Trying Not to Try: Cooperation, Trust and the Paradox of Spontaneity

Many early Chinese thinkers had as their spiritual ideal the state of wu-wei, or effortless action. By advocating spontaneity as an explicit moral and religious goal, they inevitably involved themselves in the paradox of wu-wei—the problem of how one can try not to try—which later became one of the central tensions in East Asian religious thought. In this talk, I will look at the paradox from both an early Chinese and a contemporary perspective, drawing upon work in social psychology, cognitive neuroscience, and evolutionary theory to argue that this paradox is a real one, and is moreover intimately tied up with problems surrounding cooperation in large-scale societies and concerns about moral hypocrisy.

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