

## **I Know You Are, But What Am I?**

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# I KNOW YOU ARE, BUT WHAT AM I? ANTI-INDIVIDUALISM IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF INTELLECTUAL HUMILITY AND *WU-WEI*

Brian ROBINSON and Mark ALFANO

**ABSTRACT:** Virtues are acquirable, so if intellectual humility is a virtue, it's acquirable. But there is something deeply problematic—perhaps even paradoxical—about aiming to be intellectually humble. Drawing on Edward Slingerland's analysis of the paradoxical virtue of *wu-wei* in *Trying Not To Try* (New York: Crown, 2014), we argue for an anti-individualistic conception of the trait, concluding that one's intellectual humility depends upon the intellectual humility of others. Slingerland defines *wu-wei* as the "dynamic, effortless, and unselfconscious state of mind of a person who is optimally active and effective" (*Trying Not to Try*, 7). Someone who embodies *wu-wei* inspires implicit trust, so it is beneficial to appear *wu-wei*. This has led to an arms race between faking *wu-wei* on the one hand and detecting fakery on the other. Likewise, there are many benefits to being (or seeming to be) intellectually humble. But someone who makes conscious, strategic efforts to appear intellectually humble is *ipso facto* not intellectually humble. Following Slingerland's lead, we argue that there are several strategies one might pursue to acquire genuine intellectual humility, and all of these involve commitment to shared social or epistemic values, combined with receptivity to feedback from others, who must in turn have and manifest relevant intellectual virtues. In other words, other people and shared values are partial bearers of a given individual's intellectual humility. If this is on the right track, then acquiring intellectual humility demands epistemic anti-individualism.

**KEYWORDS:** intellectual humility, virtue, *wu-wei*, anti-individualism, modesty

## 1. Introduction

While growing up, one of the co-authors of this chapter regularly received report cards that, in addition to tracking academic progress on topics such as spelling, arithmetic, and reading, assessed his progress in acquiring virtues deemed important by his school.<sup>1</sup> These included executive virtues such as patience and

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<sup>1</sup> Co-author Mark Alfano carried out some of the research leading to this publication while he was affiliated as Visiting Research Fellow at Australian Catholic University. This research was

self-control, religious virtues such as reverence, and intellectual virtues such as creativity and thoroughness (not to mention alleged virtues for which he consistently scored *needs improvement*, such as obedience). Indeed, many parochial and public schools have given their pupils marks for the development of character traits. Starting in the late 1980s in the United States, educators bought into the self-esteem fad to such an extent that the California State Task Force to Promote Self-esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility hailed it as a panacea: “Self-esteem is the likeliest candidate for a *social vaccine* [...] that inoculates us against the lures of crime, violence, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, child abuse, chronic welfare dependency, and educational failure.”<sup>2</sup> The task force went on to call on every school district in California to “adopt the promotion of self-esteem [...] as a clearly stated goal” and to make course work in self-esteem mandatory for educators’ “credentials and as part of ongoing in-service training.”<sup>3</sup> More recently, grit—construed as a kind of long-lasting perseverance<sup>4</sup>—has been lauded as the key to children’s success not only in school but also beyond.<sup>5</sup> While there are detractors from the suggestion that schools should educate for virtues like self-esteem<sup>6</sup> and grit,<sup>7</sup> the contemporary educational establishment has made forays in this direction, such as the Intellectual Virtues Academy, a public charter school founded in 2013 by philosopher Jason Baehr with funding from the John Templeton Foundation.<sup>8</sup>

This missionary zeal for character development is understandable. Pupils would presumably be better students, better citizens, better scientists, and better

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<sup>2</sup> State of California Department of Education. *Toward a State of Esteem: The Final Report of the California Task Force to Promote Self-esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility*. (Sacramento: Bureau of Publications, California State Department of Education, 1990), 4.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>4</sup> Angela L. Duckworth, Christopher Peterson, Michael D. Matthews, and Dennis R. Kelly, “Grit: Perseverance and Passion for Long-Term Goals,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 92, 6 (2007): 1087-1101.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Tough, *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Roy F. Baumeister, “Should Schools Try to Boost Self-Esteem? Beware the Dark Side,” *American Educator* 20, 2 (1996): 14-19.

<sup>7</sup> Angela L. Duckworth and David Scott Yeager, “Measurement Matters: Assessing Personal Qualities Other Than Cognitive Ability for Educational Purposes,” *Educational Researcher* 44, 4 (2015): 237-251.

<sup>8</sup> For more, see <http://www.ivalongbeach.org/about/about-iva>.

workers if their schooling inculcated virtues in addition to imparting domain knowledge. If we can do it, surely we should, or at least we may.<sup>9</sup>

Yet some virtues are more difficult to educate for than others, due to a paradox lurking in their nature. Humility, for instance, is paradoxical because typically one cannot truthfully claim to be humble. If you are humble, you don't mention it; if you claim to be humble, you're probably not.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, if modesty is distinct from humility (a question we'll examine in section 4), then *prima facie* the same paradox applies. Wisdom, at least as Socrates presents it in the *Apology*, is paradoxical, since it requires that one know that one knows nothing. Outside of a Western context, the Chinese concept of *wu-wei* (literally “no trying”)—which Slingerland defines as the “dynamic, effortless, and unselfconscious state of mind of a person who is optimally active and effective”<sup>11</sup>—has long been recognized as similarly paradoxical in the Confucian, Mencian, and Daoist traditions.<sup>12</sup>

We are primarily concerned with the problem of how to develop these paradoxical virtues, particularly the virtue of intellectual humility. At the individual level, developing intellectual humility is fraught with contradiction. By consciously striving to become more humble, one might become less so, since humility seemingly is a virtue that one can only have by not paying attention to it. *Institutionalizing* the cultivation of intellectual humility, for instance in a school context, leads to even more bizarreness. If students receive an ‘A’ in intellectual humility, should they be proud of that? Giving high marks for this virtue would seem to undermine it (especially if the high marks are dwelt upon). It hardly makes sense to educate for X if we don't even know what X is—the pedagogue's variant of the *Meno* problem. This doesn't mean that we have to map out every detail of the logical space before we get started, but it does mean that we need a rather fine-grained conception that still enjoys widespread recognition (if not consensus). In this chapter, we will argue that, counter-intuitively, the institutional level is precisely where the focus should be for developing

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<sup>9</sup> Jason Baehr, “The Situationist Challenge to Educating for Intellectual Virtues,” in *Epistemic Situationism*, eds. Abrol Fairweather and Mark Alfano (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

<sup>10</sup> Mark Alfano and Brian Robinson, “Bragging,” *Thought* 3, 4 (2014): 263-272.

<sup>11</sup> Edward Slingerland, *Trying Not to Try: The Art and Science of Spontaneity* (New York: Crown, 2014): 7.

<sup>12</sup> To be clear, Mencius took himself to be a Confucian, which remains a common interpretation of his work (cf., David Wong “Early Confucian Philosophy and the Development of Compassion,” *Dao* 14 (2015): 157-194). Here we follow Slingerland (*Trying Not to Try*) in considering Mencius separately, as there are some important differences between his account of *wu-wei* and that the standard Confucian view.

intellectual humility. To make this claim, we will draw on Slingerland's analysis of the paradoxical concept of *wu-wei*. By finding parallels between intellectual humility and *wu-wei*, we will argue that developing intellectual humility requires an anti-individualistic aretaic framework.

## 2. Three Problems

The topic of educating for virtues is helpfully structured around three questions. Which virtues? How do we instill those virtues? How can we know whether we've succeeded? Call these the questions of identification, methodology, and operationalization.

### 2.1 Identification

Multiple millennia of philosophizing have not yet succeeded in identifying all and only the virtues worth cultivating. Nevertheless, there is more controversy about some virtues than others. For instance, honesty and fairness seem to enjoy near-universal acclaim, while the Christian revaluation of values and subsequent Capitalist revaluation have left an ambivalent palimpsest of humility, obedience, chastity, ambition, greed, and other alleged virtues (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, section 21).<sup>13</sup> Should educators aim to inculcate obedience or, as Kant would have it,<sup>14</sup> the spirit of *sapere aude*? Even when it comes to near-consensus virtues, though, while people may agree on the labels, there often remains a significant amount of disagreement about the rich texture of the traits in question. Does honesty demand that one never lie, even to the murderous stranger at one's door? Does fairness mean equality or equity (or something else)? The difficulty of establishing the rich contours of a virtue also applies to the ones that have undergone Nietzschean revaluation: does intellectual humility entail or presuppose ignorance or error about oneself? Is it a disposition of behavior, of cognition, of affect, or some combination of these? (For explorations of these questions, see Hazlett,<sup>15</sup> Roberts and Wood,<sup>16,17</sup> Samuelson and Church,<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. W. Kaufmann. (New York: Vintage, 1882 / 1974): section 21.

<sup>14</sup> Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: 'What Is Enlightenment?'" (1784).

<sup>15</sup> Allan Hazlett, "Higher-Order Epistemic Attitudes and Intellectual Humility," *Episteme* 9, 3 (2012): 205-223.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Roberts and W. Jay Wood, "Humility and Epistemic Goods," in *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology*, eds. Michael DePaul and Linda Zagzebski (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003): 257-279.

Whitcomb et al.,<sup>19</sup> and Christen et al.<sup>20</sup>) In this chapter, we will work with an intuitive conception of intellectual humility that does not presuppose precise answers to these questions. We do so not because we think that the question of identification has been solved in this case (far from it), but because we think there are even more difficult questions to confront.

## 2.2 Methodology

Supposing we had a list of virtues to be cultivated and a way to measure the extent to which pupils embody them, we would then need to fix on some method for cultivating these virtues. It's not clear that every virtue is acquired in the same way. The predominance of neo-Aristotelianism in contemporary philosophy might lead us to believe that all virtues are acquired through habituation (and that we have a good understanding of what habituation is), but things are not so simple. For example, Alfano has argued that the habituation model may work for some virtues, such as generosity and friendship, for which there is no tension between having the virtue and wanting to be in its eliciting conditions.<sup>21</sup> There's nothing problematic about generous people wanting to be in a position to benefit others. There's nothing problematic about friends wanting to be in a position to commune with one another. But there is something deeply problematic about courageous people wanting to be in threatening or dangerous conditions. Indeed, such a preference seems like a component of rashness, not courage. Likewise, there is something deeply problematic about humble people wanting to be in conditions where others are liable to praise them (especially for their humility), allowing them to manifest humility by demurring with an "Aw shucks." Indeed, such a preference seems like a component of vanity, not humility. This paradox brings to mind a passage from C. S. Lewis's *Screwtape Letters*, an epistolary novel between two demons who are trying to corrupt someone:

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<sup>17</sup> Robert Roberts and W. Jay Wood, *Intellectual Virtues: An Essay in Regulative Epistemology*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007).

<sup>18</sup> Peter L. Samuelson and Ian M. Church, "When Cognition Turns Vicious: Heuristics and Biases in Light of Virtue Epistemology," *Philosophical Psychology* 28, 8 (2015): 1095-1113.

<sup>19</sup> Dennis Whitcomb, Heather Battaly, Jason Baehr, and Daniel Howard-Snyder, "Intellectual Humility: Owning Our Limitations," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 91, 1 (2015), accessed May 16, 2016, doi: 10.1111/phpr.12228.

<sup>20</sup> Markus Christen, Brian Robinson, and Mark Alfano, "The Semantic Space of Intellectual Humility," in *Proceedings of the European Conference on Social Intelligence*, eds. Andreas Herzig and Emiliano Lorini (Toulouse: IRIT-CNRS, 2014): 40-49.

<sup>21</sup> Mark Alfano, *Moral Psychology: An Introduction* (London: Polity, 2016).

Your patient has become humble; have you drawn his attention to the fact? All virtues are less formidable to us once the man is aware that he has them, but this is specially true of humility. Catch him at the moment when he is really poor in spirit and smuggle into his mind the gratifying reflection, 'By jove! I'm being humble,' and almost immediately pride – pride at his own humility—will appear. If he awakes to the danger and tries to smother this new form of pride, make him proud of his attempt.<sup>22</sup>

Developing intellectual humility through conscious habituation at the individual level does not appear promising. As already mentioned, at the institutional level, the problems appear equally vexing. Should students be proud of improving their intellectual humility score from one semester to the next? Should teachers rescind high grades for intellectual humility if they detect pride on the part of the student? Giving out bumper stickers that read, "My Child is an Honor Student and Intellectually Humble," would be counter-productive to say the least. Little attention has been paid to the paradox of cultivating paradoxical virtues in Western philosophy. Chinese philosophers, on the other hand, have grappled with this problem for centuries via the concept of *wu-wei*. The Confucian, Mencian, and Daoist traditions all opt for resolving this paradox at the institutional (or cultural) level, rather than the individual level, which we take to be suggestive of how to resolve the paradox for intellectual humility.

### 2.3 Operationalization

When students learn their multiplication tables, their schools typically test how well they've learned the material. If we were to educate for virtues, similar evaluations would be needed. Assessing character traits, however, is not as simple as administering a test with multiplication problems. One common way to operationalize personality and character traits is via self-report questionnaires: I yam what I say I yam, plus or minus standard error. This is how both self-esteem<sup>23</sup> and grit<sup>24</sup> are typically measured. Self-report can be supplemented by informant-report, i.e., asking people who know someone well to fill out a third-person version of the self-report scale.<sup>25</sup> When it comes to intellectual virtues in an educational context, neither of these methods looks very attractive. After all, if students know that they are being assessed not only for their mastery of cognitive

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<sup>22</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Touchstone, 1942 / 1961), 58.

<sup>23</sup> Morris Rosenberg, *Society and the Adolescent Self-Image* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965).

<sup>24</sup> Duckworth et al., "Grit."

<sup>25</sup> Simine Vazire and Erika N. Carlson, "Self-Knowledge of Personality: Do People Know Themselves?," *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 4 (2010) 605-620.

content and skills but also for their embodiment of character traits, then at least the ambitious ones among them are likely to provide answers to self-report questionnaires that make them look good. And while this self-serving bias might be tempered somewhat by having teachers fill out informant reports, there are reasons to worry that various biases—both explicit and implicit—of teachers would undermine their reliability as informants. These concerns are especially pertinent when it comes to intellectual humility and other paradoxical virtues in an *institutional* setting. Filling out a self-report questionnaire about one's own intellectual humility, when one knows that the stakes are high (e.g., being admitted to a more prestigious university or receiving scholarship funds), is basically an invitation to brag. But bragging is one of the things that humble people characteristically don't do.<sup>26</sup> These considerations suggest that *indirect* and *behavioral* operationalizations of intellectual virtues are to be preferred, but such operationalizations are much harder to develop and validate. To our knowledge, no valid and reliable behavioral test of intellectual humility exists. Like the question of identification, the question of the operationalization is addressed only indirectly in this chapter, via our exploration of the question of methodology.

### 3. *Wu-Wei* and Its Cultivation

Ian James Kidd argues that while the common Western conceptions of humility and intellectual humility suffer from serious conceptual and psychological incoherencies, Eastern philosophy has much to offer in this context.<sup>27</sup> For Kidd, intellectual humility amounts to an appropriately calibrated confidence in one's intellectual capacities. While we agree with much of Kidd's analysis of intellectual humility, we contend that he overlooks the paradoxicality of educating for intellectual humility. Because this issue deserves further attention, we follow Kidd's lead in looking beyond the Western philosophical tradition and examining conceptions of virtues in Chinese philosophy.

Slingerland's recent analysis of the state of *wu-wei* (and the related concept of *de*) provides an interesting parallel.<sup>28</sup> *Wu-wei* is a state of action that

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<sup>26</sup> Alfano and Robinson, "Bragging," 271.

<sup>27</sup> Ian J. Kidd, "Educating for Intellectual Humility," in *Educating for Intellectual Virtues: Applying Virtue Epistemology to Educational Theory and Practice*, ed. Jason Baehr (London: Routledge, forthcoming).

<sup>28</sup> We recognize that Slingerland's account of *wu-wei* is not the only one in the literature. Wong (Early Confucian Philosophy) for instance offers a different account. We here opt for an examination of Slingerland's account only for the parallels then available between developing *wu-wei* and educating for intellectual humility. If one were to reject Slingerland's view, then



nevertheless feels effortless. “People in *wu-wei* feel as if they are doing nothing, while at the same time they might be creating a brilliant work of art, smoothly negotiating a complex social situation, or even bringing the entire world into harmonious order. [...] People who are in *wu-wei* have *de*, typically translated as ‘virtue,’ ‘power,’ or charismatic power.”<sup>29</sup> Not surprisingly, one cannot simply opt to be in *wu-wei*; one must paradoxically try not to try. Since we are not scholars of ancient Chinese philosophy, we will draw upon Slingerland’s analysis of *wu-wei* rather than offering a novel interpretation. Our interest in *wu-wei* instead derives from its analogy with intellectual humility:<sup>30</sup>

- Having and manifesting *wu-wei* or intellectual humility tends to lead to smooth and spontaneous cooperation with others, avoiding pitfalls associated with strategic cooperation in mixed-motive games.
- It is prudentially valuable to appear *wu-wei* or intellectually humble because this appearance tends to lead to being trusted by others.
- The prudential value of appearing *wu-wei* or intellectually humble means that people may be tempted to fake these virtues and that people may be suspicious of those who seem to be faking.<sup>31</sup>
- Having *wu-wei* or intellectual humility entails or is at least strongly associated with being connected to a larger or higher value than oneself, and sharing that value-laden connection with others.<sup>32</sup>
- Focusing overly much on whether one has or is in the process of acquiring *wu-wei* or intellectual humility is in serious tension—if not outright contradiction—with actually having or acquiring the trait.
- Explicitly attending in the moment to whether one is manifesting *wu-wei* or intellectual humility is in serious tension—if not outright

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some of the parallels would collapse, but the more central points about methods for educating for the paradoxical virtue of intellectual humility would remain.

<sup>29</sup> Slingerland, *Trying Not to Try*, 7-8.

<sup>30</sup> ‘*Wu-wei*’ can refer to a cognitive-affective state that one can slip into and out of, or to the virtue associated with the disposition to enter and remain in this state. This is consistent with the language associated with other virtues. For example, ‘curious’ can refer to a cognitive-affective state that motivates one to investigate, or the virtue associated with the disposition to enter and remain in this state. For more on the polysemy of virtue-language, see Adam Morton, “Epistemic emotions,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Emotion*, ed. Peter Goldie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010): 385-399.

<sup>31</sup> Rolf Reber and Edward G. Slingerland, “Confucius Meets Cognition: New Answers to Old Questions,” *Religion, Brain & Behavior* 1, 2 (2011): 135-145.

<sup>32</sup> Slingerland, *Trying Not to Try*, 15.

contradiction—with both manifesting the trait and being perceived to manifest the trait.<sup>33</sup>

These points of analogy lead us to believe that solutions to the paradox of cultivating *wu-wei* may serve as model solutions to the paradox of cultivating intellectual humility. According to Slingerland,<sup>34</sup> there are three main (partial) solutions to the paradox of *wu-wei*, which we will refer to as the early Confucian, the Mencian, and the Daoist.

### 3.1 Early Confucian Solutions to the Paradox of Cultivating *Wu-Wei*

As Slingerland explains, the early Confucian tradition views human nature as a shapeless block of recalcitrant material, into which form is imbued through effortful engagement in various cultural forms. People are born neither good nor bad, but become so as the block of their nature is carved and polished. This may sound to Western ears a bit like Aristotle's conception of human nature, which starts off without virtues or vices but acquires such traits through habituation. There are important differences, however. First, Aristotle thought that humans have a natural *telos* (end): rational activity. As we will see below, this allies him more with Mencius (who likewise believed in natural human teleology) than with the early Confucian tradition, which sees human nature as initially formless. In addition, Aristotle held that at least some humans are born with "natural virtues," dispositions that are behaviorally identical to full-fledged virtues but which are not underwritten by practical wisdom. For the early Confucians, becoming virtuous is difficult because it requires either eliminating "natural" dispositions or unlearning non-ideal habits of mind and action. Cultivating *wu-wei* might thus be compared to a kind of *forgetting* rather than a kind of *learning*.<sup>35</sup>

Most importantly, however, the *method* of acquiring or cultivating virtue suggested by the early Confucian tradition is very different from Aristotle's model. Aristotle flat-footedly held that virtue is acquired through habituation ("the things we have to learn before we do them, we learn by doing them"<sup>36</sup>). His method is

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<sup>33</sup> For more on these last two points, see David S. Nivison, *The Ways of Confucianism: Investigations in Chinese Philosophy* (La Salle: Open Court, 1996), 31-43 and Reber and Slingerland "Confucius Meets Cognition."

<sup>34</sup> Slingerland, *Trying Not to Try*.

<sup>35</sup> For a contemporary perspective on the difficulty presented by forgetting and unlearning, see Bruno S. Frey, "'Just Forget It.' Memory Distortion as Bounded Rationality," *Mind & Society* 4 (2005): 13-25.

<sup>36</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean ethics*, trans. W.D. Ross and L. Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009): 1103b

direct. The early Confucian method, by contrast, is highly *indirect*. How is *wu-wei* cultivated? According to Reber and Slingerland, “this sort of effortless virtuous action is portrayed as the result of extended training in traditional cultural forms, including rituals and music.”<sup>37</sup> While they go on to mention more direct cultural forms such as “repeated oral and mental rehearsals of moral exemplary narratives and maxims,”<sup>38</sup> it is important to recognize just how different this is from the Aristotelian model.

But how do such indirect forms of aretaic training produce their unexpected fruit? According to Slingerland, the early Confucians were aware, if only implicitly, that repetition of rituals, music, and other cultural forms in a social setting tends to lead to affective attunement to and bonding with the other people who are also engaged in this repetition. It’s hard to chant together without such attunement. It’s hard to sing together without such attunement. Moreover, to the extent that cultural forms like singing and ritual express values, repeating them together tends to lead to a sense of shared values. And to express such values well in a ritual setting, one must have appropriate facial expressions and posture, direct one’s gaze appropriately, and engage in a wide variety of other embodied behaviors. These are precisely the kinds of behaviors that, later on, are hard to fake (e.g., the Duchenne—or genuine—smile involving both cheek and eye muscles) and are treated as reliable indicators of sincerity and trustworthiness. *De*, or moral charisma, can thus be understood naturalistically as the suite or signature of facial micro-expressions and other hard-to-fake, automatic behaviors that indicate that someone is not exercising much top-down effortful control of their behavior and demeanor.<sup>39</sup>

On top of this, communal repetition directs one’s attention outward, to the complex, coordinated activity of which one is a part. Such outward-direction is characteristic of someone who is in *wu-wei* (and, as we will see below, intellectually humble). Communal repetition also tends to involve joint attention with co-celebrants and co-observants. Cognitive science is increasingly finding that direction of gaze and length of fixation are reliable indicators of preference and predictors of behavior,<sup>40</sup> thus providing empirical support for the early Confucian method. Finally, repetition, both alone and (even more so) in a group is

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<sup>37</sup> Reber and Slingerland, “Confucius Meets Cognition,” 135.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Slingerland, *Trying Not to Try*.

<sup>40</sup> Philip Pärnamets, Petter Johansson, Lars Hall, Christian Balkenius, Michael J. Spivey, and Daniel C. Richardson, “Biasing Moral Decision by Exploiting the Dynamics of Eye Gaze,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of the Sciences of the United States of America* 112, 13 (2015): 4170-4175.

tied to fluency, positive affect, and judged truth of what is repeated. The *wu-wei* person engages in smooth, fluent action, according to the early Confucians, in part because they are so practiced in these cultural forms. Positive affect makes such action intrinsically rewarding and thus more likely to be repeated; it also is associated with hard-to-fake expressions of face, posture, and tone of voice. And when the items being repeated are morally exemplary narratives and maxims, the trainee becomes more likely to endorse the values embedded in these narratives and maxims. Extensive engagement with these moral and cultural technologies leads to internalization of values and norms that “obviates rational elaboration” and “is supposed to transform moralistic attitudes derived from mere duty to religious attitudes that emphasize the joy of doing what needs to be done.”<sup>41</sup>

### 3.2 Mencian Solutions to the Paradox of Cultivating *Wu-Wei*

Mencius was himself a continuer of the Confucian tradition, so it might seem odd to contrast his approach to cultivating *wu-wei* with the approach of his predecessors. However, as Slingerland and others have pointed out, the Mencian model is importantly different in several respects.<sup>42</sup> For one thing, Mencius held that human nature essentially tended toward the good, though not perfect, whereas the early Confucians accorded basic human nature no moral valence. The main point of difference, however, relates to the metaphor Mencius uses as a model for moral development. Whereas the early Confucians preferred the metaphor of carving and polishing a hard, shapeless block, Mencius famously employed the agricultural metaphor of *sprouts* of moral virtue that, when appropriately cultivated over time, come to fruition. There are four such sprouts: *ren* (care or benevolence), *yi* (shame or righteousness), *li* (courtesy or propriety), and *shi* (sense of right and wrong, or wisdom).<sup>43</sup> The sprouts of virtue point us in the right direction from early childhood, and if they are appropriately cultivated in a friendly socio-moral environment, they will develop into full-fledged virtues. Moreover, because the sprouts are essentially goal-directed, they can be perverted but cannot be turned completely against their nature into just anything. As Slingerland puts it, in the sprout metaphor, “natural or pre-existing structure plays

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<sup>41</sup> Reber and Slingerland, “Confucius Meets Cognition,” 139.

<sup>42</sup> For more discussion of the Mencian model and various Western models (Kant, Hume, Rawls, and Haidt), see David Morrow “Moral Psychology and the ‘Mencian creature,’” *Philosophical Psychology* 22, 3 (2009): 281-304 and Owen Flanagan, *Moral Sprouts and Natural Teleologies: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Moral Psychology Meets Classical Chinese Philosophy* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2014).

<sup>43</sup> Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Confucian Moral Self Cultivation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000).

a crucial role in determining the final product: a face that is not already well-formed will not be made beautiful through cosmetics, and a barley sprout will never, no matter what sort of cultivation it receives, produce corn. The sprout metaphor in particular is deployed to emphasize the presence of a natural *telos*, a normal and dynamic course of development.”<sup>44</sup>

For Mencius, then, the process of developing virtue involves the patient extension of pre-existing dispositions to new eliciting conditions. Consider, for instance, *ren*, which Mencius plausibly thinks leads almost everyone to feel compassion for cute babies and furry animals when they are clearly suffering, and to motivate action to end their suffering. Extending *ren* so that its descriptive eliciting conditions match as closely as possible its normative eliciting conditions is what he means by cultivating this moral sprout. Such extension does not proceed all at once, but rather slowly, through affect-laden analogies of cognition and perception. The person who is developing *ren* comes to see and emotionally appreciate that the suffering of a cute baby is morally indistinguishable from the suffering of someone with an ugly deformity, which leads them to respond in the same way to this new case as they would to the initial case. Universal benevolence, the ultimate *telos* of *ren*, is not arrived at in a flash but rather by slowly extending the analogy to nearby eliciting conditions. Moreover, universal benevolence is therefore not opposed, as many in the Western tradition would have it, to partial love of one’s nearest and dearest but in fact *grows out of* such emotional attachments.

How are sprouts of virtue such as *ren* cultivated and extended? Mencius identifies two main factors.<sup>45</sup> First, just like agricultural sprouts, moral sprouts grow best when nourished and protected. In other words, people are more inclined to extend their virtues under *material* and *political* conditions of prosperity, safety, and security. Developmentally, then, virtues depend on external features of the physical and social world. Second, just like agricultural sprouts, moral sprouts grow best in a fitting culture. Corn grows well next to beans, peas, and parsley, but not next to cabbage or celery. Likewise, moral sprouts grow best in good socio-cultural company. On the cultural side, Mencius retains an emphasis on ritual, though he puts less weight on it than the early Confucians. On the social side, Mencius emphasizes the importance of the four traditional

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<sup>44</sup> Edward Slingerland, “Crafting Bowls, Cultivating Sprouts: Unavoidable Tensions in Early Chinese Confucianism,” *Dao* 14 (2015): 213-214.

<sup>45</sup> Bryan Van Norden, “Mencius,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* Winter 2014 edition, ed. E. Zalta, accessed May 6, 2016, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/mencius/>.

Chinese relationships: father-son, lord-minister, husband-wife, and friend-friend. Once again, we see that, at least from a developmental point of view, virtues essentially depend on ongoing emotional feedback from a social world to which the agent is attuned and attached.<sup>46</sup>

### 3.3 Daoist Solutions to the Paradox of Cultivating *Wu-Wei*

*Wu-wei* appears most frequently as an object of explicit philosophical reflection in the Daoist tradition associated with Laozi (through the *Daodejing*) and later Zhuangzi (through the eponymous text). In this context, *wu-wei* is often contrasted invidiously with more direct forms of practical activity that tend to backfire. For instance, in chapter 66 of the *Daodejing*, the would-be ruler is advised prudentially to humble himself before the people rather than lord it over them.<sup>47</sup> The Daoist approach to the good life is deeply interconnected with Daoist metaphysics, which we naturally do not have the space to delve into here. Two aspects of Daoism stand out, however.

First, the Daoist tradition eschews moralizing, favoring instead a celebration of focused and absorbed activity in the moment. This is illustrated by the famous example of Cook Ding, who manifests such remarkable skill in carving meat from bones that his knife never gets stuck or nicks a bone even when going through a joint. Ding is able to accomplish this feat by focusing intently and tuning out everything beyond his current task. Furthermore, he enjoys his work and finds it rewarding for its own sake, not thinking about the external benefits or praise he might receive for his expert performance. Such intrinsically-motivated, skilled, and immersive activity is meant to be emblematic of (or perhaps even of a piece with) virtuous activity. The person with *wu-wei* is so deeply immersed in what they are doing and accomplishing, so engrossed in the current task, that strategic considerations do not arise and therefore do not distract from or undermine

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<sup>46</sup> For more on this idea of emotional feedback, see Mark Alfano, *Character as Moral Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); “What Are the Bearers of Virtues?” in *Advances in Experimental Moral Psychology*, eds. Hagop Sarkissian and Jennifer Cole Wright (New York: Continuum, 2014), 73-90; *Moral Psychology*; “Friendship and the Structure of Trust,” in *From Personality to Virtue: Essays in the Psychology and Ethics of Character*, eds. Alberto Masala and Jonathan Webber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 186-206; and Mark Alfano and Joshua August Skorburg, “The Embedded and Extended Character Hypotheses,” in *Philosophy of the Social Mind*, ed. Julian Kiverstein (New York: Routledge, 2016), 465-478.

<sup>47</sup> David Wong, “Chinese Ethics,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* Spring 2013 edition, ed. E. Zalta, accessed May 12, 2016 <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2013/entries/ethics-chinese/>.

virtuous activity. Such immersion is comparable to the intense focus required to engage successfully with cultural forms like chant and dance: explicitly thinking about what you're doing while you do it is liable to interfere with skilled activity. Unlike the early Confucians, however, the Daoists seem to think that this sort of immersion in activity is best achieved not through highly constrained ritual but through laser-like focus on the here and now. What the two have in common is their indirectness. Someone who is single-mindedly intent on performing a ritual activity perfectly has little or no cognitive bandwidth available for strategic thinking; likewise, someone who is single-mindedly focused on pursuing a valued goal has little or no cognitive bandwidth available for strategic thinking. Such people can be trusted not to be looking for opportunities for side deals, strategic betrayals, and so on. This aspect of Daoist ethics thus emphasizes finely-attuned engagement with external activities, precluding unnecessary attention to the self during action.

Second, the Daoist tradition, especially in the *Daodejing*, alternates between awe or wonder at the vastness of the cosmos and derision or amusement at human's belief in their own self-importance. While the connection with humility goes without saying, the connection with *wu-wei* is also important. *Wu-wei* involves, among other things, an attunement to and appreciation of values greater than oneself. These values can be construed as *higher* in a religious sense or as *larger* in a more naturalistic sense. The point is that one feels oneself connected with and even contributing to something greater than oneself. Such an attitude naturally combines with the sense that other people are connected with and contributing to the same higher or greater value, making trust, cooperation, and fluent communication possible. Moreover, recent work in empirical moral psychology<sup>48</sup> suggests that the emotions of awe, wonder, and elevation do indeed lead to pro-social (especially in-group favoring) motivation and behavior.<sup>49</sup> <sup>50</sup> Thus, in the Daoist tradition, as in the early Confucian and Mencian traditions, we find that *wu-wei* is best cultivated indirectly. In the case of Daoism, two of the primary methods involving tuning out long-term strategic considerations by tuning into the here and now, and bolstering one's sense of shared, larger values with others by experiencing shared awe or wonder with them.

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<sup>48</sup> Simone Schnall, Jean Roper, and Daniel M.T. Fessler, "Elevation Leads to Altruistic Behavior," *Psychological Science* 21, 3 (2010): 315-320, Paul K. Piff, Matthew Feinberg, Pia Dietze, Daniel M. Stancato, and Dacher Keltner, "Awe, the Small Self, and Prosocial Behavior," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 108, 6 (2015): 883-899.

<sup>49</sup> Schnall et al., "Elevation."

<sup>50</sup> Piff et al., "Awe, the Small Self."

#### 4. Parallel Solutions to the Intellectual Humility Paradox

We can summarize the three kinds of solutions to the paradox of *wu-wei* as follows. On the Confucian model, *wu-wei* involves being deeply entrenched in a system of social rituals, joint attention on external values, and a sort of automaticity and fluency from practice. On the Mencian model, you need the right material, social, and political environment to grow the sprouts, as well as ongoing engagement in the four traditional relationships. Finally, on the Daoist model, it's all about being engaged with an external value and not prone to strategic thinking. We propose to solve the paradox of cultivating intellectual humility by borrowing elements from each of these solutions. To do that, it will be helpful to distinguish modesty from humility.

##### 4.1 Humility and Modesty

Just as there are obvious advantages to being *wu-wei*, so too are there benefits to being humble. For instance, Van Tongeren et al. report that humility helps initiate and maintain romantic relationships.<sup>51</sup> Owens et al. provide evidence that humility has numerous benefits for leaders and employees in organizations.<sup>52</sup> Those scoring high on the honesty-humility construct of the HEXACO personality inventory<sup>53</sup> tend to be more cooperative.<sup>54</sup> *Wu-wei* is, according to the Confucians, hard to fake. But is the same true of humility? The term 'false modesty' is not uncommon in the parlance of our times. Yet it is not immediately clear whether it is synonymous with 'false humility.' To a rough determination, Google Ngram (which compares the frequency of two or more terms over time

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<sup>51</sup> Daryl R. Van Tongeren, Don E. Davis and Joshua N. Hook, "Social Benefits of Humility: Initiating and Maintaining Romantic Relationships," *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 9, 4 (2014): 313-321.

<sup>52</sup> Bradley P. Owens, Michael D. Johnson, and Terence R. Mitchell, "Expressed Humility in Organizations: Implications for Performance, Teams, and Leadership," *Organization Science* 24, 5 (2013): 1517-1538.

<sup>53</sup> Michael C. Ashton, Kibeom Lee, Marco Perugini, Piotr Szarota, Reinout E. de Vries, Lisa Di Blas, Kathleen Boies, and Boele De Raad, "A Six-Factor Structure of Personality-Descriptive Adjectives: Solutions From Psycholexical Studies in Seven Languages," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 86 (2004): 356-366.

<sup>54</sup> Ingo Zettler, Benjamin E. Hilbig, and Timo Heydasch, "Two Sides of One Coin: Honesty-Humility and Situational Factors Mutually Shape Social Dilemma Decision Making," *Journal of Research in Personality* 47 (2013): 286-295.



across Google's database of millions of books published over centuries) shows that 'false modesty' is a more common expression than 'false humility.'<sup>55</sup>



Figure 1. Google Ngram shows the frequency of the terms 'false modesty' and 'false humility' by year from 1840-2008 in the millions of books in the Google Ngram database.

This suggests that modesty and humility are not equivalent. What is missing is a conceptual means for distinguishing between them.<sup>56</sup>

To fill this conceptual lacuna, consider the hypothetical case of Holly and Molly. Behaviorally, they are fairly indistinguishable. They both do not boast; they engage in self-deprecation when praised by others; they tend not to behave in a manner intended to draw excessive attention to themselves. If praised, both would tend to say something like, "Thank you, but I'm not that special." They both also generally lack the intention to impress others, which is why they don't brag. Consequently, both can rightly be called modest. Yet, Molly is very anxious

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<sup>55</sup> We recognize that Google Ngram is not without faults, as recently pointed out by Eitan Adam Pechenick, Christopher M. Danforth, and Peter Sheridan Dodds, "Characterizing the Google Books Corpus: Strong Limits to Inferences of Socio-Cultural and Linguistic Evolution," *PLoS ONE* 10, 10 (2015): e0137041. Accessed May 22, 2016, doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0137041. Nevertheless, we contend that at least in this case it provides a suggestive starting point.

<sup>56</sup> This difference in frequency of use does not establish a difference in meaning. 'Water' is more common than 'H<sub>2</sub>O,' though they both have the same referent. In the case of 'false modesty' and 'false humility,' the difference is suggestive not only that there is a difference but perhaps even that 'false humility' fails to refer. The hypothetical case of Holly and Molly is meant as a conceptual basis for distinguishing false modesty from false humility.

for others to be impressed with her, just not directly by her.<sup>57</sup> If she were to brag, others may be less impressed because she drew attention to herself. She doesn't believe her self-deprecating statements are true. So Molly is very aware of aspects of herself that are praiseworthy and is desirous of praise for them, but doesn't directly draw attention to them. Holly, on the other hand, does not attend much to herself, and that is why she doesn't brag. She typically lacks occurrent beliefs about anything praiseworthy about herself. On the basis of this difference, we can assert that Holly is humble (and modest) while Molly is only modest.

Our intuition is that Molly embodies *false* modesty. Typically, when something is described as a 'false *X*' the meaning is that it is not actually an *X*, such as false prophet. So it might seem that our notion of false modesty entails that Molly is not actually possessing modesty. Driver holds this same view, arguing that a falsely modest person knows something good or praiseworthy about herself but feigns ignorance.<sup>58</sup> Given our distinction between humility and modesty, we think that false modesty is something of a misnomer. Molly does in fact exhibit modesty. The reason that some may want to criticize Molly, however, is that she lacks humility, though she is attempting to deceive us about this fact by means of her modesty. Though she is modest in not bragging, she is fully aware of her bragging rights. So there may be something disingenuous about Molly's modesty, since her beliefs do not correspond with her behavior. But she is modest all the same; it's her humility that is false.

#### 4.2 Lessons from *Wu-Wei*

If this distinction between modesty and humility is on the right track, then it points to several lessons from *wu-wei* that can be applied to the paradox of intellectual humility. The solutions to the paradox of *wu-wei* offered by the Confucian and Daoist traditions (and to a lesser extent the Mencian tradition as well) were in tension. When it comes to intellectual humility though, we will attempt to integrate these traditions. By bringing into conversation Daoist- and Confucian-inspired solutions to the paradox of intellectual humility, the product is

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<sup>57</sup> It should come as no surprise that the social norm against bragging is stronger for women (cf., Jessi L. Smith and Meghan Huntoon, "Women's Bragging Rights: Overcoming Modesty Norms to Facilitate Women's Self-Promotion," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 38, 4 (2014): 447-459.) and that some of Molly's reluctance to brag stems from this fact. We submit, however, that bragging can often be self-defeating regardless of the speaker's gender, with the election of the braggadocious Donald Trump as President of the United States serving as more of an exception to the rule.

<sup>58</sup> Julia Driver, *Uneasy Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 17-18.

an enriched conception of how to educate for this virtue. The Mencian tradition then supplies a final element missing from the other two through its emphasis on particular relationships.

As we noted, the Daoists emphasize that one cannot be in *wu-wei* for strategic reasons; one just is in *wu-wei* and thereby reaps the benefits as a side effect. Molly's refusal to brag is strategic: she recognizes that bragging can backfire in attempting to impress others. Holly, on the other hand, is humble without regard to the strategic advantage that her humility can provide. The first lesson, then, is that if we seek to educate for intellectual humility, we shouldn't encourage students (or people generally) to become humble instrumentally, in order to reap the rewards for humility. A growing body of empirical research is finding benefits for humility, but focusing on those benefits is liable to produce at best strategically modest individuals like Molly.

The benefits of intellectual humility specifically are so far only conceptually argued for and not yet empirically corroborated. Kidd<sup>59</sup> argues persuasively for intellectual humility as "a virtue for the management of confidence," whereby one has an accurate and not undue confidence in one's own intellectual abilities.<sup>60</sup> *At the very least* then, possessing intellectual humility entails a recognition of one's own fallibility. An intellectually humble agent is at least somewhat receptive to critical feedback from others, as well as considering others' differing viewpoints on controversial topics. More simply, intellectually humble people are open-minded.<sup>61</sup> They will not automatically dismiss or ignore the correction of a peer or superior (such as a teacher), for such behavior is the hallmark of intellectual arrogance. Open-mindedness is a widely shared social value. As we saw already, part of the Daoist solution to the paradox of *wu-wei* was through emphasis on shared external values. In the context of intellectual humility, institutionally emphasizing the importance of receptivity to feedback plays the same role. This emphasis should take two forms. First greater class time should be devoted to providing critical feedback to students. Second, beyond providing time for this feedback, there should also be explicit discussion of the value of critical feedback with emphasis on why it is important and useful. By teaching students the value of critical feedback—both for them and for society in general—schools are indirectly

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<sup>59</sup> Kidd, "Educating."

<sup>60</sup> It may be that on Kidd's account, accuracy in one's confidence of one's intellectual capacities requires one to be cognizant of that accuracy, in which case Kidd's account of intellectual humility would be subject to the paradox argued for here. We are not certain where he stands on the relevant issues.

<sup>61</sup> James S. Spiegel, "Open-Mindedness and Intellectual Humility," *Theory and Research in Education* 10 (2010): 27-38.

educating for intellectual humility without prodding students to try to be intellectually humble.

While this adaptation of Daoism to the problem of educating for intellectual humility has considerable merit, there is more to be said. The problem still remains of how to get students to become actually intellectually humble instead of just faking it. Students, for instance, could presumably feign to listen to critical feedback or the views of others, but not take seriously their own fallibility. As Reber and Slingerland notes, “Of course, part of the concern with real virtue lies in the fact that people may fake ritual performance and virtuous behavior to attain the benefits of group membership—a central concern in early Confucianism.”<sup>62</sup> The falsely humble Molly is what Confucius hatefully calls the “village poseur,” “who goes through all the motions of being good but is in the end a hollow counterfeit of virtue.”<sup>63</sup> The Confucian solution to the danger of the village poseur—who blocks the development of true virtue in herself and in others—is to use social ritual in two ways. First, in the ensuing arms race between those wanting to fake *wu-wei* and those wanting to expose the village poseurs, social rituals offer a method of detection and increase the cost of faking it. The thought is that typically only those in *wu-wei* will be able to correctly and consistently perform the rituals. Second, because these rituals require a considerable investment of time or other resources, those who might otherwise be tempted to fake it are likely to deem the cost too high.

In terms of intellectual humility, we already have some rituals in place. Merely not bragging or saying “Aw shucks,” when praised aren’t enough to conclusively demonstrate intellectual humility. There are subtle nuances in behavior that Holly may exhibit, but not Molly. Molly may pause too long before demurring, for instance. Humans are quite good at detecting such subtle behavioral nuances in other contexts. We, for instance, are often inclined to distinguish between people who genuinely feel happy and those who are merely faking it. One way we do that is noticing the subtle difference between Duchenne smiles (where one’s ocular muscles also contract) and a fake, eyeless smile. This method isn’t foolproof, but it is fairly reliable.<sup>64</sup> For Confucius, developing more complex and demanding social rituals was an effective means for discovering and discouraging the village poseur. To discourage Molly from faking intellectual humility, the Confucian solution would be to establish social rituals that are

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<sup>62</sup> Reber and Slingerland, “Confucius Meets Cognition,” 7.

<sup>63</sup> Slingerland, *Trying Not to Try*, 96.

<sup>64</sup> Daniel S. Messinger, Alan Fogel, and K. Laurie Dickson, “All Smiles Are Positive, but Some Smiles Are More Positive Than Others,” *Developmental Psychology* 37, 5 (2001): 642-653.

sufficiently costly in time or other resources to make faking intellectual humility no longer worth it. Luckily, the relationship we already noted between intellectual humility and open-mindedness provides a basis for establishing such rituals. Our worry was that some might feign open-mindedness, but not really consider the objections, corrections, or worldviews of others. Useful social rituals would therefore include a battery of tests to establish the extent to which people actually were open-minded. The educational context is ready-made for such rituals. In a classroom setting, this would involve looking for the application of critical feedback. Thus, teachers need to create opportunities for and a social ritual of constructive feedback from the teacher and fellow students, and then encourage and test for the application of that feedback.

Furthermore, social rituals can provide a fake-it-till-you-make method of developing a virtue. As Slingerland puts it, “Confucius’s strategy seems to be an injunction to just keep plugging away.”<sup>65</sup> Perhaps, then, faking modesty is a viable means of cultivating humility. Perhaps Molly, by not bragging about her praiseworthy characteristics, will eventually come to not think about them often either. In so doing, she would follow the Confucian solution of practiced repetition producing automatic and effortless results: Molly’s not bragging would eventually lead to her not even realizing she has something to brag about. “People can try to fake virtue by simulating virtuous behavior, but [...] even the act of faking can become self-defeating when an actor does not intend to be virtuous, instead becoming so as a result of his or her behavior.”<sup>66</sup>

The Doaists were skeptical of the fake-it-till-you-make-it solution of the Confucians, since they saw this approach as being “incapable of producing anything other than village poseurs. The very act of trying to be good fatally contaminates the goal.”<sup>67</sup> As Slingerland admits, however, it is far from clear in the *Daodejing* how one is supposed to stop trying, relax, and spontaneously slip into *wu-wei*, though meditation is a key practice. Laozi, the reputed author of the *Daodejing*, speaks of returning to the “mind of an infant” as the best way to achieve *wu-wei*.

When it comes intellectual humility, we think the matter is slightly less difficult, at least in an educational context. Students can fail to be intellectually humble when they become prideful of an intellectual skill or accomplishment. Individually, they will then have a hard time cajoling themselves into being intellectually humble. Institutionally, educators could attempt to discourage such

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<sup>65</sup> Slingerland, *Trying Not to Try*, 81.

<sup>66</sup> Reber and Slingerland, “Confucius Meets Cognition,” 7.

<sup>67</sup> Slingerland, *Trying Not to Try*, 96.

pride when evidenced and encourage humility instead, though as we've seen drawing attention to intellectual humility in this manner is likely to be counterproductive. Alternatively, educators could attempt to prevent the pride in the first place by distracting the student from the fact that she has done something praiseworthy. For instance, when a student masters a challenging topic after considerable effort, the educator could introduce a new challenge before intellectual pride takes hold, i.e., the positive learning outcome is acknowledged, but not dwelt upon. Holly was not ignorant of what is praiseworthy about herself; she doesn't focus on it because she has other things to do. From this perspective, humility isn't a virtue of ignorance (*pace* Driver) but a virtue of distraction. It's the virtue of those with more important things to do. Continually re-engaging and challenging students anew can foster such intellectual humility.

Finally, building on the role of the educator in cultivating intellectual humility, we can return to the Mencian and Confucian solutions that emphasize the role of society. For Confucius, *wu-wei* is achieved through participating in *social* rituals; they can't be done alone. Mencius also stressed particular relationships. In the context of educating for intellectual humility, we can emphasize three: student-teacher, student-parent, and student-student. In the student-teacher relationship, the teacher should model intellectual humility, which would include not bragging, considering differing views of others, and freely admitting to being wrong. Such behavior makes imitation easier for the students. Additionally, seeing an authority figure such as a teacher admit to being wrong when corrected can help de-stigmatize the same behavior in students. Furthermore, rituals in a classroom can be developed for students to imitate these behaviors. One such ritual could be having students praise someone (not in the class) for being intellectually humble. Finally, the teacher has the ability also to reward intellectual achievements, and not to reward intellectual arrogance for those achievements.

## **5. Anti-Individualism and Educating for Paradoxical Virtues**

Our objective in this paper is not to develop Confucian rituals for cultivating intellectual humility; neither is it our aim to articulate precisely what sort of Daoist-inspired techniques educators could use to distract students from their intellectual praiseworthiness. While these topics are important, our goal here is to articulate why educating for intellectual humility requires an anti-individualistic solution to the paradox of intellectual humility. To make this claim, it is necessary that we make clear what we mean by anti-individualism.

Anti-individualism is a form of externalism. Yet, as Carter et al. note, the internalist/externalist distinction takes different forms in different contexts.<sup>68</sup> In the philosophy of mind, active externalism is the view that the vehicle's mental states or cognitive processes extend beyond individual (human) organisms to include the external world around them. Clark and Chalmers, for instance, present the thought experiment of Otto, who has Alzheimer's but also has an extensive and well-organized notebook, in which he finds the address for MoMA on 53<sup>rd</sup> Street.<sup>69</sup> Clark and Chalmers argue that this notebook is functionally equivalent to the brain-embodied memory of another character, Inga, who remembers the same address in the more familiar way. Just as Inga's mind is functionally constituted by processes and states in her brain, so Otto's mind is functionally constituted by processes and states in his brain+notebook.

Recently, Alfano has adapted active externalism in philosophy of mind to virtue theory, claiming, "A virtue is not a monadic property of an agent, but a triadic relation among an agent, a social milieu, and an asocial environment."<sup>70</sup> This view is in opposition to the standard account of virtues as being properties of individuals (cf., Russell<sup>71</sup> and Slote<sup>72</sup>). Alfano draws extensively on the recent situationist debate in virtue theory regarding the role that non-moral situational factors (such as foul odors, dim lighting, or finding a dime) can have on the manifestation of character traits.<sup>73</sup> Doris<sup>74</sup> and Harman<sup>75</sup> contend that the fact that these situational factors exert such powerful influence on our behavior militates against confidence in robust virtues and vices. Alfano argues instead that our character traits *depend* in part on these external, situational factors. More importantly for our purposes, however, is Alfano's extension of virtues to social influences. "When an agent is functionally integrated through ongoing feedback loops with her social environment, the environment doesn't just causally

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<sup>68</sup> J. Adam Carter, Jesper Kallestrup, S. Orestis Palermos, and Duncan Pritchard, "Varieties of Externalism," *Philosophical Issues* 24, 1 (2014): 63-109.

<sup>69</sup> Andy Clark and David J. Chalmers, "The Extended Mind," *Analysis* 58, 1 (1998): 7-19.

<sup>70</sup> Alfano, "What Are the Bearers," 73.

<sup>71</sup> Daniel C. Russell, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>72</sup> Michael Slote, *Morals from Motives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>73</sup> Alfano, *Character as Moral Fiction*.

<sup>74</sup> John Doris, *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behavior* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>75</sup> Gilbert Harman, "Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology: Virtue Ethics and the Fundamental Attribution Error," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, New Series 119 (1999): 316-331.

influence her but becomes part of her character.”<sup>76</sup> In a virtuous feedback loop, other people and shared values are partial bearers of a given individual’s virtue.<sup>77</sup> Alfano discusses such feedback loops in connection with virtues such as trustworthiness and trustingness, arguing that these can form an interlocking dyad and thus be mutually constitutive.<sup>78</sup> Our contention here is that intellectual humility is another example, in that one person’s humility could depend constitutively on the humility of another person with whom they are in ongoing and highly-attuned contact.

In borrowing from the Confucian, Mencian, and Daoist solutions to the paradox of *wu-wei*, the answer to the paradox of intellectual humility that we propose relies heavily on these virtuous feedback loops. As Slingerland notes, “Cultivated behaviors have a small positive effect on [other people], which causes them to act in an incrementally more morally positive way, which in turn feeds back on us.”<sup>79</sup> Sarkissian also focusing on lessons for virtue ethics from Confucianism, notes that “the *interconnectedness* of all social behavior, how we are inextricably implicated in the actions of others, and how minor tweaks in our own behavior—such as our facial expressions, posture, tone of voice, and other seemingly minor details of comportment—can lead to major payoffs in our moral lives.”<sup>80</sup> As an example, Zajonc et al. report that the faces of people who live together as romantic partners for 25 years end up looking like each other because they empathically mimic each other’s micro-expressions. “Empathy is a process that relies on the motor engagement of the face and on the resulting subjective experience of a correlated feeling state. The person who empathizes with another can actually appreciate the other’s condition because of his or her own subjective experience. And for this subjective experience to take place, nothing more is required than a matching facial expression.”<sup>81</sup>

Earlier we claimed that Molly and Holly were *nearly* behaviorally indistinguishable, since they both refrain from bragging and demur when praised. But subtle differences aren’t implausible. Over time, those around Holly will mimic her micro-expressions when she manifests intellectual humility. Our anti-

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<sup>76</sup> Alfano and Skorburg, “The Embedded and Extended,” 467.

<sup>77</sup> Alfano, “What Are the Bearers.”

<sup>78</sup> Alfano, “Friendship.”

<sup>79</sup> Slingerland, *Trying Not to Try*, 201.

<sup>80</sup> Hagop Sarkissian, “Minor Tweaks, Major Payoffs: The Problems and Promise of Situationism in Moral Philosophy,” *Philosophers’ Imprint* 10, 9 (2010): 2.

<sup>81</sup> R.B. Zajonc, Pamela K. Adelman, Sheila T. Murphy, and Paula M. Niedenthal, “Convergence in the Physical Appearance of Spouses,” *Motivation and Emotion* 11, 4 (1987): 344.



individualist assertion then is that their intellectual humility *depends* upon and extends to Holly's humility, and vice versa. They mutually reinforce each other.

Alfano suggests another means for cultivating virtues through virtuous feedback loops: plausible, public, second-person attributions of virtues.<sup>82</sup> Publically telling someone "You are charitable" after they have just done something generous is likely to induce future behavior in that person that is consistent with the virtue of charity. This second-person virtue attribution contributes to their self-identity. It also prompts others to expect her to be charitable in the future. Such praise then is consistent with a sort of Confucian social ritual. When such plausible, public, second-person attributions of virtues become commonplace in a social milieu, the disposition of the individuals in that milieu cannot be explained apart from this practice. Their character traits are integrated with these external social conventions and rituals, such that they cannot be understood separately; they form one system.

When it comes to intellectual humility, however, there is one small catch to Alfano's proposal. By plausibly and publically telling someone that they are honest, courageous, or cleanly, she will likely start living up to those virtuous attributions. But as we've already seen, attributions of intellectual humility are tricky. I can't attribute it to myself without contradiction. Having someone else tell me of my intellectual humility (and praise me for it, as Alfano advocates) will be counter-productive. Humility is a virtue of distraction. Such praise draws my attention to my humility thereby endangering it, just as pointing out to someone that she is in *wu-wei* can easily break her out of it. If, however, a teacher tells a student of Holly's intellectual humility (when she is not present to hear), the teacher sets up Holly as an exemplar for the first student to emulate. Such speech is a sort of positive gossip, which functions as an indirect virtuous feedback loop.<sup>83</sup> The teacher can then further strengthen this feedback loop by later lauding the first student's intellectual humility to Holly, so that my example serves to re-enforce her intellectual humility. At that point, the first student's intellectual humility is partially dependent the externalia of this social practice of positive gossip and Holly's humility as well. This peculiar kind of virtuous feedback loop reveals a final anti-individualist element. If my intellectually humility requires me to be distracted from the fact that I possesses this trait, then generally I cannot (occurently) know that I am intellectual humble. Nevertheless, my intellectually humility depends on knowing that others (in this case Holly) are intellectually humility. She likewise has to know of my humility but not her own.

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<sup>82</sup> Alfano, *Character as Moral Fiction*.

<sup>83</sup> Brian Robinson, "Character, Caricature, and Gossip," *The Monist* 99, 2 (2016): 198-211.

## 6. Conclusion

The paradox of intellectual humility is a vexing problem if we are to attempt to educate for this virtue. Explicitly focusing on the value of intellectual humility is likely to produce only strategically modest students. Directly testing intellectual humility is unreliable. Self-reports of intellectual humility are self-contradictory. At first glance, it might seem therefore that one cannot know one is intellectually humble and further that educating for intellectual humility is a doomed enterprise. By looking to the Confucian, Daoist, and Mencian traditions in Chinese philosophy however—each of which has long grappled with a similar paradox for *wu-wei*—we have found a promising set of solutions. Educators should seek to distract students from their own burgeoning intellectual humility and through social rituals focus their attention on the intellectual humility of others so that students may imitate them. Consequently, for one to be intellectually humble, one must be part of a social milieu that includes other intellectually humble people and rituals that encourage intellectual humility. One must know others to be intellectually humble without paying attention to one's own humility.