

**Nature's Way (or The Way of the Sage)**  
**A Resolution to the Pragmatic Contradiction of the Daodejing**

*“People’s nature is bad. Their goodness is a matter of deliberate effort... If they follow with this, then struggle and contention will arise... They are born with feelings of hate and dislike in them. If they follow along with these, then cruelty and villainy will arise... They are born with desires of the eyes and ears, a fondness for beautiful sights and sounds. If they follow along with these, then lasciviousness and chaos will arise... Thus, if people follow along with their inborn dispositions and obey their nature, they are sure to come to struggle and contention, turn to disrupting social divisions and order, and end up becoming violent... Looking at it in this way, it is clear that people’s nature is bad and their goodness a matter of deliberate effort.” Xunzi (23.1-15.)*

**I. Introduction**

Unlike Xunzi’s deep pessimism concerning the chaotic state of human nature, one significant and pervasive feature of Daoist philosophy is an explicit emphasis on the benefits of ‘returning to a natural state of being.’ Our social and political lives ought to be simplified to the utmost, says the Daoist. And furthermore, we must relearn<sup>2</sup> to act spontaneously in an effortless, or ‘*wu wei*’ fashion.<sup>3</sup> To this end, much of Daoist thought, including the Daodejing<sup>4</sup>, Zhuangzi, and Leizi functions therapeutically<sup>5</sup> insofar as these works offer stories, examples, and methods of *unlearning* our non-natural, human forms of reasoning and acting. In these texts, the Daoist sage is an exemplar who serves as a model for simplicity through which whatever is most natural finds fruition in activity. Accordingly, as I argue in this essay, the Way<sup>6</sup> operates through the sage-as-vessel, who instructs the common people and rulers to follow suit.

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<sup>1</sup> Xunzi, and Eric L. Hutton. *Xunzi: the Complete Text*. Princeton University Press, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> By ‘relearn’ I mean to once more act as a child might, or even in accordance with the more primal animal kingdom.

<sup>3</sup> As Ivanhoe says in his introduction to the Daodejing, “The *Way* is *ziran* “so of itself” or “spontaneous” and its unencumbered activity brings about various natural states of affairs through *wuwei*.” XXII... Ivanhoe, P. J. *The Daodejing of Laozi*. Access and Diversity, Crane Library, University of British Columbia, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Henceforth referred to as “DDJ”.

<sup>5</sup> (Csikszentmihalyi 43/51)

Csikszentmihalyi, Mark, and Philip J. Ivanhoe. *Religious and Philosophical Aspects of the Laozi*. State Univ. of New York Press, 1999.

<sup>6</sup> ie. the “Dao”

The Daoist's guidance towards a natural and unremediated state of being operates in stark contrast to many of the other dominant philosophical schools of thought in early China. This is demonstrated by the famous injunction from Xunzi that begins this essay, which is presented as an objection to the underpinnings of much of the Daoist philosophical tradition.<sup>7</sup> If Xunzi is right, then the Daoist project of returning to a natural state of unfettered being would lead both society and people's individual lives into "lasciviousness" and complete "chaos." At issue among these schools of thought is a disagreement about the effects of acting naturally. For Xunzi, unremediated action is, by nature, bad action. However, for the Daoists, to act naturally without reserve is the only way to combat the world's diseases.<sup>8</sup>

I argue that the objection levied by Xunzi and the Confucians<sup>9,10</sup> against the Daoist model of naturalness in action is shortsighted because it fails to account for the deeper meaning found 'between the lines' of the DDJ and other Daoist texts. Contrary to the popular Confucian belief that a natural state of being would lead to chaos, I show rather that the Daoist model of natural activity can be interpreted to produce not only non-chaotic works, but also works that are intricately articulated and impressively structured.

To this end, I focus my attention on the DDJ. I interpret the work not only as a one that presents an explicit philosophical position, but whose performance or composition *as an activity* serves as a model for the sort of (natural) activity recommended by the Daoist sage. In short, I argue

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<sup>7</sup> Xunzi's pessimism about human nature also acts as an objection to his Confucian counterpart Mengzi who claimed that human nature is, at bottom, good.

<sup>8</sup> DDJ 71

<sup>9</sup> Responding to one of the several 'proto-daoists' in *The Analects*, Zilu states: "To avoid public service is to be without a sense of what is right. Proper relations between elders and juniors cannot be discarded – how, then, can one discard the rightness that obtains between ruler and minister? *To do so is to wish to keep one's hands from getting dirty at the expense of throwing the great social order into chaos.*" (18.7, *emphasis mine*).

<sup>10</sup> Confucius, and Edward G. Slingerland. *Analects*. Hackett Pub. Co., 2003.

that insofar as Laozi<sup>11</sup> lived up to his own philosophical word, thereby allowing nature (ie. The Way) to be the *modus operandi* of his authorship, then the DDJ is not so much the sole work of Laozi the sage, but rather the work of nature (The Way) as operating through the sage. Given convincing evidence that the DDJ is intricately articulated and poetically structured<sup>12</sup> (and was likewise historically commented on as such), I conclude that the DDJ is not only a text that purports naturalness to be a seminal source of harmony, but is also modeled in composition as a counterexample to the Confucian/Xunzian rebut for chaos<sup>13</sup>. I conclude that we ought to read the DDJ not merely as a philosopher's treatise on a particular metaphysical or epistemic position, but also as an *active exemplification* of the way in which nature or the Way operates through the sagely individual in *wu wei* fashion. To inspire this interpretive argument, I present what appears to be a pragmatic contradiction concerning the composition of the text before showing why the contradiction, on a charitably Daoist interpretation, does not have traction.

## II. The Pragmatic Contradiction

The DDJ presents a curious textual puzzle in what *appears* to be a pragmatic contradiction. This apparent pragmatic contradiction is constituted by three independently plausible interpretive premises:

1. The presence of Interlocking Parallel Style (IPS) in the DDJ's composition.
2. The form of sagely activity, as purported by the text, involves nonactivity and natural simplicity.
3. The lack of *prima facie* plausibility that IPS is a linguistic form that could come about simply or naturally.

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<sup>11</sup> There is a debate amongst the scholarship of the DDJ whether or not the work was composed by a single author – Laozi. There is evidence to suggest that the DDJ was, rather, composed by several authors who compiled different versions of the text together. For the sake of this essay, I refer to Laozi as the sole author of the work. However, I do not believe, should it turn out to be true that the DDJ is a multi-authored composition, that this fact would stand as an objection to my argument. Authorship and multiple-composition are both activities that are subject to the sagely advice of the text: to act *effortlessly*, or otherwise, as nature might have it.

<sup>12</sup> Wagner, Rudolf G., et al. *A Chinese Reading of the Daodejing Wang Bi's Commentary on the Laozi with Critical Text and Translation*. Vol. 1 & 2, SUNY Press, 2003.

<sup>13</sup> See the quote that begins this essay.

In the following sections, I describe each of these premises in order to demonstrate the apparent (but not actual) contradiction that results from them. However, I argue that, under a charitable reading of the Daoist position, the apparent contradiction is no contradiction at all, but rather an example of the Way as it operates through the exemplary sage.

## II.1 Wang Bi & Interlocking Parallel Style

Perhaps the most famous of Laozi's commentators was the early Han Dynasty scholar Wang Bi (226-49 AD). Wang Bi is responsible for having arranged the received text that we read today<sup>14</sup> and his commentary has survived through the ages likely owing to its vast insight into the DDJ. Most notably, Wang Bi pioneered a reading of the DDJ that understood the text as composed with an intricate poetic/linguistic system known as Interlocking Parallel Style (IPS)<sup>15</sup>. In this section of the essay I first define what IPS is, then show how it functions within the DDJ as both a robust linguistic structure as well as a philosophically rich tool necessary to unlocking arguments present in the text. To this end, I rely heavily upon Richard Wagner's scholarship on IPS and Wang Bi.

The western 'discovery' of IPS as a linguistic form in early Chinese writing comes to us from the Dutch Sinologist, Gustave Schlegel. Schlegel proposed that when parallelism occurred in these texts, it followed particular rules. And, according to Wagner, these rules serve as the foundation upon which we may likewise come to understand the writing of both Wang Bi and the DDJ. Schlegel states: "In two parallel or juxtaposed phrases the laws of Chinese style demand that all parts of the statement correspond to each other: subject to subject, verb to verb, noun to noun, place name to

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<sup>14</sup> ...although two other far older versions have been exhumed from tombs at Goudian and Magwandui dating back as far as the warring states period. These versions invert several of the chapters, but remain largely identical in content to the received text. Significantly, the earlier-exhumed texts are constructed in IPS. This means that it is highly unlikely that IPS was 'written in' to the later-arranged received text.

<sup>15</sup> Wang Bi also composed much of his own commentary in IPS. This linguistic form was very popular amidst Han Dynasty scholars.

place name... [etc.]”<sup>16</sup> Not every passage of the DDJ that can be transposed in IPS rigidly follows this rule, but the parallelisms remain throughout the text.<sup>17</sup> And furthermore, where there are parallelisms, they either directly accord to Schlegel’s rule or else roughly accord in a more complex form.<sup>18</sup>

Wagner’s paradigmatic example of IPS is from a selection of *zhang* 64 which he translates in pre-IPS form as follows:<sup>19</sup>

- (1) He who interferes, destroys them
- (2) He who holds fast, loses them
- (3) That is why the Sage
- (4) does not interfere and thus does not destroy
- (5) does not hold fast and thus does not lose

Clearly lines (1)-(2) and (4)-(5) follow Schlegel’s rule explicitly. Each grammatical object has a mirrored component in its corresponding line. However, line (3) has no parallel itself and thus floats between the two pairs. The ‘floating phrase’, in IPS construction, acts as an interpretive touchstone, or *key*, that binds together the corresponding parallels. And when this key is applied to the parallels, “the two uses of “that is why the sage” expresses, through silent structural means, a second layer of thought.”<sup>20</sup> For instance:

- (a) He who interferes, destroys them. That is why the Sage does not interfere and thus does not destroy.
- (b) He who holds fast, loses them. That is why the Sage does not hold fast and thus does not lose.

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<sup>16</sup> (Schlegel. *Tr.* & qtd in *Wagner* Vol.1, 55)

<sup>17</sup> About half – 39 of 81 *zhangs* are wholly or partially written in IPS: [1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 9, 10, 13, 22, 23, 25, 26, 27, 29, 33, 38, 39, 41, 44, 47, 49, 50, 51, 53, 56, 57, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 67, 68, 70, 73, 76, 77, 80]. In short, the structural and argumentative pattern described here is pervasive in the Laozi. (*Wagner* Vol.1 95)

<sup>18</sup> These two forms of IPS, respectively, are open IPS and closed IPS.

<sup>19</sup> All translations for the following example of *zhang* 64 come from Wagner.

<sup>20</sup> *Wagner* Vol.1 63

In the foregoing example, the floating third line binds together the parallels of (1)-(2) and (4)-(5) into two coherent and complete thoughts. Consequently, by binding together the parallels into antonymic pairs, the text reveals a new philosophical insight. “In subject matter [the pairs] are complementary opposites which together form the entirety of a realm of entities... As a rule, a relationship of complementary opposition prevails between the core notions of parallel pairs like the (a) and (b) here. Together these form a whole in the manner of Heaven and Earth or Yin and Yang.”<sup>21</sup> Or in other words, the parallelisms bound together by the floating third passage bring to light an ‘*argument in the gaps*’ illuminated by the conceptual dichotomy of the opposition-pair. This notion of an ‘argument in the gaps’ exemplifies the philosophical importance of IPS to reading the DDJ.

Taken alone, the foregoing passage prescriptively recommends that the sage avoid both interfering and holding fast. However, interlocked together, we see that there is a dichotomous juxtaposition between interference/destruction and holding fast/losing. According to Wagner (and likewise, Wang Bi’s commentary<sup>22</sup>), the two together are complementary conceptual opposites and form a complete whole. Read in this way, the passage no longer appears to be a prescriptive recommendation that concerns the form of sagely activity, but is rather a descriptive claim. The sage is not bound by the conceptual categories of the complete and complementary opposites. Rather, the sage remains *unbound to* or *outside of* the conceptual dichotomy and thus avoids the harms of interference and holding fast. There are numerous ‘arguments in the gaps’ throughout the DDJ in the many IPS passages (see note 17). The foregoing is merely one interpretation of the argument

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Wagner* Vol.1 67

form presented in *zhang* 64, but that these arguments are present is made clear both by Wang Bi's commentary and Wagner's rigorous scholarship.

Yet, the IPS structure present in the DDJ is not merely a philosophically rich argumentative strategy, but also an efficient and poetic linguistic practice.<sup>23</sup> There is an elegance to the IPS voice in the DDJ insofar as it efficiently constructs arguments in a poetic style. "IPS opens the way for spatially organized statements that add to the linear surface text a new organization and a rich new layer of implicit argumentative matter."<sup>24</sup> Therefore, as an interpretive strategy, composing (or simply reading) the relevant *zhang*'s of the DDJ in IPS has a twofold utility. That is, IPS makes the text out to be both linguistically rich and philosophically robust.<sup>25</sup>

## II.2 The Form of Sagely Activity

The second of the three premises from which I draw my final interpretive conclusion concerns one of the core conceptual values of the DDJ. This value is *ziran* or 'naturalness' and appears in five chapters of the DDJ. *Ziran* as 'naturalness' can be understood in a number of ways. Some scholars translate the term as referring to nature – and indeed, *ziran* does in fact mean nature. However, recent scholarship on the term from Liu Xiaogan<sup>26</sup> argues that the naturalist-interpretation is misguided. Rather, according to Xiaogan, *ziran* ought to be understood as its own entity – a form or principle of actual things whereby they exist spontaneously and without interference. Xiaogan thus understands *ziran* not so much as what is 'natural' as what is 'so-of-itself.'

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<sup>23</sup> Wagner Vol.1 63

<sup>24</sup> Wagner Vol.1 64

<sup>25</sup> For the sake of argumentative consistency, all of the passages that I cite in the DDJ from here out are among those that have been composed in IPS.

<sup>26</sup> Xiaogan, Liu. "On The Concept of Naturalness (Tzu-Jan) In Lao Tzu's Philosophy." *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, vol. 25, no. 4, Dec. 1998, pp. 423–446.



According to Xiaogan, sages model themselves on the Way's *ziran* through *wu-wei* activity.<sup>30</sup>

*Wu Wei* activity is generally interpreted as 'non-activity' or 'effortless action.' It is a challenging concept to capture; yet, there are several passages throughout the DDJ that help aid in understanding it.<sup>31</sup>

2. Sages abide in the business of nonaction, and practice the teaching that is without words... they produce without possessing.  
29. Those who would gain the world and do something with it, I see that they will fail. For the world is a spiritual vessel and cannot put it to use.  
38. Those of highest Virtue do not strive for Virtue and so they have it.  
57. And so Sages say; "I do nothing and the people transform themselves; I engage in no activity and the people prosper on their own."  
63. Act, but through nonaction. Be active but have no activities... This is why the sages never work at great things and are able to achieve greatness.

There are several common themes in these passages. Sages do not 'use' or 'possess' the world, nor do they 'strive' to create from it. Rather, it is in their 'nonactivity' that the sage-as-model helps people to 'transform themselves' and achieve Virtue. Hence, through this particular form of nonactivity (as exemplified in the foregoing passages), the sages model themselves on *ziran* and thereby exemplify the Way for all others.

### II.3 The Apparent Pragmatic Contradiction

Given that the DDJ is clearly and predominantly structured in IPS, there is a problem regarding the text's actual composition and the form of sagely activity that it recommends. In short, it does not appear *prima facie* plausible that the sage can both model *ziran* in the way described above and have written a text that employs the intricate and articulate IPS form. Yet, both obtain in the DDJ.

Interpreted *either* as 'natural' or as 'so-of-itself', *ziran* as a model for sagely activity appears at first glance to preclude the sage from writing in IPS (if not from writing at all). If we understand

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<sup>30</sup> Xiaogan 431

<sup>31</sup> Trans. *Ivanhoe*

*ziran* to refer to what is ‘natural,’ then *IPS* is simply out of the question for the sage. Children, primeval (‘natural’) humans, and the like may be able to *accidentally* write passages in *IPS*, were they to write at all. However, *IPS* is simply *too* articulate and *too* philosophically loaded with ‘arguments in the gaps’ to be a purely unintellectual and *natural* creation. And furthermore, if we understand *ziran* not as ‘natural’ but rather as ‘so-of-itself’ we find a similar problem. *IPS* appears to be a deeply intellectual activity – one that would require years of training to master in addition to having a powerful idea that could be systematically employed throughout the expression of its stylistic prose.

The text tells us that the sage does not take the world and use it, for ‘the world is a spiritual vessel that ought not to be put to use.’ It tells us that ‘the sage does nothing and works at no great activity;’ this is how the sage is able to achieve greatness under the model of the *ziran-like* Way. Consequently, as intricate and rich as *IPS* is, the Daoist sage who employs it in their writing seems to contradict themselves.

Herein lies the problem and apparent pragmatic contradiction present on the surface of the *DDJ*. The problem can be formalized in the following way:

- 1: The *DDJ* uses *IPS*.
  - 2: The form of sagely activity in the *DDJ* precludes unnatural activity.
  - 3: *IPS*, on its surface, is an unnatural stylistic form.
- C: 1-3 constitute a trilemma and cannot be held simultaneously.

Hence, Laozi explicates a model of sagely activity that appears to be at odds with the *IPS* form in which his text is composed. Should we really think that Laozi meant to contradict himself in just this way? Could it be the case that Laozi is no more a sage than a hypocrite who purports to act in a sagely manner, but writes in quite another, unnatural way? To answer these questions in the affirmative would be to commit the Daoist project in the *DDJ* to an argumentatively fatal internal inconsistency. I believe that on an uncharitable reading, this would be a fair conclusion to draw from

the text. It might even be the conclusion that Laozi's intellectual opponents would have drawn — the text is simply proof against itself and, significantly, the Xunzian objection gains even more traction. Nature is chaos, and not even the Daoist sage can prevent it.

However, this is not the interpretation that I mean to draw from the foregoing conclusions. On a charitable and *Daoist* reading of the text, I do not believe that there is any internal inconsistency or pragmatic contradiction at all in the conjunction of the form of sagely activity and the text's IPS composition. In fact, under a charitable interpretation, not only does the pragmatic contradiction dissolve entirely, but we see that the *seeming* contradiction in the DDJ's composition is really an active objection to the Xunzian/Confucian injunction that nature leads to chaos. I discuss this conclusion in the following and concluding section of the essay.

### III. Conclusion: Nature's Harmony

Interpreting the Daoist project in the DDJ charitably means that we must make an attempt to understand how the Daoist project, though seemingly inconsistent from the outside perspective, really could have been a wholly coherent theory by its own rights. Through this perspective we will see that, for the Daoist, there is no pragmatic contradiction in the DDJ's authorship at all.

Laozi wrote the DDJ and did so using IPS. So, if we take Laozi (or generally, the Daoist sage) at their word, then we ought to interpret him as having acted in the way he recommends a sage act. This form of activity is to be modeled on the Way. Insofar as Laozi modeled himself on the Way and the Way is modeled on *ziran*, then so too are Laozi's actions *ziran* actions. Under this interpretation, the third premise of the trilemma would need to be changed from its surface-level expression: "(3) IPS, on its surface, is an unnatural stylistic form." Because IPS is the result of *ziran* activity modeled on the Way, (3) would instead be rendered as, "IPS, as produced by the Way, is a natural stylistic form." Therefore, Laozi is not committing a pragmatic contradiction, but rather is

doing exactly what he says he ought to – in authoring the DDJ, Laozi let nature guide his actions as modeled on the Way. Consequently, we would be better to say that the IPS composition of the text, on this charitable interpretation, is not so much incompatibly Laozi's activity, but on the contrary, the work of the Way operating through Laozi-as-vessel in a *ziran* and *wu wei* fashion. Or, in other words, Laozi didn't write in IPS, but rather the Way wrote in IPS through Laozi-the-sagely-*ziran*-conduit. By authoring the DDJ in just this way, Laozi did nothing and yet it all happened through the natural course of the Way!

If we believe that Laozi is right and really was able to live (and write) by his own *ziran* word, then the DDJ is a living proof of Laozi's philosophical teachings. And, significantly, the IPS present in the DDJ is anything *but* chaotic. It's intricacy in poetic and argumentative form is as linguistically efficient as it is philosophically robust. Hence, the Way, left to its own *ziran* devices, can and *did* produce a non-chaotic work. Thus, the DDJ in composition is, on the charitable interpretation, a counterexample in active exemplification to the Xunzian/Confucian rebut for chaos from nature. In summation, nature does not lead to chaos, but rather leads to effective works like the DDJ composed in IPS. Understanding the DDJ as a Daoist would have, therefore, shows us that nature, like IPS, is anything but chaotic. Rather, the sage who models themselves on the Way does nothing at all and through their open receptivity to the most natural course of action, the Way makes the world harmonious.