Can we conceive of disorder in a positive sense? We organize our desks, we clean up our houses, we cultivate good habits, we discipline our children, we govern our polities—all with the aim of reducing disorder, of temporarily reversing the entropy that inevitably asserts itself in our lives. Going all the way back to Hesiod, we see chaos as a cosmogonic state of utter confusion inevitably reigned in by laws of regularity, in a transition from fearful unpredictability to calm stability. Even in modern Chaos Theory, what appears to be random is ultimately reducible to algorithmic constancy. There does not seem to be a place in normal Western, or Westernized, life for chaos.

Likewise in early China, disorder (luan) was the antithesis of everything civilized. States without rulers and minds without cohesion were luan. Familial relationships were defined, honored, and codified in the rites, and extended metaphorically to the loyal bonds of the state. But against this overt imposition of order, a Rousseauian-type counter-current arose in the background. Though not exclusively Daoist, this revolutionary way of thinking was best articulated by two philosophers we now know as the progenitors of Daoism, Laozi and Zhuangzi. In the very first chapter of the Mawangdui Daodejing, we find the entire system of imposed order turned on its head:

When dao is lost, there comes de. When de is lost, there comes ren. When ren is lost, there comes yi; when yi is lost, there come the rites. The rites exemplify the wearing thin of conscientiousness and trustworthiness and are the commencement of chaotic disorder. (luan)

Human imposition, according to Daoists, leads to the creation of chaotic disorder rather than its rectification. In contrast, the Daoists posit a type of chaos that is replete with creative potentiality and through spontaneous action yields orderly processes that proceed from the concretion of things to their dissolution.
and back, in a complex web of relations. It is as if the early Daoists had an inkling of not only the second law of the thermodynamics that has all things tending to disorder and rest but also of our recent theories of emergent order, or self-organization. For Daoists, nature is a matter of diverse processes, not necessarily tending toward disorder but each in a unique place on a continuum running between concretion and dissolution and back again in a different form. This processional activity, although taken in one sense as cosmogonic akin to Hesiod's, in a more important sense, is immanent at every moment of activity. Our task as humans is to find the place on the continuum in all of our activities and work within the bounds of circumstance by responding creatively with appropriate means, emulating the spontaneity of nature.

The English word «spontaneity» is by no means completely transparent in meaning, but I will save a treatment of its ambiguity for after an analysis of chaos as the inchoate in early Chinese thought. First we will come to understand how early Daoists understood spontaneity as a potent creativity inchoate in undifferentiated form. After this survey, we will move on to the paradox of spontaneity in Western thought and then to an analysis of spontaneous action in aesthetic order.

Chaos of the Inchoate: The Semantic Field

The predominant contemporary meaning of «chaos» as disorder, as in «with the collapse of the economy, the country fell into chaos» derives from an earlier meaning of a primal disorder of constructive matter that awaits ordering. This sense is hardly in use anymore, but we are fortunate to have translations of the Chinese classics by the hand of a sinologist who lived in a time when Greek was still a language of the literate and who therefore understood «chaos» in a way relevant to this study. If we scan his work for use of the terms «chaos» or «chaotic», we find one use in his translation of the Daodejing (Tao Teh King) and eight uses in five passages of the Zhuangzi (Kuang-tsze/Chuang Tzu). Analyzing each of these passages will bring us to a better understanding of «chaos» in a Chinese sense and to a familiarity with related terms in its semantic field.
I reproduce Legge's rendition of *Daodejing*, Chapter 20, in its entirety:

*Daodejing*, 20

When we renounce learning we have no troubles.
The (ready) 'yes',
and (flattering) 'yea';
— Small is the difference they display.

But mark their issues,
good and ill;
— What space the gulf between shall fill?
What all men fear is indeed to be feared;
but how wide and without end
is the range of questions (asking to be discussed)!
The multitude of men look satisfied and pleased;
as if enjoying a full banquet,
as if mounted on a tower in spring.
I alone seem listless and still,
my desires having as yet given no indication of
their presence.
I am like an infant which has not yet smiled.
I look dejected and forlorn,
as if I had no home to go to.
The multitude of men all have enough and to spare.
I alone seem to have lost everything.
My mind is that of a stupid man;
I am in a state of chaos.

Ordinary men look bright and intelligent,
while I alone seem to be benighted.
They look full of discrimination,
while I alone am dull and confused.
I seem to be carried about as on the sea,
drifting as if I had nowhere to rest.
All men have their spheres of action,
While I alone seem dull and incapable,
like a rude borderer.
(Thus) I alone am different from other men,
but I value the nursing-mother (the Tao).

The «state of chaos» line at the end of the second stanza
seems jarring until we realize that this is a primal chaos, an
inchoate state akin to the functioning of *dao* before differentiat-
ed manifestation. In the text from which Legge was working, the
Chinese term is *dun dun*, the fundamental meaning of which is
to be stopped up. In a qi cosmology, the notion of flow or process is of primary ontological importance, and the halting of that flow indicates either an infirmity (as in traditional medical theory) or, as I propose here, a nascent state of disorganization that will eventuate in a recommencement of differentiation and dynamic flow. The translation by Legge of dun dun is fortuitous [others translate it as «blank» (Lau') or «muddled and confused» (Henricks') and acute because the entire puzzling passage is one of Laozi's most succinct descriptions of the psychological state of chaos as the inchoate.8

This passage has long given interpreters pause. Daoism is supposed to provide an ideal for the good life, but Laozi, the icon of all Daoism, presents himself in depressingly negative terms, the only positive note being the final line about obtaining nourishment from the mother. But this is to misread the passage. We can boil the passage down to only the self-referential statements and strip them of their relative negativity:

I seem still,
my desires having as yet given no indication of their presence.
I am like an infant which has not yet smiled.
as if I had no home to go to.
I [possess nothing].
My mind is [blank];
I am in a state of chaos.
I have no special knowledge.
I am [plain].
I [have no permanent home].
I [have no profitable skill].
I value the nursing-mother (the Tao).

From this perspective, we find a person who has managed to reduce his desires to the most minimal level, resembling the utter simplicity of an infant. Having no sense of possession of anything material or conceptual, his mind is untroubled by desire, ambition, or habitual patterns of cognition and is therefore in a state of nascent creativity, ready to respond spontaneously to any circumstance.

There are two important considerations to note in regard to this passage as it relates to chaos as the inchoate. First, the negativity here is portrayed as dark, in contrast to the brightness of other people. This dark/bright contrast is one of the distinguishing characteristics separating Confucianism and Daoism, even though we can find important references to the inchoate in early Confucianism as well.9 The inchoate as an ideal of spontaneity
and a source of creativity is not unique to Daoism, only that it is articulated in negative terms that set off the non-purposive action of Daoists from the striving ambition of the Confucians.

Second, the negativity of Daoism does not involve total negation but instead negates only the contrivance and purposiveness of what is negated and so is in this sense a positive reformulation. Hall and Ames isolate this trope in Daoism, when specifically using the negative «wu», and identify it as the wu-form. The examples they offer are wu zhi, wu wei, and wu yu, literally, no-knowledge, no-action, and no-desire, respectively. Interpreting these terms, they say:

unprincipled knowing, nonassertive action, and objectless desire have this in common: To the extent they are successful, they enrich the world by allowing the process to unfold spontaneously on its own terms, while at the same time, contributing themselves fully to it. (p. 57)

Although Hall and Ames refer to this unique use of negativity exclusively in terms of the wu-form, I find that it also occurs without the use of wu and still holds its particular connotation of uncontrived engagement. Henceforth, I will refer to it as counter-negation, that negativity that strips its positive opposite of any kind of strident connotations, yielding an engagement with the world in which experience is pared down to its most inchoate form and therefore maximizes the possibility of spontaneous interaction.

Zhuangzi, 7

In Legge’s translation of the Zhuangzi, the term «chaos» (or «chaotic») occurs eight times in five passages. The first is the locus classicus for the famous myth of Chaos (hundun):

The Ruler of the Southern Ocean was Shu, the Ruler of the Northern Ocean was Hu, and the Ruler of the Centre was Chaos. Shu and Hu were continually meeting in the land of Chaos, who treated them very well. They consulted together how they might repay his kindness, and said, ‘Men all have seven orifices for the purpose of seeing, hearing, eating, and breathing, while this (poor) Ruler alone has not one. Let us try and make them for him’. Accordingly they dug one orifice in him every day; and at the end of seven days Chaos died.

Unlike «dundun» in the Daodejing, Legge is not alone in his rendering of «hundun» as «Chaos». Watson and Palmer both follow him, and Feng & English use «Primal Chaos». Most oth-
ers echo the primal inchoateness: «Primitivity» (Fung Yu-lan\textsuperscript{14}), "No-Form" (Merton\textsuperscript{15}), and «Primal Dark» (Hinton\textsuperscript{16}).\textsuperscript{17} It is often suggested that «hundun» is a reduplicative term, such as the English «hodgepodge», «rolypoly», or «Humpty-Dumpty». The «dun» of both «dundun» and «hundun» is the same and provides the basic meaning. «Hun» means whole or turbid, and together «hundun» means undifferentiated or obstructed. With the notion of undifferentiation, we can see how Legge can justify the use of «Chaos», and as I propose above, in a qi cosmology, an obstruction indicates a nascent state of disorganization that will eventuate in a recommencement of differentiation and dynamic flow. Chaos in this story is the inchoate state of nascent creativity that is inevitably destroyed by good-intentioned meddling. The fact that Chaos has no sense organs is again an indication of the undesirability of excessive differentiation, another hint at the dark/bright metaphor separating Daoism and Confucianism. The do-gooders want Chaos to share in their sensate world, but Chaos, who is doing just fine in his own inchoateness, perishes at the sight. Of course, in this metaphor it is not a creature that dies but replete potentiality that passes away once determinative choices have been made.

The story of Chaos/Hundun in Zhuangzi appears to be a metaphorical case of Daoist counternegation. As portrayed in other early sources, Chaos/Hundun is a rather hideous looking creature and viewed as vile or barbarous.\textsuperscript{18} The term hun also has a history of association with barbaric tribes.\textsuperscript{19} In Zhuangzi's hands, however, this featureless beast is potent for what it lacks. Using the negative as positive, Zhuangzi employs that strange and fearsome god/creature as a symbol for nascent creativity, showing that the repleteness of dark inchoateness will function until we force our orderly constructions upon it.

Throughout the Daodejing, we find the theme of the creative potential of the formless and the potent nature of darkness, in what are, again, instances of rhetorical counternegation. Chapter 4, for instance, reads:

The way is empty, yet when used there is something that does not make it full.
Deep, it is like the ancestor of the myriad creatures.
Blunt the sharpness;
Untangle the knots;
Soften the glare;
Follow along old wheel tracks.
Darkly visible, it only seems as if it were there.\textsuperscript{20}
The suggestion is that there is an indistinct dynamo of creativity that can be harnessed but not coerced. The way to do so is by removing complications rather than adding them, by flowing with natural movement rather than trying overtly. «Old wheel tracks» can be interpreted as a reference to cultivated habit, which once cultivated guides one’s actions along appropriate paths. Yet vagueness is to be valued, all this creative potential remains dark and inchoate, exploitable, but just out of sight.

Chapters 56 and 52 reiterate this sentiment:

Block the openings,
Shut the doors,

At the heart of creative spontaneity, interaction with one’s environment is primary, but it requires an intuitive attunement to the process rather than prior calculation. Perhaps the Asian martial arts are the best example of this kind of spontaneity that is energetic and immediate, accurate and appropriate, yielding and unforced. Chapter 56 calls the process the «dark identity» (xuan tong), a sure echo of Chapter 15’s xuan tong\(^2\) (mysteriously comprehending), where we find a more descriptive account of the inchoate life:

Of old he [the sage] was well versed in the way
Was minutely \((wei)\) subtle \((miao)\), mysteriously \((xuan)\) comprehending, and too profound to be known.
It is because he could not be known
That he can only be given a makeshift description:

- Tentative, as if wading through water in winter,
- Hesitant, as if in fear of his neighbors;
- Formal like a guest;
- Falling apart like thawing ice;
- Thick like the uncarved block;
- Murky like muddy \((hun)\) water,
- Immense like a valley,

Not exactly the description of a confident, graceful martial artist, this negativity now reveals itself as counternegation, akin to Chapter 20 noted above, as the passage continues:

The muddy, being stilled, slowly becomes limpid,
The settled, being stirred, slowly comes to life.
He who treasures this way
Desires not to be full.
It is because he desires not to be full
That he is able to be worn and incomplete.

There is a constellation of terms here and above that appear repeatedly in the Daodejing and that adumbrate the notion of the
Chaos as the Inchoate: The Early Chinese Aesthetic of Spontaneity

inchoate: xuan (dark, mysterious), miao (subtle/profound), wei (minute/inchoate), xiao (small/minute), pu (uncarved block), wu (nothingness), kong (emptiness). Although these terms are concentrated in Daoist texts, some appear elsewhere also in the sense of inchoate creativity. In Sunzi’s Art of War, as pointed out by Francois Jullien,²² the notion of shi (propensity of things) is brought into relief through some of these terms and shown to be vital to a full description of spontaneous action. As mentioned above, in the Zhong Yong, the term wei (minute/inchoate) figures prominently, and Hall and Ames in their recent translation,²³ boldly translate cheng (conventionally rendered «sincerity») as «creativity». A salient difference, however, is that the Zhong Yong, like other Confucian texts, exhorts the reader to open the senses to discernment, to seek clarity and bring the dark to light.

Zhuangzi, 11

In Zhuangzi, Chapter 11, we find several interesting themes and terms surrounding Legge’s next occurrences of «chaos». One of the two terms rendered «chaos» is «xingming», a reference to the formlessness and boundlessness of a cosmic inchoate potentiality; and the second is «hunhun dundun» a reduplication of «hundun» above, referring here not to a personage or to a cosmic state but to a nascent state of being. In the passage, an already highly achieved Daoist inquires of an even greater master regarding how to act in order to «blend together the essential qualities of [the] six [elemental] influences in order to nourish all living things». The master, Hong Meng (Vast Obscurity), replies:

Wandering listlessly about, I know not what I seek; carried on by a wild impulse, I know not where I am going.
I wander about in the strange manner (which you have seen), and see that nothing proceeds without method and order; – what more should I know? [...] What disturbs [luan] the regular method of Heaven, comes into collision with the nature of things, prevents the accomplishment of the mysterious (operation of) Heaven, scatters the herds of animals, makes the birds all sing at night, is calamitous to vegetation, and disastrous to all insects; – all this is owing, I conceive, to the error of governing men.[...]
You will only injure them! [...] Your mind (needs to be) nourished.
Do you only take the position of doing nothing [wu wei], and things will of themselves become transformed [zihua].
Neglect your body; cast out from you your power of hearing and
Here we have an echo of *Daodejing* 20, in which humans are causing disorder (*luan*) by their very attempts to bring order. Hong Meng advocates instead a return to a personal state of inchoateness that will in turn allow one to meld into a cosmic state of inchoateness. Just like the legendary Hundun, one must eliminate one’s discriminatory sense of hearing and sight in order to blend with inchoate chaos. In the *Daodejing*, terms of the inchoate, such as *pu* and *wei* occur consistently with the exhortation to reduce or eliminate desires. For the Daoists, one of the defining characteristics of human beings is that we have the unfortunate capacity to engender a supervenient self made up of strident emotions and, most disastrously, desires. In this sense, elimination of desires is equivalent to elimination of the ego self and allows for a return to a natural, spontaneous state, described as a liberating melding with the cosmos, just as all things naturally do. The specific terms of spontaneity here are *zihua* and *zisheng*, terms referring to the natural processes of transformation and generation that are hidden and mysterious but still achievable for the individual. Similar to contemporary notions of self-organization in which conditions accumulate to spontaneously produce order, things coalesce and dissolve of their own accord in constantly developing processes that interact in complex webs across scales of causality, with things possessing only transient intrinsicality.

*Zhuangzi*, 12

Legge’s next occurrence of «chaos» (this time «chaotic»), occurs in another description of ultimate achievement. Three types of person are described – men of sheng (sageliness), *de* (virtue/potency/charisma), and *shen* (spirit/supernatural/demon). The first, which happens to be the highest level on the Confucian ladder of achievement, forms a government of fair delegation, patient consideration, and appropriate and effective
spontaneous action. The second moves beyond the human world to all within the Four Seas. He has transcended conventional dichotomies such as right/wrong and beautiful/ugly, and recalling Daodejing 20, he gives the appearance of being timid and hesitant. The third, supernatural, person goes a step further:

Men of the highest spirit-like qualities mount up on the light, and (the limitations of) the body vanish. This we call being bright and ethereal. They carry out to the utmost the powers with which they are endowed, and have not a single attribute unexhausted. Their joy is that of heaven and earth, and all embarrassments of affairs melt away and disappear; all things return to their proper nature: and this is what is called (the state of) chaotic obscurity (hunming).

Chaos is the highest human achievement by which one paradoxically becomes inhuman by transcending all human limitations and coalescing with the natural realm in indistinct repletion. Spontaneity prevails in a self that has disappeared. This type of transcorporeal liberation appears more than once in the Zhuangzi and indicates a level of achieved inchoate spontaneity on a personal level to match cosmic inchoate spontaneity on a grand scale.

One may notice the references to light and brightness here and wonder why this passage contradicts my earlier statement regarding a Daoist preference for the dark. The spontaneity of inchoateness can be represented as both bright and dark — bright in the sense of insubstantial evanescence and dark in the sense of mysterious and subtle. In contrast with Confucian clarity, the darkness refers to a subtlety beyond sensate discrimination aimed at utilitarian manipulation.

When everything has returned to its proper nature, the state is one of hunming, chaotic obscurity. The «hun» of «hunming» is written differently as a Chinese character, but appears cognate with the «hun» of «hundun» both phonetically and semantically. Karlgren gives them identical pronunciations and glosses them both as «chaos», one in reference to the Daodejing and one to the Zhuangzi. The «ming» of «hunming» is effectively identical to the «ming» of «xingming» above, meaning dark or obscure. Both the «hun» and «ming» of «hunming» harken back to the Daodejing. In Daodejing Chapter 14, «hun» appears with «wei (subtle/minute)», «wuwu (no things)», and «bujian (not see)» to describe the inchoateness of the potent dao.
With these three qualities [Equable \( \text{bujian} \), Inaudible, Subtle \( \text{wei} \)],
it cannot be made the subject of description;
and hence we blend them together and obtain \text{The One}.

Its upper part is not bright,
and its lower part is not obscure.

Ceaseless in its action,
it yet cannot be named,
and then it again returns and becomes nothing \( \text{wuwei} \).
This is called the Form of the Formless,
and the Semblance of the Invisible;
this is called the Fleeting \( \text{hu} \) and Indeterminable.

In Chapter 15, quoted above, we find \( \text{hun} \) occurring with
\( \text{wei}, \text{miao}, \) and \( \text{xuan} \), in description of the inchoate life. In the
passage, \( \text{hun} \) describes the muddy condition of water. In Chapter
25, it is used as follows:

There was something undefined \( \text{hun} \)\(^*\) and complete,
coming into existence before Heaven and Earth.
How still it was and formless,
standing alone,
and undergoing no change,
reaching everywhere and in no danger (of being exhausted)!
It may be regarded as the Mother of
all things.

Here it occurs in a passage that goes on to describe the cyclic
concrescence and dissolution of things due to their own spont-
taneity (\( \text{ziran} \)). In all of these cases, \( \text{hun} \) describes an inchoate
spontaneity that possesses enormous creative power. But this
power is not forceful. It unfolds in successive stages according to
the cumulative circumstances that are so subtle as to give the
appearance of an inner essence that is the source of impulsion.
We find just such a description in the occurrence of the \text{ming} of
\( \text{hunming} \) in \text{Daodejing} 21:

The grandest forms of active force
From Tao come,
their only source.

Who can of Tao the nature tell?
Our sight it flies,
our touch as well.

Eluding sight,
eluding touch,
Profound (hu) it is, 
dark and obscure [ming]; 
Things' essences all there endure.

It is not uncommon for the reader unfamiliar with Daoist thought to read the *Daodejing* and conclude that the *dao* is an external force controlling the natural transformations. Quite the opposite, *Dao* is nothing but a name given to the mysterious and spontaneous process of natural self-organization that people at their best may emulate.

**Zhuangzi, 16**

In *Zhuangzi* 16, Legge uses «chaotic» for the term «hunmang». «Hun» is the same term as just above, and «mang» means expansive or muddled. The passage begins as follows:

The men of old, while the chaotic condition was yet undeveloped [hunmang], shared the placid tranquillity which belonged to the whole world.
At that time the Yin and Yang were harmonious and still; their resting and movement proceeded without any disturbance; the four seasons had their definite times; not a single thing received any injury; and no living being came to a premature end.
Men might be possessed of (the faculty of) knowledge, but they had no occasion for its use.
This was what is called the state of Perfect Unity.
At this time, there was no action on the part of any one, but a constant manifestation of spontaneity [ziran].

What if everyone were to attain the highest possible state of spontaneous creativity? According to this passage, that was the original condition, and rather than all things being cast in the bold relief of profit and loss or good and bad, the world seemed in a still inchoate state of chaos, a «Perfect Unity» in a complete diversity. Spontaneity was a way of life. This passage is sandwiched between two passages that describe the descent of the world into the current state of striving and contrivance, a world that requires the Confucian virtues. In both cases, the result, as in *Daodejing* 1, is *luan*, the rank chaos of disorder. The contrast is delightful — chaos in both realms, but while one devolves to entropic disor-
ganization, the other proceeds harmoniously from rest to movement and back, the creative power inexhaustible.

Zhuangzi, 18

Legge's final use of «chaos» in translating Zhuangzi is in Chapter 18, the famous story of Zhuangzi celebrating after his wife's death. Asked to explain, Zhuangzi replies that after an initial pause, he realized that his wife's passing was just another stage in the natural processes, which are worth celebrating. We have in this passage a clear indication of chaos' utility on the individual rather than the cosmic level:

I reflected on the commencement of her being.  
She had not yet been born to life; not only had she no life, but she had no bodily form; not only had she no bodily form, but she had no breath [qi].  
During the intermingling of the waste and dark chaos [manghu], there ensued a change, and there was breath [qi]; another change, and there was the bodily form; another change, and there came birth and life.

While Chapter 16 may appear confusing in that we seem to have gone back to a time of primal chaos but where human life is already in full form, here we see clearly a Daoist chaos that refers to an eternal (that is, timeless) immanence of creative potentiality. The moment of the concrescence of qi is not a return to grand cosmic primality but a momentary example of the process of self-organization that occurs repeatedly.

I believe the word «breath» above would be better left untranslated as «qi». It is hard to see, after all, how breath could precede corporeal form unless it were a Greek-like pneuma, which it clearly is not. What precedes bodily form is the inchoate qi, which coalesces as the body, only to someday disperse again. This is the process that Zhuangzi celebrates. The Chinese term for «chaos» here is «manghu». The «mang», we saw just above. «Hu» is a loan for one of two similarly written characters also pronounced hu, both of which belong to the large set of terms meaning muddled or mixed up. We saw these two used above in Daodejing 14 as the «fleeting» and 21 as the «profound».

The semantic range for all of these «chaos» terms (dun, hun, hun, ming, mang, and hu) is like the meanings of the terms themselves, immense, obscure, and with fuzzy boundaries. What we have found from our survey of Legge's translating them as «chaos», however, is that they can all possess the sense of a powerful creative spontaneity, like that of nature, that can be exploit-
ed by a human being, not through overt means but through a reduction of the self to a fundamentally natural level.

The Aesthetic of Spontaneity

Spontaneity problematizes any notion of agency and therefore all of our philosophy based on agency. Without an agent as a basis for conceptualizing a philosophical theory, it is difficult for a Western philosopher even to begin to approach issues that spontaneity might raise. Our only options are autonomy or automaticity, human or robot. Spontaneity in the Daoist sense, however, is choiceless and therefore, although implying a philosophy of action, appears to fall more under our aesthetic categories than our metaphysical or ethical categories. Around the turn of the 20th Century, a few philosophers, such as Whitehead, Heidegger, and Dewey, began to question these dichotomies that limit our conceptual options. Heidegger and Dewey were both led ultimately to aesthetics, and it was Dewey who posited an intriguingly anthropological account of human experience as fundamentally aesthetic. But before we get to Dewey, we must first confront Rousseau’s Paradox.

The Paradox of Spontaneity

For Daoists, spontaneity is the font of all creativity, but we have in the English term «spontaneity» a historically ambiguous notion. To say the «spontaneity of nature» may recall the writings of Mill, particularly his «On Nature»,27 in which he defines the «spontaneous order of nature» as «depend[ing] on the properties of the elementary forces, or of the elementary substances and their compounds». For Mill, «spontaneity» refers to the mechanistic movements of all things in nature, including human instinct, and is posited in direct contradistinction to the «voluntary action» of human beings. Mill identifies Rousseau as the founder of the line of thought that would have people following nature rather than reason, and yet when Rousseau refers to spontaneous movement (mouvement spontané),28 he identifies it with voluntary action. We have, then, two philosophers dealing with the same philosophical issue who take spontaneity on the one hand to be synonymous with free will and on the other to be its opposite, to be mechanistic and descriptive of the laws of nature. This paradox of spontaneity still persists in ordinary language. To act spontaneously is to act without forethought or aim. And yet
we also say such things as the «the planets move spontaneously» or «the grass grows spontaneously», meaning that the processes occur in the natural course of things, without an extra impelling force. The source of the ambiguity seems natural in light of the Latin root of «spontaneity», «sponte», meaning without antecedent cause. In the case of human action, «no cause» reduces to free will, and in the case of nature, it reduces to law-like regularity. But what if we encounter a philosophical tradition with neither a conception of free will nor a clockwork view of the universe? How would a notion of spontaneity be elaborated? We get a hint in a Rousseau constantly conflicted between human beings as close to the divine and therefore superior to animals and human beings as inseparable from the natural order. For Rousseau, the highest expression of spontaneity is found in God’s intelligence:

Man is intelligent when he reasons, but the Supreme intelligence does not need to reason; there is neither premise nor conclusion for him there is not even a proposition. The Supreme Intelligence is wholly intuitive, it sees what is and what shall be, all truths are one for it, as all places are but one point and all time but one moment. Man’s power makes use of means, the divine power is self-active.29

The sharp ambiguity at the heart of spontaneity, I call Rousseau’s Paradox because he is the one who struggles with it most and ultimately resolves it (to his satisfaction), in the form of God’s intelligence. «Self-active» is very nearly equivalent to the Chinese term that I have been translating «spontaneity», namely «ziran», composed of the characters «zi (self)» and «ran (so/such)». All natural processes are described by Daoists as ziran or self-so, taking place of their own accord, spontaneous, self-active. Rousseau solves the paradox of spontaneity through self-activity, dissolving the dichotomies of free will vs. determinism and reason vs. intuition, while the Daoists come to it without stumbling through any such dichotomies.

Is it helpful to posit an anthropology without the reason vs. intuition dichotomy or a metaphysics without a free will vs. determinism dichotomy? Aren’t these, after all, clarifications that mark philosophical progress? Rousseau notes that for the Supreme Intelligence, «all places are but one point and all time but one moment»; in other words, a collapse of distinctions can yield positive results. As with Rousseau, for Daoists spontaneity is inseparably bound up with the indistinct, with the inchoate. Nowhere is this inchoate creativity more apparent than in the complex field of immediate experience. For an analysis, we turn to John Dewey and Zhuangzi.
Spontaneity and Aesthetic Experience

Dewey's notion of aesthetic experience is paradigmatic of his notion of experience in general. Dewey speaks of experience in terms of particularized experience, of interaction of a live being with its environment, of a beginning and an ending, of organized processes, or conflict and resolution, of culmination and fulfillment. An experience, he says, is an intensified interaction of the person with the environment. Life involves a fluctuating adaptation to the environment, now in step with it, now falling behind. In an experience there is a spontaneous organization of perception and intention that involve reworking the material of the environment until a particular goal is achieved and equilibrium is restored. I don't believe Dewey ever explicitly uses the term «spontaneous» to describe the process of action, but it seems implicit in his descriptions in works such as *Art as Experience*, from which I will be drawing below. In other books and essays, Dewey dispenses with free will altogether in favor of habit, for instance:

... all habits are affections, that all have projectile power, and that [...] a predisposition formed by a number of specific acts is an immensely more intimate and fundamental part of ourselves than are vague, general, conscious choices. All habits are demands for certain kinds of activity; and they constitute the self. In any intelligible sense of the word will, they are will.\(^3\)

The conscious reworking of the material of the environment is, for Dewey, the germ of artistic experience. Dewey notes that in English terminology we divide our experience into artistic and aesthetic but that conceptually they are a unity. The artist reworks the materials of the environment in a meaningful way based on interpretations and feelings that guide him from all past involvements. The perceiver, likewise, recreates the work of art in the act of perceiving, interpreting it based on the psychological contributions of total personal history and predilections. The artist must take the position of aesthetic perceiver in the process of creating an art work, and the perceiver is an artist in the re-creation of the meaning of the work. An experience is the re-creation of unity, the restoration of balance, and when it is moved by its own urge to fulfillment, when it is expressed only as experience, without being dominantly practical or intellectual, it is aesthetic.

Dewey tells us that emotion, which for him is emotional thinking, is what brings unity to an experience, what orders it, what brings the things of consciousness into consciousness and filters out the rest, what integrates things of consciousness into a whole. It is not that there are separate emotions in experience but
that experience is emotional. All experience, according to Dewey, as an integrated movement toward a culmination, can bring the person into unity with the environment.

While emotion drives experience during an experience, according to Dewey, the final culmination of experience results in a kind of inner harmony, or serenity, a moment when tension has subsided, when conflict has been resolved, and intense involvement gives way to a feeling of being at one with the developed order. It is a feeling of the restoration of unity, a feeling we call happiness or delight. Dewey says that it is «a fulfillment that reaches the depth of our being— one that is an adjustment of our whole being with the conditions of existence». It is interesting to note that this feeling of inner harmony is not the final cause of an experience for Dewey. Each experience has an inherent telos, is driven forward by forces, energies, desire, and needs peculiar to it. This is the spontaneity; experiences are self-active. Aesthetic experience is controlled by a heightened sensitivity to the ordering of the relations of qualities, and it is the bringing to consummation of the ordering that is the end in view of experience. We should note the difference, in Dewey’s philosophy of experience, between the supervenient feeling of inner harmony that ensues from experience and the intense feeling of interpenetration of self with world at the height of experience. The former is a slackening of vitality, an emotion felt deeply but not intensely, a feeling of well-being in restored order but not of immediate union. In his aesthetics, Dewey emphasizes the tension, the interaction, and the heightened vitality that give rise to artistic expression and that imbue aesthetic experience. The pause for reflection and quiet enjoyment afterward is significant but not primary.

Zhuangzi also has a philosophy of creature/environment interaction, one that lends itself to being interpreted aesthetically, one that finds importance in personal union with the environment, and one that recognizes emotion as crucial to experience. For Zhuangzi, however, rather than a heightened vitality being paramount philosophically, it is inner harmony that is most important.

For Zhuangzi, as for all early Chinese thinkers, the human being is a temporary concrescence of qi, functionally organized and in constant mutual interaction with all other qi concrescences, that is, the entire environment. The processes of this interaction are understood in terms of «arousal and response» (ganying), meaning that events elicit responses in a quasi-causal way. The difference between this arousal-and-response and efficient causality is that arousal-and-response allows for much more free play. It is less law-like on the surface, similar to the way in which contemporary
complexity theory speaks of the disjointedness of causality across scales and leaves room for self-organization. The episode in Zhuangzi, Chapter 2, of the piping of nature is an excellent illustration of this arousal-and-response. In a meditative description, the wind is said to create a variety of sounds in the hollows of the natural world. The way it accomplishes this is not by successively blowing through each hole but by eliciting sound from them all at once. A phrase that occurs, for instance, is «causing each to [sound] from itself» (shì qì zìjī).

For Zhuangzi, in the natural state all things are in accord with each other as the natural processes proceed in successive transformations. There is no human being in an individualistic sense, as a separate voluntaristic entity with maximum decision power and minimum influence from external forces. As in Dewey, the person is an entity in process, constantly shaping and being shaped by the environment. For Zhuangzi, however, intentional, calculative interaction with the environment, marks a straying from the ideally natural ways of acting. There is a subtle but significant difference between Dewey and Zhuangzi on this point and it speaks to their overall axiologies. Although Dewey writes as if in purely descriptive terms of experience, his terminology (heightened vitality», «fulfillment», «recovering unison», etc.), reveal a tipping of the scales toward a valuing of the emotions of active participation as opposed to the more distant emotions of inner harmony. The height of experience for Dewey, which would also be the height of the emotion ordering experience, is a complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events. Although Zhuangzi stresses a similar interpenetration, the emotions are muted, there is a psychological distance. For Dewey, emotion is the sign of a break. For Zhuangzi, the break is a lessening of emotion.

Zhuangzi stresses not only a notion of interaction among things but of dependence relations among things. The dependence relations are noted in terms such as «dài» and «yì», which both connote a sense of dependence or reliance in regard to the ability to act. In the human realm, dependence relations are positive or negative depending on whether the particular relation is natural or contrived. In Chapter 1, for instance, Liezi is elevated as a free spirit who can roam where he will, but his clay feet are revealed in the fact that there is still something on which he is reliant (yòu suo dài zhe), namely, the wind. In contrast, Chapter 2 speaks of Cook Ding, who carves up an ox with such consummate skill that his actions are taken by a viewer as the secret of nurturing life. When asked about his secret, the cook replies that he merely relies on the patternings of nature (yì hù tian lì).
The union of person and environment is achieved, in Zhuangzi, by moving away from contrivances and re-entering the stream of natural processes, attaining a natural spontaneity. A concomitant movement is one away from common emotions of joy, anger, grief, etc., to a distant equanimity, a sort of ataraxia. From one perspective, the height of (aesthetic) experience can be seen in both Dewey and Zhuangzi as the resolution of the self with the environment, of merging with the chaos of the inchoate and taking advantage of potent and creative spontaneity therein. There is a significant difference, however, in the extent of emotional investment as postulated by Dewey on the one hand and Zhuangzi on the other. For Dewey, complete investment of the self is complete emotional investment, emotion being integral, and integrating, to the experience. For Zhuangzi, however, powerful, disturbing emotions are the result of contrived dependencies arising from unnecessary personal and psychic investments in activity. Whereas Dewey turns to society, we see, in the ideal characters depicted in Zhuangzi’s Inner Chapters, sages and worthies who move beyond the dusty world.

The contrived dependencies are described in Zhuangzi as shackles (zhigao), and those who can free themselves of the shackles also free themselves of the disturbances of emotions. See for instance, Chapter 3, where by «loosing the bonds», sadness and joy cannot find a way in. Similar language is used in Section Five of Chapter 6, and in Chapters 5 and 7 the mirror metaphor illustrates the same ideal of emotions existing on the surface but not entering deeply enough to disturb equanimity. Throughout the Inner Chapters, there are statements of equanimity as an ideal in which the self is dissolved and with it the transient emotions. The emotion that remains is a kind of equanimity, a calm delight in the constant processes of nature. This equanimity does not preclude interaction, but practically speaking, it does reduce it, since so much human interaction is contrived.

The aesthetic of spontaneity relies on a notion of experience that arises out of complex interaction with our environment that is conceptualized by Daoists as the chaos of the inchoate, a primal disorder that is the seat of potent creativity. Disorder can be desirable and through the Daoists Laozi and Zhuangzi, along with two Western Daoists, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Dewey, we have seen how this can be explained in terms both Chinese and Western.
Notes

1. There is an exception in which «luan» paradoxically means order, but this is rare.

2. In 1973, two complete versions of the Daodejing were found in a tomb dating to the Second Century BCE in Mawangdui, China, predating our earliest received version by some nine centuries. The internal chapter order of these two excavated versions differs slightly from the received versions, with the received Chapter 38 appearing first.

3. The central vocabulary of Chinese moral philosophy, dao (tao), de (te), ren (jen), and yi (i) are technical terms that defy translation. Provisionally, they may be rendered «way», «virtue», «benevolence», and «appropriateness», respectively, but in English these hollow forms do not do justice to the subtle and profound philosophical backgrounds of the Chinese concepts. To retain a sense of their unparalleled significance, I leave them transliterated, with the confidence that the sincere reader would prefer to investigate their full semantic range in works such as Hall and Ames' Thinking Through Confucius, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press 1987 or A.C. Graham's Disputers of the Tao, La Salle, Ill: Open Court 1991 rather than be mislead by anemic approximations.

4. My translation. All other translations will be from Legge, unless otherwise noted. The version used is an electronic version of Legge, Texts of Taoism found at Shuhai Wenyuan (www.shuhai.hawaii.edu).

5. It may appear random or haphazard to approach chaos in China through the serendipity of translations from over a century ago, but I do so as a convenient heuristic that allows easy access to the heart of the matter. I will consider closely the Chinese terms rendered «chaos» and other instances of the same terms when not so translated.


8. Paul J. Lin, in his translation of Daodejing (A Translation of Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching and Wang Pi's Commentary, MMCS 30 Ann Arbor, Mich: University of Michigan Center for Chinese Studies 1977, pp. 35-36), following the commentary of China's most influential interpreter Wang Bi, translates dun dun, «How chaotic! Chaoticb He records Wang Bi's commentary on this term: «Undifferentiated or unrecognized, it cannot be named». Chang Chung-yuan (Tao: A New Way of Thinking, New York: Perennial Library 1977, p. 52) notes that C.G. Jung refers to this passage in his Integration of the Personality, «identifying the 'lavishing mother' with the region of darkness into which one falls when one follows the process of wu-wei, or not-doing, expounded by Lao Tzu. This region of darkness is not empty but is the place where all potentialities are stored».

9. The Zhong Yong, for instance, expounds on wei (minute/inchoate).


Spontaneity, order, but this is rare. The earliest received version by two excavated versions differs appearing first. De (te), ren len), may be rendered "way", but in English these hollow.

Thinking Through Confucius.

Graham's Disputers of the by anemic approximations.


Following Mair (p. 113) here rather than Legge, who renders the difficult Chinese terms "grief" and "perplexity", as opposed to Mair's "timidity" and "apprehensiveness".


Henricks translates this as "chaos" (p. 236).


Foxley, op. cit., paragraph 1022.

Art As Experience, New York: Capricorn/G.P. Putnam's Sons 1934.


Ibid., p. 17.

The contrivance here is not explicit, since the wind, after all, is natural. Liezi brought attention to himself by roaming freely, roaming as if to be noticed, rather than roaming as a natural event. Hence the contrivance. Compare the worthies that Confucius praises in Section 6 (section numbering according to Mair, Wandering on the Way) of Chapter 6, who do not «watch for the inquisitive eyes and ears of groups of people» (yi guan zhi er nu).

Zhuangzi, Chapter 5, Section 3.