

Wu Wei and Cognitive Flexibility: A Narrative Review of Daoist Philosophy and Contemporary Psychological Theory

Desiree Frank¹, Dr. Amanpreet Kaur², Dr. Priyanka Srivastava³

¹Ph.D. Scholar, Department of Applied Psychology, School of Behavioural and Social Sciences, Manav Rachna International Institute of Research and Studies, Sector-43, Aravalli Hills, Delhi-Surajkund Road, Faridabad-121004, Haryana, India

Email: desireefrank4@gmail.com

²Assistant Professor, Department of Applied Psychology, School of Behavioural and Social Sciences, Manav Rachna International Institute of Research and Studies, Sector-43, Aravalli Hills, Delhi-Surajkund Road, Faridabad-121004, Haryana, India

Email: amanpreetkaur.sbss@mriu.edu.in

³Professor, Department of Applied Psychology, School of Behavioural and Social Sciences, Manav Rachna International Institute of Research and Studies, Sector-43, Aravalli Hills, Delhi-Surajkund Road, Faridabad-121004, Haryana, India

Email: priyankasrivastava.sbss@mriu.edu.in

Abstract

The Daoist idea of Wu Wei (無為), typically understood as "effortless action" or "non-forcing," has always played an integral role in classical Daoist philosophy as an approach to adaptive, spontaneous activity. Although this principle is usually explored in philosophy, religion, and ethics, its possible applicability to modern psychological discussions of adaptation and cognition has not been sufficiently studied. This narrative review explores the links between Wu Wei and the psychological concept of cognitive flexibility, namely, a person's ability to change perspective and adapt to new situations. This review will utilise classic Daoist sources, as well as modern Daoist literature and psychological sources from 1997 to 2025. Thematic narrative synthesis identified five interconnected themes: adaptive action; non-forcing and flexible thinking; shifting perspective and openness to thinking; adaptability and resilience amid uncertainty; and the role of Daoist philosophy for human flourishing and well-being. As the findings show, Daoist philosophy and modern psychology highlight adaptability, responsiveness, and open-mindedness as vital components of human functioning. However, certain discrepancies persist because Wu Wei belongs to a broader philosophical and cosmological system that is not confined to modern cognitive theories. Thus, rather than trying to establish the equivalence of these two terms, the review shows their complementary roles in exploring adaptive thinking and human flourishing. By integrating Daoist philosophy into modern psychology, the study contributes to cross-cultural research on the subject.

Keywords: adaptation; cognitive flexibility; cross-cultural psychology; Daoism; human flourishing; Wu Wei

1. Introduction

The problem of human reaction to uncertainty, change, and complexity has been a fundamental philosophical, religious, and psychological concern for many people around the world throughout different ages. In Daoist philosophy, one of the most prominent ways to respond to uncertainty, change, and complexity was the doctrine of Wu Wei (無為). This doctrine can be translated into English as "non-

action," "effortless action," or "non-forcing." Despite being considered a passive position by many, Daoist teachings do not imply passivity or renunciation of participation in life. In fact, it is the name for a particular kind of behaviour that appears when a person responds to certain circumstances, conforms to natural laws, and is free from unnecessary striving (Slingerland, 2003; Kohn, 2009).

Of all the ideas that form the basis of the philosophical and spiritual tradition of Daoism, Wu Wei ranks among the most significant and controversial. The idea is central to Daoist thought and can be viewed as an ethical, political, spiritual, and psychological concept concerning how humans relate to the world. Throughout the history of Daoist philosophy, Wu Wei has never been considered an abstinence from actions, but rather a complex form of flexible engagement.

1.1 Wu Wei and Daoist Conceptions of Human Action

The idea of Wu Wei is found throughout the *Dao De Jing* and *Zhuangzi*, the classic texts that have influenced Daoism philosophically and spiritually over the last 2,000 years. In the *Dao De Jing*, Laozi repeatedly connects wisdom and efficiency with non-coercive action and argues that success occurs when people do not try to impose their will on the unfolding of nature (Laozi, trans. Ames & Hall, 2003). Far from promoting inaction, however, the text encourages people to be receptive to changing situations and to avoid unnecessary action.

Likewise, the *Zhuangzi* presents several stories that show how successful people handle complex situations through spontaneity, responsiveness, and flexible involvement rather than coercive action (Ziporyn, 2020). In both of these texts, the idea of Wu Wei is not one of doing nothing but is, rather, a nuanced response to change. It is an approach marked by receptivity and flexibility in one's actions.

The emphasis on adaptability has deep roots in Daoism's broader philosophy. According to Daoist philosophy, reality is an ongoing process of transformation, where everything exists through its interaction with the Dao and comes into being through that interaction. From this perspective, human happiness is less about managing one's environment and more about being in harmony with the ongoing process of transformation (Ames & Hall, 2003). Terms like *ziran* (自然; naturalness or spontaneity), *hua* (transformation), and the dynamic relationship between yin and yang are all indications of this kind of world-view, where the ability to be flexible and responsive is highly valued, rather than rigidity and adherence to fixed modes of thinking.

1.2 Cognitive Flexibility in Contemporary Psychology

The ideas of flexibility and adaptiveness embedded in Daoism coincide with certain problems raised by modern-day psychology. Namely, the concept of cognitive flexibility became an essential factor in adaptive functioning. Cognitive flexibility is a person's ability to change their cognitive approach and perspective, adapt to environmental changes, and generate new responses to novelty, uncertainty, and complexity (Diamond, 2013; Ionescu, 2012). As one of the key executive functions, cognitive flexibility facilitates learning, creativity, problem-solving, and emotional and social adaptability. The research shows that people who possess cognitive flexibility cope with stress better, can deal with uncertainty and changing situations, whereas cognitive rigidity causes anxiety, depression, maladaptive coping and psychological difficulties (Dennis & Vander Wal, 2010; Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010).

The importance of cognitive flexibility in contemporary views of resilience and psychological adaptability becomes increasingly evident each year. Contemporary models of resilience involve an individual's ability to adapt their thoughts and behaviour in challenging and adverse situations (Southwick et al., 2014). It clearly shows the increasing understanding of the fact that flexibility is a necessary quality of the modern environment.

1.3 Theoretical Background

This literature review considers two related theoretical viewpoints. First, there is classical Daoism and its principles of Wu Wei and *ziran*. According to Daoism, life is characterised by dynamics, relationships, and constant transformations. In this context, the effectiveness of one's actions can be reached through adaptation to new situations, rather than trying to control everything (Ames & Hall, 2003; Kohn, 2009). People who use Wu Wei act effectively because they can feel the situation and adjust their actions accordingly.

Secondly, it is the modern cognitive flexibility theory. Cognitive flexibility is defined as the ability to change perspectives, modify thought patterns, and adjust cognitive responses to situational demands (Ionescu, 2012). There is evidence that flexibility helps people to be resilient, solve problems, regulate emotions and behave adaptively (Diamond, 2013; Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010). Even though Daoist philosophy and modern psychology developed in different contexts, both theories share adaptability and openness as characteristics of effective human functioning.

The current review does not attempt to equate the two concepts of Wu Wei and cognitive flexibility. The former concept of Wu Wei lies in its unique philosophical and cosmological context, which cannot be understood using the psychological concepts that prevail today; instead, this review explores both concepts from a perspective of complementarity.

1.4 Purpose and Scope of the Review

In recent years, researchers from cross-cultural psychology, contemplative studies, and philosophical psychology have come to recognise the importance of engaging with non-Western intellectual traditions in their considerations of the nature of human cognition and well-being (Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008). Although many scholars have turned their attention to Buddhist concepts such as mindfulness, Daoism is much less frequently discussed in relation to human cognition and well-being in the existing literature. Most previous studies have considered Daoism in relation to spirituality, leadership, ethics, or well-being; however, the connection between Daoist ideas about adaptive action and the theory of cognitive flexibility has not yet been sufficiently elaborated.

This narrative review aims to contribute to this developing area of research by examining the relationship between Wu Wei and cognitive flexibility. The classical Daoist texts, contemporary Daoist philosophy, and the psychological theories of cognitive flexibility and resilience will be used to investigate possible convergences and divergences among these frameworks.

2. Review of Literature

Over the past couple of decades, increasing academic attention has been paid to the role that classical philosophical schools of thought may play in contemporary discussions of cognition, adaptation, and psychology. As part of these growing studies, the value of Daoist philosophy as an area offering rich opportunities for insights into these fields is becoming increasingly evident, as Daoism stresses spontaneity, adaptability, transformation, and the harmony of change. Among Daoist notions, Wu Wei is among the most popular, as it pertains to human actions, decision-making, self-improvement, and the ability to respond to change. At the same time, current psychological literature emphasises cognitive flexibility as a key aspect of adaptive functioning and resilience. While both areas of research developed separately, current interdisciplinary research shows links between them, as Daoist theories of adaptability and psychological theories of cognitive flexibility share commonalities. The present paper reviews the existing literature in these areas and establishes the framework for the present review.

2.1 Wu Wei in Classical and Contemporary Daoist Scholarship

Wu Wei is one of the fundamental doctrines of classical Daoism and has been widely debated both historically and presently. The traditional way to translate Wu Wei was "non-action," which led to the idea that Daoism taught inaction and disengagement. Present-day scholars, however, have begun challenging this understanding of the concept. According to Slingerland (2003), Wu Wei should be understood as effortless and unself-conscious action resulting from the harmonisation with one's environment. In a similar vein, Ames & Hall (2003) noted that Wu Wei was the way of action that was non-coercive and less intentional.

Indeed, scholarly interest in the *Dao De Jing* and the *Zhuangzi* has consistently highlighted adaptability, spontaneity, and responsiveness as key aspects of Wu Wei. Specifically, Roth (1999) argued that in terms of self-cultivation, the Daoist tradition emphasises the development of one's sensibilities to enable oneself to respond appropriately to changes in one's environment. Kohn (2009) argued that Wu Wei is both a pragmatic and a spiritual concept, in which one seeks harmony with the dynamic processes of the Dao. Recent literature has further explored and enriched the interpretation of

these concepts. Indeed, Ziporyn (2020) found that Zhuangzi's philosophy emphasises adaptability and fluidity in engaging with the dynamic transformations of reality rather than static distinctions. A modern interpretation of Daoist philosophy has further emphasised perspectivism, situationality, and responsiveness as fundamental to Daoist wisdom (Ziporyn, 2020; Slingerland, 2003).

2.2 Cognitive Flexibility in Contemporary Psychology

In modern-day psychology, cognitive flexibility has become a crucial concept in relation to adaptation, executive functions, and psychological resilience. Cognitive flexibility is defined as the ability to change perspective, alter cognitive strategies, and adapt behaviour to situational requirements (Ionescu, 2012). As one of the core executive functions, cognitive flexibility enables people to cope with uncertainty and challenges, solve problems, and respond appropriately to environmental stimuli (Diamond, 2013).

Recent research over the last ten years has shown the significance of cognitive flexibility for psychological functioning. The importance of cognitive flexibility for psychological well-being has been outlined by Kashdan and Rottenberg (2010), who have described flexibility as a basic dimension of psychological well-being as the ability to adjust thoughts and behaviours to situational needs. In similar ways, Dennis and Vander Wal (2010) stated that cognitive flexibility is responsible for adaptive appraisal and regulation of emotions. Later, the relationship between cognitive flexibility and resilience, creativity, social skills, academic success, and psychological well-being was established (Gabrys et al., 2018).

Flexibility has been made more significant in psychological theory through studies from 2020 to 2026. The concept of flexibility has gained greater significance in the literature due to its protective value against anxiety, stress, and poor coping mechanisms (Southwick et al., 2014; Gabrys et al., 2018). It is now a core component of modern therapies, emphasising adaptation and contextual behaviour.

2.3 Daoist Thought and Contemporary Psychological Perspectives

The growing interest in integrating Eastern philosophical traditions with modern psychology has led to numerous studies examining the psychological significance of Daoist ideas. Although Buddhism has been widely investigated in relation to mindfulness and contemplative practices, Daoist philosophy has been gaining recognition as a valuable framework for interpreting adaptation, well-being, and human flourishing (Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008).

Some researchers claim that Daoist concepts help in the study of human functioning, adaptation, and self-improvement. Modern views on Wu Wei emphasise responsiveness, contextuality, and non-coercion rather than inaction or retreat (Slingerland, 2003; Kohn, 2009). Therefore, modern interpretations of the concept can be viewed as an additional resource for investigating adaptation to changing conditions and complex situations.

In recent years, Daoist philosophy has been discussed across a wide range of issues, including leadership, decision-making, resilience, and well-being. The recurrent stress on adaptability, spontaneity, and responsiveness shows that Daoism can be considered a valuable resource for the study of adaptive functioning and cognitive flexibility (Kohn, 2009; Ziporyn, 2020).

2.4 Adaptive Thinking, Psychological Flexibility, and Human Flourishing

The ideas of adaptation and flexibility have gained greater significance within recent psychological theories of well-being and resilience. According to psychological flexibility theory, individuals adapt more successfully to environmental conditions when they maintain openness to experiences and regulate their behaviour flexibly in response to the situation and their personal values (Hayes et al., 2012). Also, resilience theories consider adaptation and flexibility essential for successful coping in the face of adversity, uncertainty, or change (Southwick et al., 2014).

One can easily observe the similarities between the above-mentioned theories and Daoist ideas about human flourishing. Daoism presents wisdom as always developing from responsiveness, openness, and harmony with change rather than from following a particular set of beliefs or predetermined goals. Some contemporary researchers have noted this similarity and proposed an alternative approach to adaptation and well-being through the lens of Daoism (Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008; Kohn, 2009).

2.5 Research Gap and Rationale

Although considerable literature has been produced on Wu Wei and cognitive flexibility, these two topics have been studied independently. Specifically, in Daoism, Wu Wei is commonly interpreted from the perspective of philosophy, religion, ethics, and politics. In psychology, cognitive flexibility is primarily discussed in relation to executive functioning, resilience, adaptation, and mental well-being. In other words, little literature exists that explores the conceptual connection between these two concepts.

Additionally, while there has been recent research on Daoist views of well-being, mindfulness, leadership, and adaptation, few studies have investigated Daoist views on effortless action, spontaneity, perspectival openness, and adaptive responsiveness to explain modern views of cognitive flexibility. However, this research gap should not be overlooked, given the growing need for adaptability.

The current review tries to fill this gap by engaging in a constructive dialogue between classical Daoism and modern psychological thinking. By analysing the convergences and divergences between the two theories, the research aims to contribute to cross-cultural research in adaptation, resilience, psychology, and well-being. Instead of translating the ideas of one tradition into another, the review seeks to explore how both perspectives can enrich each other.

3. Method

3.1 Review Design

In the current research, a narrative review design was utilised to investigate the link between the important idea of Wu Wei in Daoist philosophy and the concept of cognitive flexibility in modern psychology. A narrative review design appeared appropriate, as the study's goal was not to conduct a statistical synthesis of the empirical results but to synthesise, analyse, and interpret various pieces of academic literature from different disciplines.

Due to the multidisciplinary nature of the issue under consideration, including Daoist studies, philosophy, cognitive psychology, positive psychology, and resilience, the use of a narrative review was essential for examining areas of agreement and disagreement among these disciplines. The main purpose of the review was to identify themes associated with adaptive thinking, spontaneity, adaptation, and flexibility in classical Daoist sources and in modern psychological literature.

3.2 Literature Search Strategy

Literature on this topic has been systematically gathered by searching major databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, JSTOR, PsycINFO, and ProQuest. A literature search has been conducted primarily on publications from 2010 to 2026, thus covering the basic and most recent developments in Daoism and psychology literature.

Major keywords used in literature search include "Wu Wei," "Daoism," "Daoist philosophy," "Zhuangzi," "Dao De Jing," "cognitive flexibility," "psychological flexibility," "adaptive thinking," "resilience," "adaptation," "well-being," and "cross-cultural psychology." Different combinations of these keywords have been searched using Boolean operators to identify relevant literature on the relationships between Daoism and contemporary psychological constructs.

Both peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly books and chapters have been included in the literature review when relevant to the conceptual framework of this topic. Major literature in the fields of Daoism and psychology has been particularly influential in defining adaptation, flexibility, and human well-being.

3.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The review encompassed scholarly articles that fulfilled three main criteria. First, the studies or theories were expected to address Daoist philosophy, especially ideas concerning Wu Wei, spontaneity, naturalness (*ziran*), transformation, or adaptive actions. Secondly, articles examining cognitive flexibility, psychological flexibility, resilience, adaptation, executive functions, or related concepts were selected for inclusion in the review. Lastly, the publications had to make conceptual contributions towards our understanding of adaptive cognition, human functioning, or adjustment.

Excluded from consideration were articles that had little scholarly connection to the review's goals, that focused only on other religions, or that were concerned with the flexibility of very specific domains and

had no theoretical meaning. The non-scholarly resources and unpublished literature were also excluded from the review.

3.4 Data Analysis and Narrative Synthesis

Analysis of the selected literature was conducted using thematic narrative synthesis. After the sources were read repeatedly and compared, the main concepts and recurrent themes were identified and grouped into wider conceptual categories. Special focus was placed on themes related to adaptability, spontaneity, non-coercion, perspective change, resilience, and contextual behaviour.

The analysis aimed to identify similarities and differences between the interpretation of Wu Wei in Daoism and the contemporary interpretation of cognitive flexibility in psychology. The concepts were not viewed as similar, but their conceptual intersections were studied with the recognition that they have different roots, histories, and cultures.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Given that the present research is conducted entirely using available academic sources, no human subjects were used, and hence no ethical clearance is required. However, all sources have been analysed and cited in accordance with the requirements outlined in the academic literature and APA style.

4. Thematic Analysis

The current thematic review aims to explore the relationship between the Daoist concept of Wu Wei and the psychological construct of cognitive flexibility prevalent in today's world. After a comprehensive review of scholarly literature across Daoist studies, philosophy, cognitive psychology, and cross-cultural studies from 2010 to 2026, several key themes have emerged. Even though these fields are quite different and belong to different schools of thought, they share certain features related to adaptation, response, perspective-taking, and handling uncertainty. As a result of the thematic analysis, five interrelated themes were found: (a) adaptive behaviour of Wu Wei, (b) non-forcing and flexible cognition, (c) perspective taking and cognitive openness, (d) adaptation and resilience amid uncertainty, and (e) human thriving and well-being.

4.1 Wu Wei as Adaptive Action

Another prominent theme that has emerged from the reviewed literature is the conceptualisation of Wu Wei as a mode of adaptive action. According to both the *Dao De Jing* and the *Zhuangzi*, effective action does not consist in using force, planning, or controlling actions, but instead involves an appropriate response to changes in circumstances (Ames & Hall, 2003; Slingerland, 2003). Contrary to what some critics of Daoism argue, Daoist philosophy presents the concept of Wu Wei as a proactive approach to situations, acting in accordance with situational needs without resisting or forcing anything to happen.

It should be acknowledged that the above-mentioned theme is similar to the modern understanding of cognitive flexibility. By definition, cognitive flexibility denotes the ability of a person to alter his/her way of thinking, to change perspective and behave accordingly to new circumstances (Ionescu, 2012). There is ample evidence that people with high cognitive flexibility perform better on complex tasks and problem-solving than others (Diamond, 2013). The philosophical assumptions of Daoism and modern psychology diverge significantly, but their focus on the adaptability of responses to changes is quite similar.

According to the literature, adaptive action goes beyond mere behavioural adaptation. As Daoism understands it, the sage is characterised by being always attentive and sensitive to his surroundings and their changes. Adaptation occurs through awareness and sensitivity rather than rigid rules or expectations (Kohn, 2009). Likewise, cognitive flexibility theory emphasises the importance of monitoring one's environment and adapting one's cognition to its demands (Dennis & Vander Wal, 2010). People with greater cognitive flexibility can usually evaluate different courses of action and choose an appropriate response.

The *Zhuangzi* presents several examples of adaptive actions through tales about skilful people whose proficiency stems from attunement rather than control. One of the most famous examples is the tale about Cook Ding, who shows that mastery is gained through sensitivity to the natural way things should be done, not through strenuous effort (Watson, 2013). Modern scholars have interpreted such

examples as instances of flexible adaptation, in which proficiency develops as an ongoing process of adapting to change (Ziporyn, 2020).

Likewise, current psychological studies have highlighted that adaptive functioning hinges on the capacity to change assumptions and strategies and to respond to the unknown efficiently. Cognitive flexibility has been linked to resilience, learning, creativity, and effective adaptation in various settings (Gabrys et al., 2018; Southwick et al., 2014). Within this approach, flexibility allows an individual to transcend the usual ways of thinking and devise actions more appropriate to the changing circumstances.

At the same time, significant differences remain. While cognitive flexibility is typically considered a cognitive process related to executive function and information processing in psychology, Wu Wei emerges in a broader philosophical and cosmological framework regarding harmony with the Dao. Thus, it should not be assumed that there is a direct correlation between these notions. Instead, according to existing literature, each tradition has found adaptability to be a defining feature of human functioning.

Generally speaking, based on the above review of the literature, it can be said that adaptive action is an important intersection of Daoist philosophy and modern psychology. Both philosophical doctrines reject any inflexibility and emphasise the importance of responsiveness, situational awareness, and adaptability of action according to changing circumstances. From this perspective, Wu Wei can be seen as a philosophical approach to adaptation consistent with contemporary cognitive flexibility research.

4.2 Perspective Shifting and Cognitive Openness

Another important theme that emerges from the literature review is the association of Daoist perspectivism with modern notions of cognitive flexibility. According to Ionescu (2012), cognitive flexibility refers to the ability to switch between different perspectives, adjust one's strategy, and consider various interpretations of a situation. As for Daoist philosophy, the idea of the limitations of fixed perspectives and openness to multiple perspectives can also be noted.

In particular, the Zhuangzi challenges any fixed judgments, absolute distinctions, and the notion of singular truths. The Zhuangzi sees the world as complex and ever-changing. Contrary to advocating for an absolute perspective, the Zhuangzi urges the readers to acknowledge the partiality of human knowledge and to be open to different perceptions of reality (Ziporyn, 2009). Through the stories and dialogues presented by Zhuangzi, it becomes clear how people can get stuck in fixed assumptions, conventions, and interpretations of the experience.

Psychological research in the current era also shares these concerns. Cognitive flexibility refers to the ability to adjust one's frame of mind when that frame becomes useless (Diamond, 2013). People with high cognitive flexibility can see multiple sides of things, propose alternative options, and adjust their thinking in response to changing conditions (Dennis & Vander Wal, 2010). This type of cognitive ability is linked to creativity, problem-solving, learning, and good decisions (Gabrys et al., 2018).

Several philosophers often cite Zhuangzi's perspective in Daoism as an example of philosophical cognitive flexibility. Instead of viewing reality through fixed categories of concepts, Daoism helps people realise its complexity and ambiguity (Ziporyn, 2020). This way, one cannot be limited to a single perspective and can thus be more flexible and open to what one sees. To some extent, this idea resembles psychological cognitive flexibility.

Perspective shifting and its link with adaptation appear to be especially relevant when the subject is dealing with an uncertain and complex situation. Modern psychological research shows that individuals who can see the issue from multiple angles cope better with the ambiguity of the situation and avoid fixed ways of thinking (Cherry et al., 2021). In the same way, Daoist teaching implies that too much certainty can lead to conflict and suffering; instead, openness to transformation enables one to cope with change (Kohn, 2009).

However, the sources point out that perspectivism practised in the Daoist philosophy is about more than just information processing and executive functioning studied by psychology. While psychology investigates how flexibility helps an individual cope with uncertainty, Zhuangzi reflects on knowing,

identity, and reality through perspective-shifting. As a result, one should not view openness to different perspectives as simply another cognitive skill but rather as a philosophical stance.

In summary, there appears to be considerable overlap between Daoism and psychology regarding perspective shifting. Both approaches acknowledge the importance of maintaining an open mind to possible solutions rather than being inflexible when adapting to an environment. Even though it may be considered from different perspectives, it seems that both Daoist perspectivism and cognitive flexibility have much in common.

4.3 Non-Forcing and Cognitive Flexibility

Another important issue raised by the examined literature is the connection between the Daoist idea of non-forcing and the psychological notion of cognitive flexibility. According to Daoism, Wu Wei is an approach to action that does not presuppose unnecessary effort, coercion, or inflexible manipulation of results. Instead of trying to impose one's will on events, the person who practices Wu Wei acts in accordance with the current situation, finding the most effective and natural solution to a problem (Ames & Hall, 2003; Slingerland, 2003). Thus, the idea of non-forcing in Daoism implies flexible and adaptive behaviour in a constantly changing environment.

The idea of non-forcing can be associated with the modern notion of cognitive flexibility. Cognitive flexibility is understood as the ability to modify thinking patterns and adjust cognitive processes in response to new conditions (Ionescu, 2012). The research shows that cognitively flexible people do not stick to inefficient strategies but change their actions when necessary (Diamond, 2013). At the same time, cognitive rigidity can be characterised as an excessive dependence on well-known ideas and beliefs.

From the Daoist point of view, excessive straining and control are regarded as hindrances to efficient action. In many places in the *Dao De Jing*, it is stated that trying to control something can produce resistance and unexpected results, while being flexible and receptive helps people respond to changes in a more balanced way (Laozi, trans. Ames & Hall, 2003). In addition, the current psychological literature states that, to be adaptive, people must challenge and reject outdated ideas and cognitive frameworks and remain open to various problem-solving approaches (Dennis & Vander Wal, 2010).

The link between non-forcing and cognitive flexibility is especially apparent in situations of uncertainty and unpredictability. In line with modern psychological research, people who think flexibly are better at handling uncertainty because they can consider different options and adjust their behaviour based on emerging information (Gabrys et al., 2018). Moreover, according to Daoist philosophy, people should not hold fixed views but should be sensitive to changes in circumstances.

Furthermore, the literature indicates that non-forcing generally helps foster cognitive openness. The lack of fixation on any particular result helps people become open to other perspectives and find creative solutions to their problems. It is consistent with the research showing that cognitive flexibility is an essential element for innovation, creativity, and problem-solving (Diamond, 2013; Gabrys et al., 2018). Instead of sticking to habitual ways of thinking, cognitive flexibility enables people to generate multiple interpretations and choose responses based on specific circumstances.

However, there are significant distinctions between the two ideas. Cognitive flexibility is usually studied in psychology as a cognitive process related to executive function, attentional shifting, and adaptive problem-solving. In turn, non-forcing is a part of Daoist philosophy, emphasising harmony, naturalness, and alignment with the *Dao*. Therefore, the connection between these two concepts should not be perceived as equal. However, the literature shows that both concepts highlight the problems associated with rigidity and the importance of adaptiveness.

The common conclusion derived from the discussed body of literature is that both non-forcing and cognitive flexibility emphasise the importance of openness to change rather than rigidity in dealing with new situations and events, which is necessary for successful adaptation. While Daoism explains this concept through harmony and *wu wei*, psychology explores it through flexible cognition and behaviour adaptation.

4.4 Adaptation, Resilience, and Coping with Uncertainty

An additional significant theme that has emerged in this literature review concerns the need for adaptation and resilience in response to uncertainty and change. According to both Daoism and modern psychology, uncertainty is an intrinsic part of human existence, and one's ability to function successfully hinges on his/her readiness to adapt to new conditions. Even though Daoism and contemporary psychological theory approach this matter from different perspectives, in both cases, the principles of flexibility and adjustment serve as important components of adaptation.

In Daoism, change is seen as an inseparable attribute of the world we live in. In the *Dao de Jing* and Zhuangzi, the world is often depicted as a process of constant transformation rather than something that stays the same (Ames & Hall, 2003). As such, the essence of wisdom, according to Daoist philosophy, does not lie in resisting change but in adapting to it. People who are too rigid and have rigid expectations in certain situations may become frustrated and face difficulties, while those who stay flexible can cope much more easily (Kohn, 2009).

Modern psychological studies also recognise cognitive flexibility as one of the components of resilience. In general, resilience can be defined as the ability to maintain or restore psychological well-being in the face of adversity, stress, and other life difficulties (Southwick et al., 2014). Numerous studies have shown that cognitive flexibility enhances resilience by facilitating reinterpretation of situations, reconsideration of options, and the creation of new coping techniques (Southwick et al., 2014; Gabrys et al., 2018). Flexible people are usually better prepared to deal with uncertainty, since they can adjust their thinking in response to changing circumstances.

The connection between cognitive flexibility and resilience has recently gained much attention in the psychological literature. Flexible individuals perceive challenges as manageable and can cope with difficulties that arise during the application of one approach by using other techniques (Dennis & Vander Wal, 2010). They do not get stuck in inflexible thoughts and expectations yet remain ready to consider other perspectives and adapt. It seems that such ideas are similar to Daoist images of flexible people who react to life's challenges through accommodation.

The literature further emphasises that uncertainty often provides the context in which flexibility becomes important. The rapid changes in society, new technologies, economic volatility, and global emergencies have fueled the interest in understanding how people cope with the unpredictable environment. Recent research shows that cognitive flexibility helps people cope with unstable situations, allowing them to be more tolerant, manage emotions, and adapt to novel environments (Southwick et al., 2014). The same idea is supported by Daoism, which presents uncertainty as a positive stance towards change, enabling one to navigate situations through adaptability and responsiveness.

Despite the similarities described above, there are differences in the principles of resilience between the two traditions. While modern psychology explores resilience from the perspective of cognitive, behavioural, and emotional mechanisms, Daoism views adaptation in the broader context of cosmological harmony with the Dao. At the same time, both theories show that attempts to control the uncertain world through rigid structures will be fruitless, and one must remain flexible.

On the whole, the literature analysed suggests that adaptation and resilience constitute critical areas where the philosophies of Daoism and modern psychology converge. The two schools agree that uncertainty can never be eliminated and that success or fulfilment in life depends on one's ability to adapt to change. Adaptability in either case takes centre stage as a crucial element in navigating through the vagaries of life.

4.5 Human Flourishing and Well-Being

The last theme to emerge from the discussed literature concerns the association among adaptive thinking, cognitive flexibility, and human flourishing. In essence, Daoist philosophy and contemporary psychology seek to understand how people can operate in an ever-changing reality. Despite differences in assumptions, approaches, and goals, both traditions imply that happiness increases when people learn to respond adaptively to various situations rather than being stuck in fixed modes of thought and behaviour.

In Daoist philosophy, human flourishing is closely associated with being in tune with Dao. The texts *Dao De Jing* and Zhuangzi present well-being not as a result of gaining power, status, or other

achievements, but as a state of balance, simplicity, adaptation, and harmony (Ames & Hall, 2003; Kohn, 2009). People who have developed Wu Wei react to changes effortlessly, thus avoiding conflict and suffering. Flourishing results from being in harmony with reality rather than from controlling it.

Similarly, the current psychological literature highlights the importance of flexibility for mental well-being. Cognitive flexibility is known to correlate positively with emotional regulation, problem-solving, resilience, creativity, and life satisfaction overall (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010; Diamond, 2013). Individuals who can adapt their thinking processes by changing their perspective tend to be better at coping with challenges, handling stressful situations, and maintaining psychological functioning in difficult conditions (Gabrys et al., 2018). On the contrary, rigidity of one's mind appears to result in maladaptive coping, emotional suffering, and difficulty in adapting to new circumstances. Also, the above literature review shows that adaptive thinking contributes to people's well-being by helping them form more balanced interpretations of events. More flexible people usually have more capacity to consider other options, reevaluate assumptions and alter their behaviour when circumstances change. It will lead to a decreased risk of getting caught up in the vicious circle of certain behavioural or cognitive patterns (Dennis & Vander Wal, 2010). Similarly, according to Daoist philosophy, one should avoid rigid expectations and assumptions about what should happen.

In recent years, several studies have shown that flourishing is more than the absence of distress. Flourishing is generally associated with adaptability, resilience, meaning, and the ability to react appropriately to challenges (Southwick et al., 2014). This point reflects Taoist philosophy's view on the issue, as it holds that development involves constant adaptation and responsiveness rather than reaching an immutable state of perfection.

Although there are many discrepancies between Daoist philosophy and modern psychology, adaptability plays an important role in both disciplines' definitions of flourishing. Daoists consider the process to involve the harmony of the individual with the Dao and his/her ability to be responsive. On the other hand, psychologists focus on cognitive, behavioural, and psychological processes in defining it.

From the literature review above, one may deduce that there is significant overlap between the concept of cognitive flexibility and the Daoist concept of adaptive action, in terms of openness, responsiveness, and adaptability to change. Such overlaps suggest that flexibility could be an important avenue to fostering resilience and human flourishing.

5. Discussion

This current review of narratives examined the connection between the Wu Wei concept in Daoist philosophy and the cognitive flexibility in modern psychology. An analysis of scholarly sources on Daoist studies, philosophy, and psychology found several similarities among these terms regarding adaptive action, perspective change, resilience, and flourishing. Despite their different origins, the results show that Daoist philosophy and modern psychological theories emphasise the importance of flexibility in responding to the complexity and constant changes in our environment.

Firstly, one major result is that the Wu Wei concept can be interpreted as adaptive rather than non-adaptive. The Daoist classical texts present the idea that adaptive action occurs by responding to situational needs rather than through control and hard effort (Ames & Hall, 2003; Slingerland, 2003). Moreover, modern psychological theories claim that cognitive flexibility allows for modifying thinking and changing perspective in the face of new and uncertain situations (Diamond, 2013; Ionescu, 2012). Therefore, although these philosophical roots are different, adaptability is seen as the crucial aspect of adaptive action.

Another significant point to be noted is the issue of perspective shifting. The literature reviewed shows that the Zhuangzi consistently questions rigid viewpoints and promotes a readiness to consider multiple perspectives simultaneously (Ziporyn, 2009). Cognitive flexibility theory shares a similar position on the importance of being willing to change one's viewpoints and to develop alternative interpretations of a situation (Dennis & Vander Wal, 2010).

The results obtained can also be interpreted as the common understanding of the limits of strict control. Daoism warns people about the dangers of unnecessary struggle and of an obsession with preset goals

and outcomes. This often leads to resistance and disharmony (Kohn, 2009). Similarly, psychological literature warns about the problems that can arise from cognitive rigidity. This may complicate problem-solving, adaptation and coping processes (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010). However, the flexible people are more likely to manage the situations.

Another point stressed in the review concerns the value of flexibility amid uncertainty. For Daoism, change is understood as a feature of reality and is regarded as a factor that needs to be addressed by fostering responsiveness rather than resistance. The same principle underlies modern psychological theories of resilience, in which the need to adjust thoughts and behaviours in adverse conditions is seen as a key to success (Southwick et al., 2014). Hence, adaptation is not so much about control over one's environment as about responding effectively to it.

Nevertheless, while there are some similarities between the concepts of interest, their differences need to be recognised. Cognitive flexibility is understood as a cognitive mechanism linked to processes such as information processing and problem-solving, and is studied in psychology from this perspective. In turn, Wu Wei is related to philosophical and cosmological notions of harmonious alignment with the Dao, naturalness, and self-improvement. Therefore, the current paper does not argue for the equivalence of the terms in question but sees them rather as complementary approaches.

In terms of contribution to the body of knowledge, this review adds to the existing literature by exploring the link between Daoist philosophy and cognitive flexibility. Despite substantial literature on the connections between Wu Wei and spirituality, mindfulness, leadership, and well-being, relatively few studies have examined its potential significance for the modern debate over cognitive adaptation. Similarly, despite extensive research on cognitive flexibility in psychology, there has been little interest in classical Daoist philosophy.

It can be concluded that flexibility plays a key role in both Daoism and modern psychology. Both in Daoist philosophy, where the concept is referred to as Wu Wei, and in the theory of cognitive flexibility, adaptability is an important resource for managing uncertainty and promoting well-being. Future research would benefit greatly from further interdisciplinary investigation of the relationship between philosophical traditions and psychological theories.

6. Implications for Contemporary Psychology

This review holds several implications for modern-day psychology and cross-cultural research. Firstly, the results indicate that classical Daoism can serve as an effective concept for explaining adaptive thinking and cognitive flexibility. Wu Wei, one of the basic principles of Daoist teaching, implies openness to change, flexibility, and responsiveness – traits related to modern psychological views of flexible cognition.

Secondly, this review shows that it is important to consider non-Western philosophies in conducting psychological research. The majority of concepts of cognitive flexibility have been developed within Western psychology. Considering a Daoist perspective may offer a different perspective on adaptation, resilience, and well-being.

Thirdly, the results could be useful in educational, counselling and organisational applications. Modern-day societies are marked by fast-changing social, technological and economic realities, making it increasingly necessary for people to adapt successfully to these changes. The concepts of flexibility, responsiveness, and openness in Daoism, as well as in psychological studies, could be used to develop approaches that foster adaptive thinking and resilience.

Fourthly, this review further develops cross-cultural psychology by fostering increased collaboration between philosophical schools and the field of psychology. This kind of collaboration might enrich the debates on cognition, adaptation and human flourishing.

7. Limitations

Several limitations of the current review should be mentioned. First, a narrative review method was used. Hence, the findings cannot be taken as empirical evidence of an association between Wu Wei and cognitive flexibility.

Secondly, the current review focused primarily on sources published in English between 2010 and 2026. Thus, some relevant materials written in other languages, including Chinese, might have been excluded.

Thirdly, despite certain parallels between Wu Wei and cognitive flexibility, they emerge from quite different backgrounds. Hence, care should be taken when using the terms interchangeably.

Lastly, the current review is predominantly theoretical. Empirical studies examining whether the principles of Daoism, specifically Wu Wei, can be useful for understanding cognitive flexibility might be considered in the future.

8. Conclusion

In this narrative review, the association between the Daoist concept of Wu Wei and the modern psychological notion of cognitive flexibility was analysed. Based on the literature on Daoism, philosophy, and psychology published from 2010 to 2026, the review examined the approaches of both traditions to adaptation, responsiveness, perspective shifting, and efficient functioning in changing conditions.

According to the analysis, Wu Wei should be interpreted as an approach to adaptive action rather than passive nonaction, as it implies spontaneity, adaptability to the surrounding world, and responsiveness to change. Cognitive flexibility was identified as a key feature of modern psychology, enabling individuals to adapt their thinking and behaviour to new conditions.

There are several areas where these theories overlap, including themes of adaptive action, openness to multiple perspectives, dealing with uncertainty, resilience, and human flourishing. On the other hand, there are certain distinct aspects as well. While the former concept is generally considered from a psychological perspective, as a mental process related to executive functioning and adaptive cognition, the latter idea fits within a broader Daoist philosophy centred on harmony, naturalness, and alignment with the Dao. Thus, no direct parallels are drawn between these ideas; rather, they complement each other in explaining the adaptive functioning of human beings.

This paper contributes to the field of cross-cultural scholarship by introducing Daoist ideas into modern psychological theories of cognition, adaptation, and well-being. In addition, this paper shows the continued relevance of ancient Daoist philosophy to the problems posed by modern uncertainties, complexity, and human flourishing. As the modern world becomes faster, knowledge of philosophies such as Wu Wei and the ideas of cognitive flexibility becomes more relevant.

References

1. Ames, R. T., & Hall, D. L. (2003). *Dao de jing: Making this life significant: A philosophical translation*. Ballantine Books.
2. Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1997). Writing narrative literature reviews. *Review of General Psychology*, 1(3), 311–320. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.1.3.311>
3. Christopher, J. C., & Hickinbottom, S. (2008). Positive psychology, ethnocentrism, and the disguised ideology of individualism. *Theory & Psychology*, 18(5), 563–589. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354308093396>
4. Dennis, J. P., & Vander Wal, J. S. (2010). The Cognitive Flexibility Inventory: Instrument development and estimates of reliability and validity. *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, 34(3), 241–253. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10608-009-9276-4>
5. Diamond, A. (2013). Executive functions. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 64, 135–168. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-113011-143750>
6. Gabrys, R. L., Tabri, N., Anisman, H., & Matheson, K. (2018). Cognitive control and flexibility in the context of stress and depressive symptoms. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9, 2219. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.02219>
7. Graham, A. C. (1989). *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical argument in ancient China*. Open Court.
8. Hall, D. L., & Ames, R. T. (1998). *Thinking through Confucius*. State University of New York Press.

9. Hansen, C. (1992). *A Daoist theory of Chinese thought: A philosophical interpretation*. Oxford University Press.
10. Hayes, S. C., Strosahl, K. D., & Wilson, K. G. (2012). *Acceptance and commitment therapy: The process and practice of mindful change* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.
11. Ionescu, T. (2012). Exploring the nature of cognitive flexibility. *New Ideas in Psychology*, 30(2), 190–200. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.newideapsych.2011.11.001>
12. Kashdan, T. B., & Rottenberg, J. (2010). Psychological flexibility is a fundamental aspect of health. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 30(7), 865–878. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2010.03.001>
13. Kohn, L. (2009). *Introducing Daoism*. Routledge.
14. Liu, X. (2015). Daoist philosophy and contemporary psychological well-being. *Journal of Daoist Studies*, 8, 45–63.
15. Mair, V. H. (1990). *Tao Te Ching: The classic book of integrity and the way*. Bantam Books.
16. Nisbett, R. E. (2003). *The geography of thought: How Asians and Westerners think differently... and why*. Free Press.
17. Roth, H. D. (1999). *Original Tao: Inward training (Nei-yeh) and the foundations of Taoist mysticism*. Columbia University Press.
18. Slingerland, E. (2003). *Effortless action: Wu-wei as conceptual metaphor and spiritual ideal in early China*. Oxford University Press.
19. Southwick, S. M., Bonanno, G. A., Masten, A. S., Panter-Brick, C., & Yehuda, R. (2014). Resilience definitions, theory, and challenges: Interdisciplinary perspectives. *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 5(1), 25338. <https://doi.org/10.3402/ejpt.v5.25338>
20. Watson, B. (Trans.). (2013). *The complete works of Zhuangzi*. Columbia University Press.
21. Wong, P. T. P. (2011). Positive psychology 2.0: Towards a balanced interactive model of the good life. *Canadian Psychology*, 52(2), 69–81. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0022511>
22. Ziporyn, B. (2003). *The Penumbra Unbound: The Neo-Taoist philosophy of Guo Xiang*. State University of New York Press.
23. Ziporyn, B. (2009). *Zhuangzi: The essential writings with selections from traditional commentaries*. Hackett Publishing.
24. Ziporyn, B. (2020). *Zhuangzi: The complete writings*. Hackett Publishing.