CHAPTER THREE

WÛ-WÉI, THE BACKGROUND, AND INTENTIONALITY

Chris Fraser

1. Introduction

Among John Searle’s many contributions to the philosophy of mind is his attempt to articulate the role of non-intentional capacities—know-how, skills, abilities to engage in practices—in constituting intentionality. Searle’s attention to such capacities—which remains relatively rare among major philosophers of mind—makes his work particularly well-suited for constructive engagement with Chinese thought. For such capacities stand at the heart of mainstream Chinese conceptions of knowledge and action. Classical Chinese thinkers consistently explained knowledge in terms of practical know-how, and they conceived of action primarily in terms of ability, habit, and skill, rather than pieces of practical reasoning and the individual acts that issue from them.

Searle refers to the various capacities, abilities, and know-how that enable intentional states to function as “the Background”, the capitalization indicating that the word is a technical term. He calls his account of the role of non-intentional capacities in intentionality the “thesis of the Background”. We can summarize the thesis as the claim that all intentional phenomena—such as meaning, understanding, belief, desire, experience, and action—function only within a set of non-intentional capacities that play an indispensable role in determining their intentional content, and thus their status as intentional phenomena. In and of itself, for instance, an utterance is merely a pattern of sound waves, meaning

---

2 Searle’s most careful, precise statement of the thesis is: “All conscious intentionality—all thought, perception, understanding, etc.—determines conditions of satisfaction only relative to a set of capacities that are not and could not be part of that very conscious state. The actual content by itself is insufficient to determine the conditions of satisfaction” (Searle, 1992, p. 189). For an earlier version, see Searle (1983), Intentionality, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 143. Searle’s most informative accounts of
nothing in particular. Utterances have meaning only in some context of use. But any such context will involve a range of non-intentional, causal capacities of the speaker and audience, from brute perceptual capacities to the know-how or abilities that enable us to participate in complex social practices. These capacities are aspects of the Background that enable particular utterances to have the meaning they do.

One concept in Chinese thought naturally called to mind by reflecting on the role of non-intentional capacities in facilitating various sorts of activities is the Daoist concept of wú-wéi (“non-action” or “non-doing”), which refers, among other things, to a sort of non-intentional response to the particular situation. In this essay, I will try to show how Searle’s thesis of the Background can help us clarify what is plausible in the notion of wú-wéi, while at the same time shedding light on the kind of immediate, automatic activity that might originally have inspired this concept. Just as important, however, his work yields a convincing explanation of why the ideal of wú-wéi as expressed in early Daoist texts is untenable. Searle’s theory of intentionality helps us to clarify how automatic, wú-wéi-like responses are an indispensable part of action, but also shows why it is a mistake to think such responses could func-
