, some other editions are also mentioned when relevant, including the Chu bamboo slips edition excavated in Guodian, the Han bamboo slips edition collected in Peking University, the Han silk books A and B editions excavated in Mawangdui, and some handed down editions. For these various editions, see "The Full Text Comparison Table of the Main Editions of *Laozi*" (《老子》主要版本全文對照表) in *The Bamboo Books of the Western Han Dynasty in Peking University (II)* (北京大學藏西漢竹書(貳)). See [Institute of Excavated Documents of Peking University \(2012\)](#).
- <sup>2</sup> The word *wei* in *wuwei* has a special meaning, which does not refer to all actions. When translating *wuwei*, I adopt the word "non-action", which is currently popular in sinology. Similar to *wei* in *wuwei*, the word "action" in "non-action" also has a special meaning, not referring to all actions. In the situation of treating others, *wei* in *wuwei*, or "action" in "non-action" refers specifically to the actions interfering with others.
- <sup>3</sup> The meanings of *wu* 物 in the *Laozi* are a little complicated, which will be discussed later. It is usually translated as "thing," but this word is not enough to reflect exactly the meanings of *wu* in the *Laozi*. I do not intend to translate it in English, but express it only with *pinyin*.
- <sup>4</sup> The word *qi* 其 here is ambiguous. Some researchers interpret it as the actors themselves, while Gao Heng 高亨 believes that it refers to ordinary people toward whom the sages as actors are oriented (Gao 2010, p. 91). I agree with Gao's opinion. The message here concerns how the sages treat others, instead of how they treat themselves.
- <sup>5</sup> On the issue of actions, what Laozi mainly cares about are the political practices of sages as rulers. However, in some of the texts, the actions of sages also contain ethical significance. Thus, a discussion completely limited to political affairs is not enough to fully reflect Laozi's thoughts on the issue of how to act. Based on a broad sense of ethics, this paper tries to contain simultaneously both the ethical significance which has narrowed meaning and the political significance, and to a certain extent, it is also an attempt to expand the horizon of our understanding of Laozi's philosophy.
- <sup>6</sup> The character *ci* 辭 is written as *shi* 始 in the Fu Yi edition (傅奕本) and the silk books B edition (帛書乙本). *Shi* 始 means to begin something, and it better suits the context. Chen Guying 陳鼓應, and Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall explain or translate the sentence with this character *shi* 始 (Chen 2009, p. 63; Ames and Hall 2003, pp. 79–80). The translated word "initiate" here is based on the translation of Ames and Hall.
- <sup>7</sup> For example, Chen Guying 陳鼓應 use *ren* 人 (people) to explain the word *wu* 物 in some passages of the *Laozi* (Chen 2009, pp. 158, 181); Zheng Kai 鄭開 points out the consistency among *min* 民 (the people), *baixing* 百姓 (the hundred clans), and *wanwu* 萬物 (the myriad *wu*) in his study of Laozi's political philosophy (Zheng 2019, p. 5).
- <sup>8</sup> The word *shi* 恃 is often interpreted as claiming credit for oneself. Gao Heng 高亨 believes that *shi* 恃 is interchangeable with *chi* 持, which means to control something (Gao 2010, p. 28). Laozi is against the practice of claiming credit for oneself, and the usual interpretation is consistent with this idea. However, it is not very consistent with the context that mentions "not occupying them" (*buyou* 不有), and "not dominating them" (*buzai* 不宰), while Gao's explanation is more in line with this context. In addition, the sentence *wei er bu shi* 爲而不恃 also appears in chapter 51, and the character *shi* 恃 is written as *chi* 持 in the Han bamboo slips edition collected in Peking University (this sentence does not appear in chapter 10 of the Han bamboo slips edition), which can support Gao's explanation.
- <sup>9</sup> As for the meanings of the words *dui* 兌 and *men* 門, Gao Heng 高亨 believes that they refer to apertures and doors of people's greed (*yu* 慾) and ingenuity (*zhi* 智) (Gao 2010, p. 91). I agree with this opinion. What this passage expresses is that the sages will lead people to curb their greed and ingenuity. In addition, The last word *xuantong* 玄同 in this passage is also a key point. Arthur Waley translates it as "the mysterious levelling" (Waley 1958, p. 210), while Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall translate it as "the profoundest consonance" (Ames and Hall 2003, p. 164). My translation combines both of them. It needs to be further pointed out that no matter how it is translated, if we admit that *qi* 其 refers to ordinary people (see the explanation above), then *xuantong* 玄同 means a state common to all the people, not a state unique to the sages. The sages are also in this style of life, but

they achieve it in a different way from ordinary people. They rely on self-consciousness, and ordinary people reach it with the help of the sages. In addition, there is a statement in the Qujie 肱胝 chapter of *Zhuangzi*: “The virtues of the people in the world reach the mysterious consonance” (天下之始玄同) (Guo 2004, p. 353). The word *xuantong* 玄同 mentioned here also refers to a state common to all the people, and it can be used as a reference for understanding the statement by Laozi.

- 10 The role of the sages as the persons of foresight is recognized by both Confucianism and Daoism. Mencius states this clearly: “*Tian* nurtures the people, and it allows the persons of foresight to enlighten those who are not yet self-conscious” (天之生此民也,使先知覺後知,使先覺覺後覺也) (Zhao and Sun 1999, p. 261). Confucianism and Daoism, however, have different views on how the persons of foresight enlighten others between, which will be discussed later.
- 11 The character *jian* 見 is interchangeable with *xian* 現. *Bujian* 不見 is equivalent to *buxian* 不現, which means to let something not to appear. The word *keyu* 可慾 refers to those things that easily stimulate people’s greed.
- 12 There is a detail worth discussing here. The expression *bujian keyu* 不見可慾 can be interpreted as not letting those things appear, even though it has been explained as letting those things not appear in this article. The former is a manifestation of “not to do  $V_2$ ,” while the latter belongs to “to do  $V_1$ .” According to the former, “to suppress their greed” as a manifestation of “to do  $V_1$ ” needs to be completed by “not to do  $V_2$ .” So, there is a question here needing to be discussed: Is  $V_1$  as an action still independent? It should be noted that the key to this situation does not lie in “not letting” or “letting . . . not,” which is just a difference in presentation or translation. As far as its substance, *bujian keyu* could mean not to show those things and also could mean to remove those things. The former belongs to “not to do  $V_2$ ,” the latter points to a positive action, and it can illustrate the independence of  $V_1$ .
- 13 The word *jiao* 交 means each other. The word *de* refers to merits (*gongde* 功) produced by something. In this chapter, Laozi says that ghosts do not injure people and next says that sages also do not injure people, and finally, he sums these situations up with the sentence quoted. This paper only pays attention to the relationship between sages and others, so the relationship between ghosts and people is not discussed here.
- 14 It is not very likely that Laozi’s criticism of the education with *renyi* is aimed specifically at Confucius’s teachings. The practice and the idea of this kind of education already existed before both Confucius and Laozi, and this older system is more likely to be the object of Laozi’s criticism. The situation discussed above is the objective difference between Laozi’s and Confucius’ thoughts.
- 15 As for the expression *wei-wuwei*, Chen Guying 陳鼓應 and Wang Zhongjiang 王中江 believe that it means to act (*wei*) according to the rule of *wuwei* (Chen 2009, pp. 70, 294; Wang 2017, pp. 47, 212). I agree with this opinion. The expression *wei-wuwei* is similar to the expression *wei-Dao* 為道, which means to act (*wei*) according to the principle of Dao. The word *wei* means to act, and the words *wuwei* and Dao refer to the norm that should be followed in actions. The meaning of Dao is abstract, while the meaning of *wuwei* is more concrete and narrower, for it reflects only one aspect of the guidance of Dao. As a principle, Dao also contains the guidance for assisting others. In both expressions, *wei* is a term with a broad sense, and its performance includes both non-interference and positive assistance in the situations involving others. What Laozi emphasizes in *wei-wuwei* is the aspect of non-interference, but there is also an implicit aspect of positive assistance. The rule of *wuwei* or non-interference does not exclude the rule of assistance, though Laozi only pays attention to the former in this expression. This is one of the reasons why I think that, between these two, Laozi places more emphasis on *wuwei*.

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