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The De of Levinas: Cultivating the Heart-Mind of Radical Passivity

Abstract  This essay explores the early Chinese text Guanzi to address the question of ethical responsibility in the work of Emmanuel Levinas. We begin with the premise that being responsive to the other, feeling the impossibility of renouncing ethical obligation, and experiencing the basic moral asymmetry at the heart of Levinas’s project all rely on the welcome openness of the subject that Levinas describes as the subject’s “radical passivity.” However, his emphasis on infinite responsibility, coupled with the theme of radical passivity, gives the problematic impression that ethics amounts to a never-ending to-do list for the other, and certainly this is not what Levinas means. We turn to the Guanzi, which recommends that the ethically efficacious sage-prince must cultivate a state of passive stillness and inner vacuity. Only because the sage-prince maintains this deferential heart-mind is he freely open and responsive to others. Here the sage-prince looks strikingly like a good Levinasian: He is deferential, sensitive to context, and hyper-aware of the limits of his own knowledge. The Guanzi goes on to describe specific practices the sage-prince can employ to cultivate his ethical prowess, including practices of meditation and gentle physical exercises. Taking this insight into Levinas’s context, we suggest that such practices of self-regulation are necessary to enable effective responsiveness to the other. From this perspective, responsibility is “infinite” not because I am perpetually beholden to the other’s whims, but because I am perpetually accountable for calming and clearing my own mind of the unstable emotions, selfish desires, and intellectual machinations that prevent the welcome openness of radical passivity.

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1 A Very Expensive Question

The question concerning the “radical passivity” of the ethical agent undoubtedly constitutes the proverbial 64,000 dollar question in Levinas scholarship and reception.

—Benda Hoffmeyr

The supreme quality of heaven lies in its regularity
Of earth, it is equity;
Of man, it is [passivity (jing 靜)].

—Guanzi

De (德), a key term in Chinese philosophy generally and Daoism specifically, has many translations, including virtue, excellence, morality, integrity, insistent particularity, moral charisma, and moral force. What might be the de, that is, the moral force or the particular potency, of Levinas’s ethics? We make the rather counterintuitive proposal that the “infinite responsibility” that Levinas claims I bear passively for the Other must be understood in active terms as an obligation to conduct myself appropriately. Only the subject who can empty out its own identity and hence be “radically” passive can avoid the totalizing attitude of what Levinas calls the “imperialism of consciousness” (Levinas 1998, 92). Levinas makes this point in Otherwise than Being but gives few clues as to how such passivity enables effective ethical action. In contrast, the connection between emptiness, passivity, and the moral efficacy of de is a major theme in early Daoist texts. In the Guanzi in particular, we find practices for cultivating the xin 心 or heart-mind that produce the sort of flexible, open actor who can respond to the needs of others out of a state of passivity.

In the earliest Chinese sources, de is something that the good or wise king has; it inspires others to act on his behalf, or carry out his wishes, without him even having to ask. A king who is or has de is dutiful, gentle, humble, non-assertive, and lives a life of personal restraint (Nivison 1996, 31–32). From this ancient idea of the king’s moral force, de slowly transforms into something more like “moral particularity,” attributable to anyone, not just royalty, and to situations as well as persons:

In the early philosophical literature, de retains a strong cosmological sense,

1 Throughout the essay, we gloss jing with some variant of the word “passive.” The original translation in the Rickett edition uses “quiescence” (Rickett 1998, 43), and “stillness” is also a common translation. While “passivity” may not be a common choice, given the context of this essay we feel it is appropriate. Please see pages 9 and 10 for a more in-depth discussion of our use of passivity.
connoting the “insistent particularity” of things generally, and usually of human beings specifically … [it is] both the potency and the achieved character of any particular disposition within the unsummed totality of experience …. In this context, de has a range of meaning that reflects the priority of the situation over agency, thus characterizing both the giving and the getting …. “having inherent virtue or power to produce effects” … (Ames and Hall 2003b, 60–61)

For the early Daoists, the person who has de is able to respond effectively to those around her; she is able to achieve a desired outcome without imposing herself on the situation. Furthermore, de “appears to be something [the king or sage] gets, or something that becomes more evident in him when he denies or risks himself, does something for another” (Nivison 1996, 24). That is, the more one acts for others, the more morally potent one becomes, and so the more effectively one is able to act for others. Yet, this acting for others is continually characterized as passive, weak, quietistic, non-active—the very ideal of Daoist action is, literally, “empty action” (wuwei 无為).

The de of Levinasian ethics, then, is that particular moral force that allows one to act effectively for the Other from a place of radical passivity. But at this point we return again to that very expensive question: What is “radical passivity”? The “what” here is the standard Western question that longs for a substantive answer. Following the early Chinese tradition—which emphasizes questions of process over substance—we can try to ask the “how” question: How does one cultivate the heart-mind of radical passivity, so as to act effectively for the Other?

2 The Problem of Action for Levinas

A sense of passivity is already implied in the “face-to-face” relation that plays such a key role in Totality and Infinity and that speaks to the heart of an epistemological crisis at play in the experience of alterity: “It involves a calling into question of oneself, a critical attitude which is itself produced in the face of the other and under his authority” (Levinas 1969, 81). The face-to-face relation not only places an absolute limit on what I may possess as knowledge, but it also thereby calls into question my freedom as the agent of my own actions. To be aware that I am free to act is at once to be aware that my actions unavoidably affect others, and that, due to my limited knowledge, I cannot foresee all such consequences—the unavoidability and unpredictability of my impact on others is itself ethical through and through. Against the inescapabilty of ethics, freedom appears as a forbidden fruit, as the desire for an unbridled “spontaneity” that Levinas names as a foundational if “undiscussed value” in all political theory.
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(Levinas 1969, 83). Such theory reflects not a realistic state of affairs but rather
the fantasy of absolute, non-relational individuality and the pure freedom such
individuality is imagined to bring. Hence the fantasy of freedom is also a desire
to be rid of the other—which is why Levinas links it to a desire for murder.
Moral consciousness, he writes, “is accomplished as shame, where freedom
discovers itself murderous in its very exercise” (Levinas 1969, 84). Freedom is
never mine innocently but always brings with it my capacity for arbitrariness and
violence. The face-to-face relation, thus, places me in a bind: Because the other
eludes my knowledge, I can make no unambiguously “informed” decision about
how to fulfill my ethical obligations; yet, I cannot trust my unreflective “gut
reactions” to guide me either, for there is no innocence in spontaneity for
Levinas.

The question of radical passivity, addressed explicitly in Otherwise than Being,
is prefigured in these epistemological constraints placed on the subject in Totality
and Infinity. Peter Zeillinger comments:

At first glance it seems obvious that any ethical relation to the other … will of
course always embrace a certain passivity, insofar as the mere appearance, as
well as any subsequent understanding, of “the other” will fail to be simply
enclosed in or described by a system of perceptions, speculations, and
representations of the self. Without a certain receptive and therefore “passive”
openness on the side of the self, no actual and effective relation to the other in
its (his/her) alterity could be said to take place. (Zeillinger 2009, 95)

Were alterity to mean only that I am called to be open-minded and flexible, my
obligation to the other would remain unfulfillable, but only technically so—the
perpetual attempt at fulfillment would be a pleasure to undertake, like a long and
meandering conversation with an endlessly enchanting friend.

But my relation to the other does not remain at the level of pleasant discourse;
toward the end of Totality and Infinity, the full dilemma of radical passivity
emerges. Throughout that text, Levinas describes the advent of ethical
consciousness as the self’s discovery of itself as for-the-other. But this implies a
pre-existing subject, and Levinas has not yet given readers a full account of what
subjectivity is. Indeed, with his conclusion that “being is exteriority,” Levinas
seems to leave no room for any being, including the self, that is not exterior and
hence other. In the final pages of Totality and Infinity, Levinas entertains this
dilemma: If being is exteriority, then it appears that otherness encompasses the

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2 For a thorough discussion of the transition of the account of subjectivity from Totality and
Infinity to Otherwise than Being, see Bernasconi (2002), “What is the Question to which
‘Substitution’ is the Answer?”
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self and erases the absolute distance between self and other; yet if the “being” of the self is somehow distinct from the “being” of the other, then we appear to be left with dualism (Levinas 1969, 290).

Otherwise than Being, which can be seen as a sustained meditation on this puzzle, begins by denying the possibility of a self that pre-exists the ethical relation. Instead, the self always finds itself displaced, decentered, or, as Levinas says repeatedly, “the other in the same.” This is not because the self is a type of being and being is exteriority, but because the self is “otherwise than being” (Levinas 1998, 26). Unlike the subject of Totality and Infinity, this self is no longer at home with itself and up for the challenges and rewards of a long conversation with the other. Instead, the subject of Otherwise than Being is “hunted down” in its own home, its sense of identity spilling away from it “like in a hemophiliac’s hemorrhage” (Levinas 1998, 92). As Levinas makes clear, passivity is not simply “not acting,” but is not yet being an actor; that is, this self, who is not yet a being, who has no being of its own, is what Levinas describes as “passivity more passive than all passivity” (Levinas 1998, 15). Given the constraints and instabilities inherent to this portrayal of selfhood, how can a radically passive subject be an ethical actor at all?

In the collection of essays Radical Passivity, Alphonso Lingis and Peter Zeillinger present two opposing viewpoints on this question. Lingis holds that Levinas’s passivity places us in a bind that sufficiently limits our movement so as to make ethical and political action impossible (Lingis 2009, 81). Zeillinger disagrees, claiming that radical passivity enables ethical action by freeing the self from itself, that is, by freeing the self from egoism and the impoverished freedom of spontaneity (Zeillinger 2009, 95). We suggest that perhaps both positions can be right—that is, radical passivity can indeed be a catalyst for efficacious action, but not radical passivity as Levinas describes it. In other words, Levinas does not give readers enough information to sort out what being freed of the ego means or how to achieve this. Reflecting back on Levinas’s insight that “what I permit myself to demand of myself is not comparable to what I have the right to demand of the Other” (Levinas 1969, 53), we find that the vast majority of his work focuses on what I do not have a right to demand of the other. He leaves much unsaid about what I can permit myself to demand of myself. If we accept the premise of the self’s constitutive being-for-the-other, then what is my relation to myself, what demands can I place on myself, and how do I fulfill them? Daoist writings on deference, passivity, and the action of non-action come to our minds.

Unlike Levinas’s presentation of alterity, the unknowability of dao (道, way, path, way-making, prescriptive discourse), is not related to a crisis in modern epistemology, for the early Daoists are enmeshed in and responding to a different set of philosophical and doctrinal concerns. That said, the early Daoists do discuss dao as eluding total conceptualization and thereby disrupting the
certainty of knowledge claims. Moreover, they mock the efficacy of universalizing moral principles, considering such sweeping claims to know “right” from “wrong” as callously insensitive to particularity. Dan Lusthaus comments that in early Daoist writings attributed to Laozi (老子) and Zhuangzi (莊子), “both argue that codes of standards do not engender social harmony; instead they provide a yardstick by which to judge, punish, ostracize, and disable others” (Lusthaus 2007, 54). Such fixed moral codes lead to a rigidity of action that is inherently undesirable for early Daoists, who prioritize flexibility and responsiveness and criticize the ossification of formal ethical principles.

In their emphasis on epistemological humility and their suspicion of totalizing ethical systems, the early Daoists and Levinas share a compatible moral starting point. Indeed, A. T. Nuyen goes so far as to declare that “in the Daodejing, de stands to dao as Levinas’s ethics of responsibility stands to the otherwise of Being, to the saying from beyond essence” (Nuyen 2007, 162). As Nuyen discusses, dao cannot be known directly, and yet the sage’s actions accord with dao through the potency of de. He describes de as a “deconstructive” power that allows for the indirect expression of dao and hence enables the incredible efficacy of the sage (Nuyen 2007, 174). We find Nuyen’s claims intriguing, but we want to hear more about the “nuts and bolts,” as it were, of how this so-called deconstructive power enables sagely action.

3 Daoist Deferential Activity

As has often been discussed, early Chinese thinkers did not make a strong distinction between knowing and acting: standards for knowing already include efficacious action. As Edward Slingerland notes, “true ‘clarity’ is an illumination of the actual landscape before one’s eyes that serves to guide one through it, and is thus always intimately and inextricably tied to action” (Slingerland 2003, 4). This Daoist sense of skillful knowing and acting is often expressed in terms of deference, which is a kind of disposition or action characterized by yielding, respect, regard, esteem, submission, and the consideration for another to whom such an orientation is due. Roger Ames and David Hall explain:

Daoism … expresses its deferential activity through what we are calling the wu-forms. The three most familiar articulations of this pervasive sensibility are: wuwei 無為, wuzhi 無知, and wuyu 無欲. These are, respectively, noncoercive actions in accordance with the de (“particular focus”) of things; a sort of knowing without resort to rules or principles; and desiring which does not seek to possess or control its “object.” (Ames and Hall 2003b, 38)
If, as Ames and Hall suggest, the \textit{wu}-forms characterize the kind of disposition to be cultivated by the Daoist, then these forms give us a window into how the sage accomplishes deferential activity.

\textit{Wuwei} is one of the most important, and perhaps paradoxical, ideas in early Daoism. “[\textit{W}]uwei, often translated (unfortunately) as ‘no action’ or ‘non-action,’ really involves the absence of any course of action that interferes with the particular focus (\textit{de}) of those things contained within one’s field of influence” (Ames and Hall 2003b, 39). That is, the height of Daoist recommendations for action involve the cultivation of deference in terms of non-impositional action, not a lack of action. As the \textit{Dao De Jing} (\textit{道德經}) states in Chapter 48, “One does things noncoercively (\textit{wuwei}) / And yet nothing goes undone,” and in Chapter 2, “sages keep to service that does not entail coercion (\textit{wuwei})” (Ames and Hall 2003a, 80, 151). It is not that the sage does not act but that her actions are characterized by deference, and so incredible things are accomplished seemingly without her intervention. Bradley Park further explains:

\textit{Wuwei} is precisely an attempt to capture the experiential sense of an activity developing spontaneously (\textit{ziran}, 自然), rather than on the basis of the subject’s spontaneity, qua “doing” (\textit{wei}, 为). In other words, one is notably conscious of the absence of egocentered initiative and control in the case of skill-in-action. To consciously assert agency in the midst of skillful flow is to puncture the continuity of its unfolding and deflate the quality of the performance—to try and seize the experience of flow is to lose it. (Park 2014, 221)

An entire category of passages in the \textit{Zhuangzi}—the knack or skill passages—speak to the cultivation of this “skillful flow” and help us to flesh out how precisely the sage acts without acting.

The story of Cook Ding is perhaps the most famous of the skill passages. As an exemplar of Daoist activity in the \textit{Zhuangzi}, Cook Ding begins butchering a cow in a manner that evokes a dance: “As his hand slapped, shoulder lunged, foot stamped, knee crooked, with a hiss! With a thud! The brandished blade as it sliced never missed the rhythm, now in time with the Mulberry Forest dance, now with an orchestra playing the Ching-shou” (Graham 2001, 63). Cook Ding explains to Lord Wen-hui that he has left skill behind him, and instead cares only for \textit{dao}. As he describes his process of butchering, he tells Lord Wen-hui that although most butchers have to change out their cleavers once a year, or perhaps even once a month, his is still sharp:

Now I have had this chopper for nineteen years, and have taken apart several thousand oxen, but the edge is as though it were fresh from the grindstone. At
that joint there is an interval, and the chopper’s edge has no thickness; if you insert what has no thickness where there is an interval, then, what more could you ask, of course there is ample room to move the edge about. (Graham 2001, 64)

That is, he lets his cleaver find the empty spaces in the joint, and so is able to cut apart the meat with minimal, but yet beautiful, effort. Cook Ding embodies the Daoist ideal of wuwei—he dances through his activity with no force, no imposition of himself, and yet in the end not only has successfully butchered the cow but has also taught Lord Wen-hui how to nourish life.

We note that Cook Ding’s skill, by virtue of being a “knack,” is not a matter of deliberative forethought or knowledge. The Dao De Jing is clear that too much so-called knowledge clouds the mind, encourages ideological rigidity, and impedes the flow of efficacious action. For example, Chapter 32 advises: “When we start to regulate the world we introduce names / But once names have been assigned / We must also know when to stop / Knowing when to stop is how to avoid danger” (Ames and Hall 2003a, 127). A person who does not know when to stop will inevitably impose herself on others to their detriment, as Chapter 64 makes clear: “Thus to use knowledge in governing the state / Is to be a bane to that state / To use a lack of knowledge in governing a state / Is to be its benefactor” (Ames and Hall 2003a, 179). This “lack of knowledge” is not simple ignorance but an appreciation of the dark spaces and unknowable areas within the unbounded whole that is dao. Again, to refer to the Zhuangzi,

Knowledge that stops at what it does not know is the best. Who can know the wordless discriminations, the Way that is not spoken? The ability to know this is referred to as the Storehouse of Heaven. Pour into it and it will never become full, ladle it out and it will never run dry, and yet no one knows where it comes from. (Slingerland 2003, 177–78)

The dao is “fluid” and “indeterminate,” but in a way that emphasizes its fecundity and creative possibilities. To appreciate any one feature of the larger and more comprehensive pattern of continuity and particularity requires an understanding of the real uniqueness of each particular, standing as it does in an unrepeatable and distinctive relation to everything else. That is, dao requires an appreciation of de, or of moral particularity. Hence the sage does not seek comprehensive knowledge for its own sake, but rather seeks to act well in her specific context. This points to an important corollary of wuwei or non-coercive action, namely wuzhi or non-coercive knowing.

Chapter 71 of the Dao De Jing is a key passage when it comes to interpreting wuzhi, or non-principled, non-impositional, non-coercive knowing: “Knowing
that one does not know is knowing at its best” (Ames and Hall 2003a, 189). The sage is instructed to keep herself free of ignorance regarding her own ignorance. To know in a non-coercive way is to let each particular show itself, as it stands in its context of relations and within larger patterns. The arrogance of presuming to be able to know without deference—i.e., without sensitivity to particulars in context—is precisely the illness the sage is advised to be wary of. Non-deferential knowing is the “imperialism of consciousness” that Levinas warns us of. It means to place one’s own fixed conceptions of what is to be known onto the world at large, in effect hiding it from view. Knowing with deference requires patience and caution: “the sages dress in burlap / Yet conceal jade in their bosom” (Ames and Hall 2003a, 188).

The deference of the \textit{wu}-forms is often associated with Daoist imagery of the feminine, the dark, the mysterious, the valley, and the indeterminate. But these associated images are also, importantly, images of profound creativity and productivity in the Daoist imagination. Chapter 6 of the \textit{Dao De Jing} states:

\textit{The life-force of the valley never dies—}\n\textit{This is called the dark female.}\n\textit{The gateway of the dark female—}\n\textit{This is called the root of the world.}\nWispy and delicate, it only seems to be there,\nYet its productivity is bottomless. (Ames and Hall 2003a, 85)

Daoist imagery captures the connection between generative power and the feminine, the yielding, and the receptive: only that which is first empty, the womb, can then grow to fullness and give birth to new life. To defer or to yield is weakness in the Daoist tradition, but for the sage weakness is power. Her desired disposition is womb-like, empty, vacuous—she is able to act best when “she” is least. The most potent and creative places in this Daoist worldview are hidden, dark, mysterious, and obscured from easy access. The \textit{wu}-forms, then, enjoin the sage to remain aware of the limitations of knowledge and to cultivate a deferential disposition with regards to acting, knowing, and desiring, in order that she might become an efficacious ethical actor.

We suggest that the deferential activity of the sage is a kind of “passivity” that is relevantly similar to the sort of passivity Levinas requires for ethical action. Neither Levinas nor the early Daoists use what we are describing as passivity to mean simple non-action. As Ames and Hall say: “The notion of \textit{jing} 靜—stillness, tranquility—that is often used to characterize this posture, far from being simple passivity, is an ongoing, dynamic achievement of equilibrium that requires constant monitoring and adjustment” (Ames and Hall 2003b, 40). Early Daoists are fond of reversals that not only alter the value structure of a given
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hierarchical dualism but that in fact transform the dualism into a potent relationship of polarity. They repeatedly engage in this process of reversal, with dualisms such as male-female, strong-weak, light-dark, and active-passive. By prioritizing the yin phase of each dualism, they also redefine the terms so that each pole of the relationship is not only necessarily involved with the other but also made more vivid and effective through the other. Ames and Hall note that “all correlative pairs entail their opposites in the sense that jing is ‘tranquility-becoming-agitated’” (Ames and Hall 2003b, 40). Passivity, in this case, is not opposed to activity but is instead a radical way of understanding the quality of acting. Chapter 38 of the Dao De Jing states: “Persons of the highest efficacy neither do things coercively nor would they have any motivation for doing so” (Ames and Hall 2003a, 135). In other words, those who are of the highest de, who are the most effective persons, are characterized by the disposition of wuwei; by being empty of action, or non-impositional in their activities, they are the most effective actors.

Although we find that the early Daoists and Levinas share a distrust of totalizing knowledge and both value the moral efficacy of passivity, we do not wish to overstate their compatibility. In particular, Levinas is responding to a specific understanding of transcendence deeply indebted to the Western metaphysical tradition. A vast and perhaps unbridgeable gulf separates this metaphysics from the fully immanent cosmos of the Daoists, in which events and processes come to be and fade away as part of the natural spontaneity of the world and its inhabitants. We wish to argue, however, that the very differences that separate Levinas from the Daoists make visible the space for our intervention. The Daoist emphasis on skill, embodiment, and personal cultivation indicates an absence in Levinas’s thought that invites us to focus on the “how” of ethical cultivation.

Putting aside the metaphysical baggage for a moment and simply observing the sage as she is described in Daoist literature, we find that she looks strikingly like a good Levinasian: She is deferential to others, sensitive to context, and hyper-aware of the limitations of her own knowledge. Moreover, she is a highly efficacious ethical actor, whose moral prowess seems to border on the magical: She nurtures harmony in the world around her while appearing to do nothing at all, working in the background to benefit others while seeking no glory for herself. As Chapter 77 says, “sages act on behalf of things but do not make any claim on them / They see things through to fruition but do not take credit for them / It is in such a way that they refrain from making a display of their worth” (Ames and Hall 2003a, 196). Finally, the sage accomplishes all this while following no ethical principles or rules that can be completely captured in words. Chapter 43 comments: “Rare are those in the world who reach an understanding of the benefits of teachings that go beyond what can be said, and of doing things
noncoercively” (Ames and Hall 2003a, 145). A good Levinasian, we suggest, strives to become just such a rare person. What can the Daoist tradition offer in terms of specific practices that might aid this Levinasian sage-in-training?

4 Cultivating the Heart-Mind of Passivity

For guidance on this question we look to the four so-called “Art of the Mind” chapters in the *Guanzi*, a Han-dynasty (or possibly pre-Han) text blending elements of Daoism, Legalism, and Confucianism. These chapters describe the efficacious action of the sage and discuss practices for cultivating a heart-mind that enables such action. This properly cultivated *xin* is the key to gathering and expressing the moral potency of *de*. In W. Allyn Rickett’s translation: “The mind’s inner reality is benefited by rest and quiet … This inner reality, if we search for it, is never far away and we may daily use its Power [de]” (Rickett 1998, 40). Several *Guanzi* passages are particularly helpful in fleshing out our understanding of how to harness and utilize this moral power.

Regarding sagely behavior that follows from the well-cultivated *xin*, consider Statement XIX of the chapter “The Art of the Mind, Part I” (“Xinshu Shang”):

Mistakes are inherent in relying on one’s own opinions. Crimes are inherent in forcing change. For this reason, the prince who adheres to the Way, when at rest, appears to lack knowledge; when responding to things, appears to be at one with them. This is the way of [passive stillness (*jing*)] and relying on things as they are. (Rickett 1998, 74)

Here we see the same descriptors of the sage discussed above, in that the prince’s actions are always appropriate and effective within a specific context, although he appears to lack more general knowledge. The commentator on this passage provides a more nuanced reading of what either enables or impedes such sagely behavior:

“Mistakes are inherent in relying on one’s own opinions. Crimes are inherent in forcing change.” If you rely on your own opinions, you are not vacuous. If you are not vacuous, you will identify with things. If you force change, it will give rise to artificiality. If artificiality arises, there will be confusion. Therefore the Way relies on things as they are. (Rickett 1998, 80)

3 Here “mind” is Rickett’s translation of *xin*, which we have been translating as “heart-mind.”

4 Our quotations follow Rickett’s translation, except where we have glossed *jing* (静) with some variant of “passive stillness” or “passivity” instead of the original “quiescence.”
The commentator makes a key point: When the original passage says to be “at one” with things, this does not mean to project yourself onto them, or as the commentator says, to “identify with things.” Only a person who is not vacuous will identify with things. In contrast to such a person, the prince appears to be at one with things because he himself is transparent or empty. He allows no artificiality to arise, because he does not display himself at all, indicating that any display of self involves artificiality to some degree.

Compare this to Levinas’s description of the subject in *Otherwise than Being,* for whom passivity means always “to be contested in one’s own identity ... It is always to empty oneself anew oneself ... it is to be emptied even of the quasi-formal identity of a being someone” (Levinas 1998, 92). Only such a subject, with no identity on display, can face the other without projecting or imposing the self: “This passivity is the way opposed to the imperialism of consciousness open upon the world” (Levinas 1998, 92). Like the unimposing prince of the *Guanzi,* the non-imperial consciousness of Levinas’s subject does not project itself out onto the world but perpetually empties itself of its own identity so as to be responsive to others.

In another illustrative passage, Levinas describes the subject as a “lung.” Here, he says again that the subject is empty, but this emptiness is not simply the non-being or nihility that is the obverse of being. Rather, to recall Chapter 6 of the *Dao De Jing,* it is “wispy and delicate” and “only seems to be there.” Levinas writes:

That the emptiness of space would be filled with invisible air, hidden from perception, save in the caress of the wind or the threat of storms, non-perceived but penetrating me even in the retreats of my inwardness, that this invisibility or this emptiness would be breathable or horrible, that this invisibility is non-indifferent and obsesses me before all thematization, that the simple ambiance is imposed as an atmosphere to which the subject gives himself and exposes himself in his lungs, without intentions and aims, that the subject could be a lung at the bottom of its substance—all this signifies a subjectivity that suffers and offers itself before taking a foothold in being. It is a passivity, wholly a supporting. (Levinas 1998, 180; our emphasis)

The non-imperial subject is not yet a “being” or has yet to take a “foothold” in being; it is entirely for-the-other and constituted by this responsive “offering” of itself.

Compare this to the *Guanzi* commentator on Statement XIX, describing the unimposing prince:

“When responding to things he appears to be at one with them” means that he
fits himself to each occasion like a shadow resembling a form or an echo responding to a voice. Therefore when things arrive he responds to them. When things have passed by, he lets them go. “Letting go” means that he has returned to a state of vacuity. (Rickett 1998, 81)

The prince responds to things without investing himself in them; or, to borrow Levinas’s language, the prince is “the otherwise than being and the disinterestedness from essence” (Levinas 1998, 154). By having no vested interest in things—or even in himself being a “thing”—the prince removes himself from the totalizing economy of knowledge or the ordering of the world into “this and that.” He occupies no position in such an economy, remaining like a “shadow” or an “echo,” wholly constituted through his responsiveness to others.

For the Daoist tradition at large, being able to cultivate this state of passivity and vacuity is key to developing all of the sagely skills that we have seen so far. We suggest that a similar point is true for Levinas. Although the descriptions of the self-emptying subject occur later in the development of his philosophy (that is, after Totality and Infinity and in preparation for Otherwise than Being), this passive, disinterested, “barely there” subject is yet the key to practicing the ethical attitude toward the other that Levinas stresses earlier in his writings. That is, to be responsive to the other, to feel the impossibility of renouncing this obligation, or in short to experience the basic moral asymmetry at the heart of Levinas’s project, all rely on the welcome openness of the self-emptying subject.

We agree with Claire Katz when she argues that Levinas is “describing at once a subject that already is and a subject that needs to be developed” (Katz 2012, 82). That is, Levinas’s project is phenomenological and hence, Katz points out, some would say, “Levinas is describing a subjectivity that we already are and that we have simply covered over” (Katz 2012, 80). Nonetheless, this portrayal of the subject does not immediately “speak” to all readers of Levinas. His ideas are not necessarily intuitively plausible or rationally justifiable, especially to modern sensibilities:

To be an ethical subject as Levinas describes requires that our ego be decentered. If he contrasts this decentered ego with the ego or self produced by modernity, then the kind of subjectivity he describes most likely does not develop on its own. It is not a self that we are already. It is a self that we need to learn to be. (Katz 2012, 82)

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5 See, for example, Zhuangzi’s comments on the folly of being too attached to our conceptions of “this and that” (Graham 2001, 52–53).
The focus of Katz’s work in this area is on moral education. We see a complementary project unfolding out of the Daoist teachings on heart-mind cultivation, which the Guanzi frames as practices that cultivate an inner state of vacuity and passive stillness.

As the Guanzi teaches, the actions of the sage-prince will appear to be spontaneous and sincere but are in fact the products of long-term discipline and practice. The chapters “Inner Workings” (“Nei Ye” 内業) and “Purifying the Mind” (“Bai Xin” 白心) both describe various meditation and yoga-type exercises meant to “fast the mind” and develop the state of vacuity that enables sagely responsiveness. “Nei Ye” XV.2 assures the reader that he or she may have confidence in the efficacy of such practices: “That the Way will naturally come / Is something you can count on and plan for. / If you are [passive and still (jing)], you will obtain it” (Rickett 1998, 54). Throughout the “Nei Ye” chapter, achieving stillness and passivity or “quiescence” is described as quieting your thoughts and resting your mind (Rickett 1998, 45), quieting the breath and pulse (Rickett 1998, 51), expanding the mind to feel release and deepening the breathing to feel relaxation (Rickett 1998, 54), and most frequently as focusing your power of awareness and concentrating your mind (Rickett 1998, 42, 50, 51). The “Bai Xin” chapter contains a description of what may be a yoga-type routine, but the details are lost to history: “Turn to left and right, before and behind, and return to the original position. Hold fast to discipline, suppress your personal qualities, and respectfully welcome whatever comes” (Rickett 1998, 96). As these sorts of passages make clear, practice is necessary to empty out the self, or to borrow Katz’s terminology, to decenter the ego; and only by getting the self out of the way do we become open and responsive to others.

Perhaps the most helpful advice the Guanzi offers is to have strategies in place for dealing with an unruly ego when it does get in the way. “Nei Ye” XIII states: “If joy and anger are excessive, / Deal with them in a planned manner”; and in XIV.1: “If hunger or overindulgence is excessive, / Deal with it in a planned manner” (Rickett 1998, 52–53). In addition to breathing exercises to calm the mind, the text offers a variety of correctives for whatever excesses or deficiencies might trouble the self. “Nei Ye” XIII advises: “Thus, for arresting anger, nothing is better than poetry. / For getting rid of sorrow, nothing is better than music”; and in XIV.1: “When too full, quickly move about; when hungry, relax your thoughts; when old, forget your worries” (Rickett 1998, 52–53).

Of all the excesses and deficiencies discussed, the most dangerous condition is that of being intellectually over-stuffed: “It is ever so that the mind’s gestalt, on being inundated with too much knowledge, loses its vitality” (Rickett 1998, 44).

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6 See Rickett’s introductory comments to the “Bai Xin” chapter for some discussion of the exercise routine (Rickett 1998, 82–85).
Such knowledge encourages the over-confidence of epistemological certainty, preventing a person from being flexible and even promoting a death-like rigidity. Indeed the text does not hesitate to declare that without meditation, breathing exercises, and other practices to regulate the heart-mind, there will be death:

The mind therefore contains an inner mind./That is to say within the mind there is another mind./In the mind’s mind,/ the power of awareness comes before sound./After awareness comes forms./After forms comes names./After names comes putting the mind to use./After putting the mind to use comes its regulation./Without proper regulation, there is certain to be confusion./If there is confusion, there is certain to be death. (Rickett 1998, 47)

This passage echoes similar teachings from the *Dao De Jing* and *Zhuangzi* that describe a state of undifferentiated vitality prior to the development of conceptual thinking. Once we begin to differentiate things and apply concepts to them, we are in danger of losing *dao*, and we must work to maintain the flexibility and vitality that the non-discriminating and hence vacuous heart-mind provides. While the *Zhuangzi* often puts this in terms of “forgetting oneself,” the *Guanzi* chooses the language of regulating the conceptual mind by routinely emptying it out, making clear that such practice is a matter of life and death.

The state of being over-full with knowledge is contrasted with the wisdom of the sage: “In responding to things, he is ever flexible, but never inconsistent” (Rickett 1998, 43). We cannot imagine a better description of the ethical attitude that might enable us to put into practice a Levinasian ethic, for to remain open to a non-totalizing relation with the other requires I be consistently flexible. As we have seen in the *Guanzi*, this consistent flexibility is possible only when I empty out my own unstable desires, emotions, and intellectual machinations; and such clearing of the heart-mind is best achieved through the breathing and meditation exercises that generate a state of passive stillness. We stress that, in the context of the *Guanzi*, to clear the mind is simultaneously to be open to things as they are. Taking this insight into Levinas’s context, we suggest that practices of self-regulation are necessary to enable effective responsiveness to the other.

5  Fulfilling the Unfulfillable Obligation

If, as our opening quote suggests, the question of radical passivity is the 64,000-dollar question in Levinas scholarship, then the question of infinite responsibility is only slightly less expensive. Levinas is clear on this point: I am infinitely responsible to and for the other, under the burden of an obligation that I can never discharge. This, coupled with the theme of passivity, gives the
problematic impression that I am slavishly beholden to do whatever the other wants me to. Certainly this is not what Levinas means, but his hyperbolic language offers few clues otherwise. The general consensus seems to be that Levinas intends “infinite responsibility” as a phenomenological condition of ethical consciousness, not as a never-ending to-do list for the other.

This returns us to the dilemma noted earlier in the essay, which involves translating these phenomenological conditions for ethics into an ethical worldview that can be put into practice. As a phenomenological experience, we are called to respond to the other. Yet we cannot “know” how to respond, if this means appealing to abstract principles, nor can we “intuit” how to respond, if this means acting on gut reactions. Indeed, acting in any way at all toward the other seems to be a problem for Levinas, in that no matter what I do, I will likely overstep my bounds, i.e., make assumptions and thematize. Because of the epistemological constraints of the face-to-face relation, alterity per se can never become a principle that guides action.

In answer to this dilemma, we agree that alterity cannot be cast as deontology—there is no rulebook for Levinas’s ethics. Yet we nonetheless suggest that an ethics of alterity does require specific actions on the part of the subject—namely, the subject must engage in practices of self-regulation such as meditation. In a sense, we are recasting the meaning of infinite responsibility: My obligations are unfulfillable not because I am always beholden to the other’s whims, but because the self is in a state of constant flux and must continually be regulated. I am perpetually responsible for calming and clearing my mind so as to be responsive to the other, and this is the obligation that I can never discharge. The practice of self-regulation is the effective “putting into practice” of Levinas’s ethic. Our claim may sound counterintuitive at first, but we find that it addresses dilemmas in Levinas scholarship surrounding the normative application of his work on passivity and responsibility. We cannot engage our obligation to the other via the direct route of simply trying to treat the other well, do whatever he or she wants, and so forth; so we must engage this obligation via the indirect route, that is, through the self.

References

The *De* of Levinas: Cultivating the Heart-Mind of Radical Passivity


