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Anti-interference and Eliminating the Scheming Mind: Two Forms of the Daoist Concept of *Zi ran*

Ye Shuxun 葉樹勛
Professor of Philosophy, Zhejiang University, Hangzhou, Zhejiang, China
shuxunye@163.com

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Abstract

Current scholarship on the Daoist concept of *zi ran* (naturalness/spontaneity/self-so-ness) often overlooks semantic variations across different contexts, leading to overgeneralization and interpretive errors. The problem stems from *zi ran*'s semantic ambiguity, which requires clarification. Analyzing the causal conditions underlying *zi ran* is essential for distinguishing its meanings. This analysis reveals that Daoist *zi ran* manifests in two distinct forms. Each form has different connotations and relationships to the *Dao* and *wu wei* (non-action).

The first form emphasizes freedom from external force—meaning "self-so" without outside influence. Here, *wu wei* by one party causes *zi ran* in another. Specifically, the *Dao* practices *wu wei* while the myriad things achieve *zi ran*. The second form emphasizes freedom from internal intention—meaning "originally so" without deliberate artifice. Here, *zi ran* and *wu wei* describe the same object and together explain the *Dao*'s nature.

Zi ran first appeared in Laozi's thought as the first form. The second form emerged in Chuangzi's philosophy. From then on, both forms coexisted. These two forms embody different Daoist values: anti-interference preserves spontaneity, while eliminating the scheming mind maintains authenticity. Clarifying these forms enables a clearer understanding of *zi ran's* meaning and related issues.

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Zi ran 自然 (naturalness/spontaneity) is a central yet semantically fluid concept in Daoist philosophy. Existing studies frequently fail to distinguish its contextual meanings, resulting in sweeping claims and misjudgements. Such problems affect not only the explanation of *zi ran*'s itself but also the understanding of its relationships to other crucial concepts like the *Dao* and *wu wei* 無為.[1] Therefore, clarifying its philosophical meaning requires a preliminary semantic analysis.[2]

As A. O. Lovejoy (1873–1962) observed, the most important concepts tend to be the most semantically ambiguous; intellectual history thus requires philosophical semantic analysis to eliminate such ambiguity.[3] This point is crucial for understanding *zi ran*. Beginning with semantics reveals that Daoist *zi ran* encompasses two forms with different connotations and different relationships to the *Dao* and *wu wei*. Clarifying these distinctions also shows that some current scholarly debates arise because scholars are developing arguments around different forms of the concept. Meanwhile, interpretive biases often result from confusing different situations—importing a form of *zi ran* that does not apply to the specific case being examined.

Several questions, therefore, demand investigation: How should the semantic ambiguity of *zi ran* be resolved? How do its different meanings reflect Daoist ideals? And why do the relationships between *zi ran*, the *Dao*, and *wu wei* vary?

1 Victor H. Mair, *Tao Te Ching: The Classic Book of Integrity and the Way* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), 116, 140, 110. Mair notes that *zi ran* 自然 literally means "self-so" and also translates it as "spontaneous." He renders *wu wei* 無為 as "nonaction."

2 Translator's Note: All translations from classical Chinese texts are by the author, unless otherwise specified. Citations from the *Dao De Jing* refer to R. B. Blakney, *The Way of Life* (New York: Mentor Books, 1955). Citations from the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 refer to Victor H. Mair, *Wandering on the Way: Early Daoist Tales and Parables of Chuang Tzu* (1994; repr., Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998).

3 A. O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: a Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 12–15.

1 Analyzing *Zi ran's* Semantics through Different Causal Factors

Daoist usage reveals two important yet inadequately distinguished meanings of *zi ran*. As a compound of *zi* 自 and *ran* 然, *zi ran* literally means "self-so" or "so of itself"—a well-established understanding. Additionally, *zi ran* often indicates action without intention or purpose, the opposite of deliberate artifice. Both senses are common in Daoist texts and contemporary usage alike. While we may recognize these as different meanings, scholarship rarely examines their distinctions, and we often conflate them unconsciously.

This conflation appears when scholars gloss *zi ran* etymologically as "self-so" but then shift to interpretations based on discursive needs, at times interpreting it as "self-so" and at other times emphasizing its meaning of "without intention" or "no artifice." Such inconsistency is common. We rarely consider how "without intention" embodies the meaning of "self-so." For instance, describing a smile as natural and unforced does not align seamlessly with an interpretation of *zi ran*. Moreover, while the etymology of "self-so" is clear, we rarely examine how "without intention" should be understood through the word's construction.

These issues extend beyond semantics; they fundamentally shape our understanding of *zi ran's* philosophical content. To address them, a viable method is to first consider why something might be unnatural, then examine how it becomes *zi ran*. Regarding the "self-so" meaning, unnaturalness results from external influence. When such factors disappear, something becomes "so of itself"—not made so by others. In the "without intention" meaning, unnaturalness stems not from external interference but from internal intentions that manipulate one's expression. When such factors disappear, the expression emerges from original nature rather than from deliberate artifice.

While the absence of internal intention might also be traced to a lack of external influence, our focus here is on internal conditions, where the absence of intention holds independent significance as a causal factor (as will be discussed later). Therefore, although related, the two meanings remain distinct from the perspective of their primary causal factors. The former focuses externally, emphasizing the absence of external forces—hence "self-so." The latter focuses internally, emphasizing the absence of intentions that manipulate the self—hence "without intention."

This distinction is also reflected in the character *zi*. Scholars have not always closely examined *zi's* specific referent, generally interpreting it simply as "self." But as the causal factor changes, the meaning of *zi* shifts its emphasis. *Zi* originally meant "nose," later acquiring extended meanings like "self," "original," and "from." It primarily expressed these extended meanings, leading to the creation

of the character *bi* 鼻 specifically for "nose." In the word *zi ran*, when external force is absent, *zi* emphasizes "self" (not made so by others, but so of itself). When intention is absent, *zi* primarily indicates "original" (not done intentionally, but originally so).

Regarding this latter meaning, *zi ran* means "originally so" or "as it is by nature." Yet because we often focus on its causal factor, we also understand it as "without intention" or "no artifice." Even so, the meaning "originally so" remains evident in usage. For example, saying someone's smile is very natural means their smile is originally this way, not intentionally affected. Here, the word's direct meaning ("originally so") is present, though the emphasis on its cause ("not intentionally affected") somewhat diminishes it. Analyzing the different causal factors is key to understanding the semantics of *zi ran*. This reveals both the connections and distinctions between the two meanings and shows how the significance of *zi* shifts under different circumstances.

In modern Chinese, *zi ran* not only describes a quality but can also refer to the substantive natural world. This usage became popular through modern translations of the Western term "Nature." In the West, "Nature" can indicate the essence of things as well as natural objects and their totality—the natural world. Through modern translation and new usage, the meaning of the Chinese *zi ran* expanded accordingly, making its substantive sense increasingly prominent.

In summary, Daoist *zi ran* has two basic meanings: "self-so," free from the influence of others, and "originally so," free from deliberate artifice. Analyzing the cause of *zi ran* is the key to understanding both meanings. The former meaning targets the external world, emphasizing the absence of external forces, with *zi* primarily meaning "self." The latter targets the internal self, emphasizing the absence of self-will, with *zi* primarily embodying "original." This distinction serves not merely to analyze semantics; for Daoist philosophy, it enables a better grasp of the different forms of *zi ran*. We will now examine their specific manifestations in Daoist thought.

2 Freedom from External Force: *Zi ran* and the Ideal of Anti-interference

From the intellectual history of *zi ran*, its initial appearance in the thought of Laozi 老子 (571–470 BCE) is our primary concern. As a concept which Laozi originated, *zi ran* represents the essence of his philosophy and has long been a subject of rich scholarly discussion. Yet significant disagreements persist.

Interpretations of its meaning differ, and views on the relationships between *zi ran*, the *Dao*, and *wu wei* remain varied.

Given the prominent status of the *Dao*, traditional views often classify both *zi ran* and *wu wei* as attributes of the *Dao*. However, this understanding has faced recent challenges. Some scholars argue that in the *Dao De Jing*, *zi ran* does not refer to the *Dao's* own manifestation but rather to the state of the myriad things being "so of themselves." In the political realm, this means the spontaneous activity of the people. The realization of *zi ran*, in this view, depends on the *wu wei* of the *Dao* or the sage.[4] This interpretation offers new perspectives on Laozi's *zi ran* and has attracted scholarly attention, though some scholars object based on traditional views.[5] This situation directly affects how we define the form of Laozi's *zi ran* and requires careful investigation.

The term *zi ran* appears five times in the *Dao De Jing*:

> He is aloof, as if his talk / Were priced beyond the purchasing; / But once his project is contrived, / The folk will want to say of it: / "Of course! We did it by ourselves!" (Ch. 17)[6]

> Sparing indeed is nature of its talk. (Ch. 23)[7]

> Man conforms to the earth; / The earth conforms to the sky; / The sky conforms to the Way; / The Way conforms to its own nature. (Ch. 25)[8]

4 See Wang Zhongjiang 王中江, "Dao yu shiwu de ziran: Laozi 'dao fa ziran' shiyi kaolun" 道與事物的自然：老子"道法自然"實義考論, *Zhexue yanjiu* 哲學研究, no. 10 (2010): 37–47; Ikeda Tomohisa 池田知久, *Daojia sixiang de xin yanjiu: yi* Zhuangzi *wei zhongxin* 道家思想的新研究—以《莊子》為中心, trans. Wang Qifa 王啟發 and Cao Feng 曹峰 (Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou guji chubanshe, 2009), 547–61; Wang Bo 王博, "Quanli de ziwo jiezhi: dui Laozi zhexue de yi zhong jiedu" 權力的自我節制：對老子哲學的一種解讀, *Zhexue yanjiu* 哲學研究, no. 6 (2010): 45–55; Cao Feng 曹峰, "*Laozi* de xingfuguan yu 'xuande' sixiang zhijian de guanxi" 《老子》的幸福觀與"玄德"思想之間的關係, *Zhongyuan wenhua yanjiu* 中原文化研究, no. 4 (2014): 35–42.

5 See Luo Anxian 羅安憲, "Lun Laozi zhexue zhong de 'ziran'" 論老子哲學中的"自然", *Xueshu yuekan* 學術月刊, no. 10 (2016): 36–43; Xiao Ping 蕭平, *Lao-Zhuang ziran guannian xintan* 老莊自然觀念新探 (Taipei: Huamulan wenhua chubanshe, 2015), 102–7; Zhou Geng 周耿, "'Zuo ziji': Laozi 'dao fa ziran' zhexue yiyi xintan" "做自己": 老子"道法自然"哲學意義新探, *Zhexue dongtai* 哲學動態, no. 3 (2017): 48–53.

6 R. B. Blakney, *The Way of Life*, 69. Blakney's "Of course! We did it by ourselves!" captures the essence of *wo ziran* 我自然 as the people's perception of their own agency.

7 Ibid., 75.

8 Ibid., 78.

> The exaltation of the Way, / The veneration of its power, / Come not by fate or by decree; / But always just because / By nature it is so. (Ch. 51)[9]

> He studies what others neglect / and restores to the world what multitudes have passed by. / His object is to restore everything to its natural course, / but he dares take no steps to that end. (Ch. 64)[10]

Following the previous analysis, determining which form of *zi ran* appears here requires examining its causal factors. The meaning in chapter 64 is clear: *zi ran* refers to the myriad things acting "so of themselves" (their "natural course"), which the sage assists but "dares take no steps" to force. Chapter 17 describes the people acting "so of themselves" ("We did it by ourselves!"), a state realized through the ruler being "aloof" and not overbearing. The form of expression in chapter 23 is concise but connects to chapter 17. The idea that "nature" is "sparing … of its talk" mirrors the ideal of a ruler who rarely issues orders, thereby allowing the people to be *zi ran*. In essence, these three passages present *zi ran* as a state of freedom from external force, emphasizing the spontaneous activity of the people or the myriad things, with no interference.

The use of *zi ran* in chapter 51 is ambiguous. It could mean that the honor of the *Dao* and the value of its *De* are "self-so," with no external agent bestowing command upon them. Alternatively, it could mean that the myriad things are "so of themselves"—that the *Dao* and its *De* do not interfere but instead allow the myriad things to be *zi ran*. Regardless of the interpretation, *zi ran* here indicates "so of itself" without implying "without intention" or "no artifice." However, the referent of "self" in "so of itself" differs in each reading, which in turn affects the understanding of the relationship between *zi ran* and the *Dao*. From the context, *zi ran* should refer to the myriad things acting spontaneously. This chapter discusses the relationship between the *Dao*, its *De*, and the myriad things; the concepts of "honor" and "value" appear within this relationship. The passage thus means: the *Dao* and its *De* receive honor from the myriad things not because anyone commands it, but because the myriad things act this way spontaneously.

The phrase "*Dao fa zi ran*" 道法自然 (The Way conforms to its own nature) from chapter 25 is the most famous of the five occurrences.[11] It is generally

9 Ibid., 104.

10 Ibid., 117. Blakney's translation of "natural course" directly corresponds to *zi ran* in this context, and "dares take no steps" is a rendering of *bu gan wei* 不敢為.

11 Blakney's translation, "The Way conforms to its own nature," identifies *zi ran* with the inherent spontaneity of the *Dao* itself. R. B. Blakney, *The Way of Life*, 78.

understood to mean that the *Dao* takes itself as its own foundation—that the *Dao* is "self-so." However, according to the view that *zi ran* represents the manifestation of the myriad things, this passage would mean that the *Dao* allows the myriad things to be *zi ran*. The proposition is extremely concise. Taken literally, it means the *Dao* models itself and takes *zi ran* as its standard. Thus, *zi ran* can be understood as an abstract value principle. Its subject lacks a specific referent, logically including both the *Dao* and the myriad things it generates. This interpretation could potentially reconcile the previous two viewpoints.

Such a synthetic understanding has some basis, but it does not capture the emphasis in Laozi's thought. As Wang Zhongjiang 王中江 notes, Laozi's philosophy emphasizes the *Dao* allowing the myriad things to be *zi ran* at the cosmological level; in the political realm, it emphasizes the sage following the *Dao's* method to allow the people's *zi ran*. Laozi frequently uses expressions like *zihua* 自化 (self-transformation), *zipu* 自樸 (self-simplicity), and *zizheng* 自正 (self-correction), all of which are closely related to *zi ran*. As Ikeda Tomohisa observes, *zi ran* as an abstract concept serves to summarize these "self-X" expressions. Thus, in chapters 32 and 37, if rulers maintain the *Dao* and treat the myriad things according to its method, then the myriad things will *zibin* 自賓 (submit themselves) and *zihua* (transform themselves)—that is, achieve *zi ran*. These can be seen as two examples of "*Dao fa zi ran*." Though mediated by one who has attained the *Dao*, this ultimately manifests the *Dao* allowing the myriad things to be *zi ran*. When a sage applies this method to politics, it appears as the principle from chapter 57: "I take no action [practice *wu wei*] and the people transform themselves." Such reasoning represents an important trajectory in Laozi's philosophy. In this context, *Daofa ziran* means that the *Dao* allows the myriad things their natural course; within this allowance, the myriad things develop and achieve themselves.

In summary, Lao zi's use of *zi ran* emphasizes the meaning of non-interference and being "self-so." It focuses on the spontaneity of a thing's activity in the absence of external force, rather than the authenticity of its nature in the absence of internal intention. Here, the "self" primarily refers to the myriad things, while the *Dao* and the sage represent others. If these others do not interfere, then the myriad things can engage in spontaneous activity and be "so of themselves." In the political realm, this means that the people can develop independently and be "so of themselves" without interference from the sage.

Because Laozi's expressions are often concise, and given the prominent status of the *Dao*, it is easy to classify *zi ran* as an attribute of the *Dao*. In such an interpretation, *zi ran* might indicate that the *Dao* is self-rooted, with no higher existence determining it, or it might indicate that the *Dao's* activity is without will or artifice. Thus, both forms of *zi ran* could seemingly appear

here (which partly explains why some viewpoints conflate the two meanings). In fact, Laozi's concept of *zi ran* is not used to explain the condition of the *Dao* but rather to describe the state of the myriad things in relation to it. The condition of the *Dao* itself is explained through other means. In Laozi's philosophy, the *Dao* is indeed self-rooted, but this is not explained with the term *zi ran*. Instead, it is reflected through other descriptions, such as "mother" (*mu* 母), "root" (*gen* 根), "ancestor" (*zong* 宗), and "beginning" (*shi* 始). Moreover, the *Dao* is indeed without will and has no artifice, but Laozi does not use *zi ran* to indicate this either. Rather, he explains this through another related concept—*wu wei*. Furthermore, the lack of artifice of the *Dao* and the sage—that is, *wu wei*—is precisely the cause of the *zi ran* of the myriad things.

The *Dao De Jing* frequently describes the lack of artifice of the *Dao* and of those who attain it, and this is elaborated in the very chapters that mention *zi ran*. For example, chapters 17 and 23 emphasize the value of minimal speech: the ideal ruler is so aloof that his talk seems "priced beyond the purchasing" (*guiyan* 貴言), while nature itself is described as "sparing … of its talk" (*xiyan* 希言).[12] Chapter 25 characterizes the *Dao* with phrases like "silent and empty" (*jixi liaoxi* 寂兮寥兮) and "circulating without peril (*zhouxing er budai* 周行而不殆)."[13] Chapter 51 states that the *Dao's* mystic "power," as Blakney translates it, or "Integrity," as Mair translates it, is to engage in "generating without possessing, acting without relying, leading without dominating."[14] And chapter 64 further notes the sage's principles of "not desiring" (*bu yu* 不欲), "not learning" (*bu xue* 不學), and "not daring to act" (*bugan wei* 不敢為).[15]

These phrases all reflect the condition of non-interference that enables the other party to achieve *zi ran*. The term in Laozi's thought that encompasses this

12 R. B. Blakney, *The Way of Life*, 69, 75. The first passage from chapter 17 is: "He is aloof, as if his talk / Were priced beyond the purchasing; / But once his project is contrived, / The folk will want to say of it: / 'Of course! We did it by ourselves!'" The second passage from chapter 23 is: "Sparing indeed is nature of its talk."

13 Ibid., 77. The full passage from chapter 25 reads: 寂兮寥兮，獨立不改，周行而不殆，可以為天下母. (So silent, so aloof and so alone, / It changes not, nor fails, but touches all: / Conceive it as the mother of the world.)

14 Ibid., 104. The full passage from chapter 51 reads: "You shall give life to things / But never possess them; / Your work shall depend on none; / You shall be chief but never lord. / This describes the mystic power." In this context, Mair's term "Integrity" is an appropriate rendering for the concept Blakney translates as "power" (*de* 德).

15 Ibid., 117. The full passage from chapter 64 reads: "So the Wise Man wants the unwanted;/ he sets no high value on anything/ because it is hard to get./ He studies what others neglect/ and restores to the world what multitudes have passed by./ His object is to restore everything to its natural course,/ but he dares take no steps to that end." Blakney's "dares take no steps to that end" is his rendering of 不敢為.

is the familiar *wu wei*. Laozi's concept of *wu wei* represents a kind of "useless use," where the actor, though capable of action, refrains from acting, thereby allowing the other party spontaneous activity and self-achievement. The saying that the *Dao* is "still, at rest" yet "does everything that's done" (*wuwei er wu buwei* 無為而無不為)[16] captures this intent. In this situation, *wu wei* and *zi ran* appear as cause and effect, respectively describing the agent and the recipient of this "useless use." As noted earlier, the freedom-from-external-force form of *zi ran* emphasizes the absence of interference from another. *Wu wei* indicates precisely this causal factor.

In this sense, *zi ran* as Laozi's original concept largely embodies the ideal of anti-interference. Laozi advocates the non-interventionism of "sage-kings practice *wu wei* while people achieve *zi ran*." He recognizes at the cosmic source that "the great *Dao* practices *wu wei* while the myriad things achieve *zi ran*," taking this as the basis for the legitimacy of non-interventionism. Later followers developed this spiritual ideal. Examples include the call to "Follow along with the nature of things and admit no personal preference" from the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, and its description of a time when "there was no action but only constant spontaneity."[17] This meaning of *zi ran* is also common in contemporary or slightly later texts, with examples such as the principle from the *Hanfeizi* 韓非子 of "being natural without being commanded" and the *Wenzi's* 文子 definition of non-governance as that which "does not alter the natural."[18]

To conclude this point, when Daoists discuss *zi ran*, a major consideration is the advocacy of non-interventionism. This excludes others from destroying the spontaneity of things, especially rejecting the ruling class's interference in the *zi ran* lives of the people. Therefore, the freedom-from-external-force form of *zi ran* and the ideals it embodies are primarily applied to political contexts. The Daoists believe people can spontaneously achieve good lives, but that improper interference by certain individuals damages this spontaneity and creates social chaos. As the *Hengxian* 恆先 states, "In the beginning, there was good, there was order without disorder; when there were people, there

16 Ibid., 90. Blakney's rendering of this core principle from chapter 37 is: "The Way is always still, at rest, / And yet does everything that's done."

17 Victor H. Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, 68, 149. The first phrase is from the "Ying Diwang" 應帝王 (Responses for Emperors and Kings) chapter. The second is from the "Shanxing" 繕性 (Mending Nature) chapter.

18 The first phrase, from the "Anwei" 安危 chapter of the *Hanfeizi*, is 不令而自然. The second, from the "Daoyuan" 道原 chapter of the *Wenzi*, is part of a larger principle: "One who practices non-action does not act before things; one who practices non-governance does not alter what is natural."

was not-good, and disorder came from people."[19] The key to governance, therefore, lies not in active intervention but in passive non-interference, providing people sufficient space for *zi ran*. In this sense, *zi ran* represents an important value pursued by the Daoists, and *wu wei* serves as the basic method for realizing it.

For a long time, scholars have tended to view *zi ran* and *wu wei* as expressions of the same concept, overlooking the important trajectory in Daoist philosophy where one party practices *wu wei* and, as a result, another party achieves *zi ran*. When the concept of *zi ran* emerged in Laozi's thought, it manifested precisely this trajectory, and later followers continued this pattern. However, this does not represent the complete content of Daoist *zi ran*. After Laozi, another form gradually emerged, and its relationship with *wu wei* also underwent a change, which we will now explore.

3 Freedom from Internal Intention: *Zi ran* and the Call to Eliminate the Scheming Mind

The other common meaning of *zi ran* is to indicate action without intention or artifice. This sense is prevalent today and often used in scholarly interpretations. But a fundamental question remains: How can a concept meaning "self-so" and implying freedom from external force also come to signify action without internal intention or artifice? How does this meaning manifest in Daoist thought, and what philosophical principles does it embody? These questions demand a close examination of the texts.

In the intellectual history of Daoism, this meaning of *zi ran* first appears in the *Zhuangzi*. However its usage is mixed: some resemble those in the *Dao De Jing*, while others have undergone a significant transformation. Consider the following examples:

> What I mean by having no emotions is to say that a man should not inwardly harm his person with "good" and "bad," but rather should accord with the spontaneous and not add to life.[20]

19 The original text from the *Hengxian* 恆先 reads: （天下）先者有善，有治無亂; 有人焉有不善，亂出於人. Ma Chengyuan 馬承源, ed., *Shanghai bowuguan cang Zhanguo Chu zhushu* 上海博物館藏戰國楚竹書 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2003), 3: 297. This translation of the excavated text differs from the official archeological report. See Ye Shuxun 葉樹勳, "Chujian *Hengxian* de bianlian zaiyan yu sixiang xinjie" 楚簡《恒先》的編聯再驗與思想新解, *Guanzi xuekan* 管子學刊, no. 1 (2017): 103–10.

20 Victor H. Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, 49.

> The babbling of water is its natural quality, not an intentional act.[21]

> The rites were devised by the vulgar people of the world; one's true nature is that which was received from heaven, so naturally it cannot be changed.[22]

Superficially, the use of *zi ran* in these passages seems similar to the form discussed in the previous section, but its meaning has in fact shifted significantly. While the first form focuses on external factors, this one focuses on the self. Whether something achieves a state of *zi ran* here depends on whether the agent acts with intention. Due to this change in the causal factor, the emphasis of *zi* also shifts; here, it embodies the sense of "original" rather than "self."

The first passage describes a person who avoids letting preferences harm them and instead accords with their original, spontaneous condition. The second passage states that the movement of water is not a product of intention but is an expression of its original, natural quality. The third passage indicates that "true nature" (*zhen* 真) is something one originally possesses, unlike worldly "rites" (*li* 禮), which are a product of intentional action. Here, "heaven" and *zi ran* are used synonymously, suggesting that our "true nature" is an inherent, natural quality that cannot be altered.

If we apply the analytical method from the previous section, we can again discern a structure where one party's non-action (or absence) allows another party to be *zi ran*. In the first quotation, from the "Dechongfu" 德充符 (Symbols of Integrity Fulfilled) chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, when "emotions" are absent, the "person" and their "life" can accord with what is *zi ran*. In the second and third quotes, from the "Tian Zifang" 田子方 (Sir Square Field) and "Yüfu" 漁父 (An Old Fisherman) chapters respectively, the elements that are *zi ran* are one's "natural quality" and "true nature," while the potential interfering party is one's own intention. Without the artifice of intention, one's nature can manifest in a *zi ran* way.

This situation still involves a two-party relationship, but with a crucial difference: the two parties are not two separate objects but two aspects of the same subject. One aspect of the self does not influence the other aspect. Here, the *zi ran* party is the behavioral expression, while the opposing party is a form of internal will. When one acts with ulterior motives—deliberately controlling oneself for a specific purpose—the expression cannot achieve its original, authentic state. Conversely, without the will to manipulate oneself, one's

21 Ibid., 203.
22 Ibid., 322.

actions emerge from this original nature and become *zi ran*, or natural and spontaneous. This deliberate, manipulative mindset is what the Daoists sought to eliminate, referring to it as the "scheming mind" (*jixin* 機心).

This analysis is not merely a logical exercise; it is, in fact, crucial for understanding how the meaning of *zi ran* transformed. The passages from the *Zhuangzi* cited above already embody the concept of action free from internal intention. In other contemporary texts, this idea is expressed even more explicitly:

> The five colors, five sounds, five odors, and five tastes—these four categories exist *zi ran* between Heaven and Earth, not designed for human use.[23]

> Heaven achieves its height, Earth achieves its thickness, sun and moon shine, stars gleam, yin and yang harmonize—none of this is intentional action. They follow their proper way, and things become *zi ran*.[24]

> If something requires deliberation before implementation, exhaustion follows. Therefore, those who follow *zi ran* endure, while those who grasp constancy succeed.[25]

> Release cunning schemes, abandon artifice, let consciousness wander through infinite dimensions, and set the heart upon the path of *zi ran*.[26]

In these passages, the meaning of *zi ran* as "without intention" is clearly revealed through its opposition to certain conditions. The first passage indicates that natural phenomena exist in the world on their own terms, not because they were created for human use. The second passage might initially seem to use *zi ran* in the sense found in the *Dao De Jing*. However, the context reveals that it describes the movements of Heaven, Earth, *yin*, and *yang* as non-intentional actions; they follow their proper way and are thus "originally so." In the latter two passages, the opposite of *zi ran* includes "deliberation" (*si* 思), "cunning schemes" (*zhimou* 智謀), and "artifice" (*qiaogu* 巧故). To act without requiring "deliberation" and to "release cunning schemes," and "abandon artifice" is to be in a state of original spontaneity, free from calculation or the "scheming mind."

23 *Yinwenzi* 尹文子, "Dadao shang" 大道上.
24 *Wenzi* 文子, "Jingcheng" 精誠.
25 *Shenzi* 慎子, "Yiwen" 逸文.
26 *Lüshi Chunqiu* 呂氏春秋, "Lunren" 論人.

Judging *zi ran*'s meaning through contextually opposite conditions proves to be an effective method. In these situations, the causal factor of *zi ran* lies not in the absence of external interference but in the absence of internal intention. Given this absent intention, the *zi* in *zi ran* emphasizes "original" rather than "self." Therefore, *zi ran*'s direct meaning is "originally thus." As a noun, it can indicate original nature or authenticity. Because we emphasize the absence of will as a causal factor, we often understand it as "without intention" or "without purpose." Strictly speaking, however, "without intention" and "without purpose" represent the cause of *zi ran*, not its direct meaning.

As their cause and meanings change, the spiritual ideals embodied by *zi ran* also transform. The first form primarily addresses external demands, opposing interference from others to preserve the spontaneity of an actor's activity. This form, however, addresses internal cultivation, opposing self-artifice in the hope that the actor maintains their original nature. The "self" here refers particularly to one's inner mind. The Daoists criticized deliberate action and the internal "scheming mind" (*jixin*). As the *Zhuangzi* states, "When one harbors an ingenious mind in one's breast, its pure simplicity will be impaired."[27] Moreover, it warns that "There is no greater affliction than for integrity to be possessed by the mind."[28] Therefore, one should aim to "totally eradicat[e] their thievish intentions"[29] and achieve the state of "emptiness" that comes from the "fasting of the mind."[30]

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27 The term "ingenious mind" is used here for *jixin* 機心. Victor H. Mair translates a key passage from the "Tiandi" 天地 chapter (Heaven and Earth) of the *Zhuangzi* that explains this concept: "I have heard from my teacher that where there are ingenious contraptions, there are sure to be ingenious affairs, and where there are ingenious affairs, there are sure to be ingenious minds. When one harbors an ingenious mind in one's breast, its pure simplicity will be impaired." See Victor H. Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, 111.

28 Ibid., 330. Mair's translation of the full passage from the "Lieyukou" 列御寇 (Lieh Yük'ou) chapter is: "There is no greater affliction than for integrity to be possessed by the mind and for the mind to be possessed by its eye. Once ruled by the mind's eye, a person looks inward, and when she looks inward she is defeated."

29 Ibid., 110. The full passage from the "Tiandi" chapter describes the governance of the great sage: "Totally eradicating their thievish intentions, he would encourage their singular ambitions, as though they were doing it of their own nature, but the people would not know why they did so."

30 Ibid., 32. From the "Renjian shi" 人間世 (The Human World) chapter, Confucius explains: "'Maintaining the unity of your will,' said Confucius, 'listen not with your ears but with your mind. Listen not with your mind but with your primal breath. The ears are limited to listening, the mind is limited to tallying. The primal breath, however, awaits things emptily. It is only through the Way that one can gather emptiness, and emptiness is the fasting of the mind.'"

This "emptiness" (*xu* 虛) describes the pure condition that remains after the scheming mind is removed. The "scheming mind" and "thievish intentions" (*zeixin* 賊心) represent the "cunning schemes" (*zhigu* 智故) that the Daoists criticized. *Zi ran* negates precisely these harmful intentions that damage life's original nature and lead to self-alienation. This explains why *zi ran* often appears in opposition to terms like "cunning schemes."

The call to eliminate the scheming mind is also present in the philosophy of the *Dao De Jing*, but the concept of *zi ran* in that text does not carry this specific meaning. The philosophy of the *Zhuangzi* inherited this ideal and used the concept of *zi ran* to reflect it. In later thought, this spirit of *zi ran* was developed further, while the first form did not disappear. From the Qin (221–207 BCE) and Han (206 BCE–220 CE) dynasties onward, the two forms of *zi ran* have coexisted, with different meanings being emphasized in different contexts. Furthermore, although the Daoist admonition to eliminate cunning schemes was designed for humans, the use of *zi ran* to mean "without intention" was not limited to human applications. This is already evident in the *Zhuangzi*, and in later literature, this meaning of *zi ran* was frequently applied to non-human subjects, with Wang Chong's 王充 (27–ca. 97) use of it to dissolve the intentionality of Heaven being a typical example.

In this second form, the relationship between *zi ran* and *wu wei* undergoes a significant transformation. A notable change is that the two no longer refer to separate objects but instead function as descriptive terms for the same entity. This shift is already evident in the materials cited previously, such as the *Zhuangzi*'s statement that "The babbling of water is its natural quality, not an intentional act." Similarly, the phrase "not intentional action" (*fei youwei* 非有為) from the *Wenzi* and the call to "abandon artifice" from the *Lüshi Chunqiu* carry meanings equivalent to *wu wei* while referring to the same object as *zi ran*. This pattern becomes increasingly common in Han dynasty literature.

The *Laozi zhigui* 老子指歸 by Yan Zun 嚴遵 (87 BCE–ca. 6 CE) exemplifies this development. Yan frequently uses the phrase "*wuwei weizhi*" 無為為之, meaning "acting without purpose," to explain *zi ran*. Here, *wuwei* signifies a lack of purpose—not acting for the sake of external goals (where *wei* 為 is read as *wèi*). "*Wuwei weizhi*" thus describes an act done without calculation, closely paralleling *zi ran*. Wang Chong's *Lunheng* 論衡 takes this further by directly using *wuwei* to express unintentional action. In his work, *wu wei* becomes nearly synonymous with *zi ran*; the two concepts jointly explain the non-intentional nature of Heaven's Way. The *Lunheng* also introduces the compound phrase "*zi ran wu wei*" 自然無為.

It should be noted, however, that distinctions remain between these converging concepts. *Wu wei* indicates acting without intention, emphasizing the

absence of purpose. *Zi ran* indicates "originally thus," describing the authentic expression that results from a non-calculating state. Their meanings are complementary, forming a complete significance: an entity's activity lacks ulterior purpose (*wu wei*), and it manifests its original nature (*zi ran*).

As in the first form, these concepts also maintain a causal relationship; *wu wei* remains the basic method for realizing *zi ran*. But the target of *wu wei*'s appeal shifts from others to oneself. Its meaning also changes. In the first form, *wu wei* emphasizes not acting rashly or interfering with external entities. Here, it primarily means eliminating internal calculation and artifice. In summary, this represents a crucial transformation: two concepts that previously described different objects now describe the same entity, and the meanings of both concepts have evolved. Consequently, *zi ran*—which was not used in the *Dao De Jing* to describe the *Dao*—now joins *wu wei* as a descriptor of the *Dao* itself. In this form, *wu wei* and *zi ran* complement each other causally, jointly explaining the nature of the *Dao* and, by extension, indicating a principle for action.

At this point, we have analyzed the two different forms of *zi ran*. While we have focused on their differences, they remain interconnected, as noted in the first section. The "without intention" form can still be influenced by external factors—the absence of external pressure might prevent artificial intentions from arising. Nevertheless, the absence of specific intentions possesses independent significance as a cause of *zi ran*. What truly determines this form of *zi ran* lies not in external circumstances but in the self's own intentions and choices.

This distinction is philosophically significant. Only in this latter form do the implications of autonomy and self-choice within *zi ran* achieve their full embodiment. Although the first form semantically means "self-so," the key to its realization lies outside the self, depending on the hope that others will not interfere. Conversely, while the latter form does not semantically mean "self-so," the key to its realization lies within the self, which possesses the autonomous power of choice. Borrowing Isaiah Berlin's (1909–1997) distinction between negative and positive freedom provides helpful clarification.[31] The first form primarily embodies the negative dimension of *zi ran* (its realization depends on others), while its positive dimension is manifested through the second form (its realization depends on oneself).[32]

31 Isaiah Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1958).

32 This analysis borrows Berlin's method to illuminate *zi ran's* meaning. The broader relationship between *zi ran* and freedom requires separate investigation.

4 Conclusion

Beginning with the semantic complexities of *zi ran*, we have analyzed the two primary forms of this concept in early Daoist thought. Examining the different causal factors of *zi ran* proved crucial for distinguishing its dual meanings. These distinct causes generate two different relational patterns: that between others and the self, and that between two aspects of the self. This analytical framework illuminates the varying connotations of *zi ran*.

Both forms manifest a consistent pattern where one party's non-interference (or absence of artifice) allows another party to achieve a state of *zi ran*. In the first form, the two parties are an external other and the self. In the second, they are two aspects of the same individual. Consequently, the meaning of *zi ran* diverges across these trajectories, creating distinct relationships with concepts like the *Dao* and *wu wei*.

Zi ran first appeared in the thought of *Dao De Jing* as the first form. This meaning was subsequently developed, embodying the Daoist appeal for anti-interference. The second form emerged in the philosophy of the *Zhuangzi* (coexisting with the first) and was likewise developed in later thought, reflecting the Daoist advocacy for eliminating cunning and artifice. From the time of the *Zhuangzi* onward, both forms have coexisted, with different meanings being emphasized in different contexts—a pattern that continues to this day.

Further analysis reveals the deeper connection between these two forms. Concerning a thing's authentic condition, both external interference and internal artifice constitute a disruption. When both external interference and internal intention are eliminated, what remains is a pure *zi*. This *zi* is the key to understanding *zi ran*.

This *zi*, however, functions as more than an ordinary reflexive pronoun; it carries a unique philosophical significance. A pure *zi* excludes both *ta* 他 (interfering with others) and *wo* 我 (the intentional self). It signifies the authentic self—the authentic dimension of a thing itself. In this sense, *zi* can be characterized as the "authentic self" (*benji* 本己), while *ran* signifies this authentic self's realization.

Therefore, *zi ran* fundamentally means "authentic self-realization." This concept excludes both external interference and internal intention. In specific contexts, different factors receive emphasis, and so *zi* as the "authentic self" takes on different dimensions of meaning accordingly. This synthesis explains how the two forms of *zi ran*, despite their differences, share a common philosophical foundation rooted in the pursuit of authentic existence.

Translated by Jenny Lu