

Post-Egoic Action: A Theory of Transformed Agency through Daoist Wu Wei and the Bhagavad Gita's Nishkama Karma

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Abstract

How can action remain intentional, morally responsible, and purposeful when the self is no longer its motivating principle? This question remains insufficiently explored within the philosophy of action. Addressing this conceptual gap, the paper introduces Post-Egoic Action, a higher-order theory of transformed agency derived from a comparative philosophical dialogue between wu wei (Daoism) and nishkama karma (Bhagavad Gita). Adopting an interpretive approach grounded in comparative philosophy, it argues that while these traditions differ in their metaphysical and ethical commitments, they converge in proposing a transformation in the motivational structure of agency. Post-Egoic Action refers to intentional, purposive, ethically responsible, and socially embedded action that is no longer governed by the pursuit of personal gain, recognition, or control. By distinguishing agency from ego-centred motivation, the theory extends contemporary debates in the philosophy of action. It offers a conceptual vocabulary for engaging with responsible leadership, humanistic management, organisational flourishing, sustainability, and human-centred artificial intelligence. More broadly, the paper demonstrates how comparative philosophy can generate original theoretical insights while advancing contemporary understandings of intentional human action by developing Post-Egoic Action as a higher-order theory.

Keywords: *Post-Egoic Action; transformed agency; wu wei; nishkama karma; comparative philosophy; philosophy of action; responsible leadership; humanistic management*

Introduction

What is the right way for a man to live in the world without getting ensnared in the very thing that drives him? It is a question that has been debated throughout history in all civilisations and remains relevant in today's ethical discussion of agency, accountability, leadership and human flourishing. The philosophical question is not merely how actions can be effective, but whether there is a need for ego-centred striving (MacIntyre, 1981; Ricoeur, 1992; Taylor, 1989) for actions to be meaningful and effective.

In classical and modern philosophy, agency has been defined as a manifestation of intentional will, rational deliberation or self-directed autonomy (Frankfurt, 1971; Korsgaard, 1996; Ricoeur, 1992; Taylor, 1989). Even the more phenomenological forms of the discussion, which focus on the embodied responsiveness of the self, continue the theme of how intentional action arises from the self's interaction with the world (Bratman, 1987; Dreyfus, 2002; Gallagher, 2017). Similarly, a modern understanding of self-transcendence tends to focus on one or more aspects of the individual's psychology, ethics, or spiritual state, but not the transformation of agency itself (Frankl, 2010; Wong, 2016). Ego-centred attachment is seen as the main driver of action, which raises numerous philosophical questions that have not been fully explored: How can an individual remain fully intentional, responsible, and effective when ego-centred attachment is no longer the primary driver of action?

The two most important responses are the Daoist principle of wu wei and the Bhagavad Gita's nishkama karma. They are not advocating withdrawal from the world, but rather modes of engagement in which action is purposeful and the striving of the ego is fundamentally transformed (Ames & Hall, 2003; Matilal, 2002; Mohanty, 2000; Slingerland, 2003).

A term often translated as "non-action" or "effortless action" is *wu wei*, which in Daoist philosophy does not mean "no action" or "no effort" but rather "actionlessness" or "effortlessness". The source of human flourishing is being attuned to the Dao, developing *ziran* (spontaneity), and making things happen in harmony with reality rather than trying to control it (Ames & Hall, 2003; Kohn, 2009; Slingerland, 2003).

The Bhagavad Gita is a different way of solving the same philosophical dilemma, but using a different moral and metaphysical system. It teaches the practice of one's *dharma* in a disciplined way without any attachment to the results of action (*nishkama karma*). Ethical conduct continues to be purposeful, systematic, and socially responsible, but is not based on attachment to success, failure, or personal gain (Matilal, 2002; Mohanty, 2000; Radhakrishnan, 1948; Vashishtha & Gambhir, 2026).

These studies have made a great contribution to intercultural understanding, but have not resolved a central philosophical question. While there is existing scholarship on the lessons these traditions offer on detached action, there is comparatively little on how agency itself is transformed once the ego-centred motivation that organises the action is replaced (Chakrabarti, 2015; Clooney, 2010; Frankl, 2010; Wong, 2016).

The paper proposes the theory of Post-Egoic Action as a new theory of transformed agency in a comparative philosophical discussion of *wu wei* and *nishkama karma*, to address this gap. The goal is not just to compare two philosophical traditions, but to create a conceptual framework through which intentional action can remain purposeful, ethical, socially situated, and not be driven by attachment to the "ego" (self). The theory is presented not as part of either tradition by itself, but as an interpretive construction which allows for philosophical discussion while maintaining the unique metaphysical principle.

Methodologically, it pursues a comparative hermeneutic approach based on a close interaction with the Dao De Jing, the Zhuangzi and the Bhagavad Gita, as well as on recent research in the area of Daoist studies, Hindu philosophy, comparative philosophy and the philosophy of agency (Ames & Hall, 2003; Chakrabarti, 2015; Clooney, 2010).

The paper contributes to the theories in three related ways. First, it brings to light an under-theorised aspect of comparative scholarship in showing that the shift of agency has been neglected to date, despite the wide range of talk about detachment and self-transcendence. Second, it develops and presents a higher-order theory of transformed agency, namely post-Egoic action, which looks at the possibility of acting on purpose after ego-centred action, that is, the capacity of action that can be effective, responsible and socially implicated, even beyond the ego-centred motivation. Third, it shows how the comparative dialogue between Daoism and the Bhagavad Gita can benefit comparative philosophy and, more generally, discussions of philosophy of action, ethics, leadership, humanistic management, and human flourishing.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Human Agency as a Philosophical Problem

Human agency is at the centre of philosophy because of its connection to the notions of responsibility, freedom, ethics, identity, and social life. Philosophical accounts of action account for how individuals can be moral, existential agents of conduct, but at the same time be bound up in broader moral and existential worlds (MacIntyre, 1981; Ricoeur, 1992; Taylor, 1989). In Western philosophical traditions, agency has typically been defined in terms of intention, rational thinking, and the independent subject (Bratman, 1987; Frankfurt, 1971; Korsgaard, 1996). This perspective has influenced notions of leadership, organisational behaviour, education and psychological growth, and the ability to be effective is associated with self-determination, productivity, influence, and control (Nussbaum, 2001; Taylor, 1989).

However, this model has come into question from phenomenology, embodied cognition and psychology. Expert performance can arise in an embodied way, as in Dreyfus' (2002) account, and human action is relational and embodied, as per Gallagher's (2017) and Thompson's (2015) accounts. In the same way, Frankl (2010), Reed (1991) and Wong (2016) associate well-being with service, responsibility, and a purpose beyond the ego. However, these views do not really

address one key question: When is agency shifted from a primary motivation of recognition, control and outcomes? It is a significant question in Daoism and the Bhagavad Gita in which agency is reoriented through alignment, discipline, detachment and transformed participation.

2.2 Existing Models of Transformed Action

Existing scholarship has focused on self-transcendence, detachment, non-attachment, flow, relational agency, virtue and selfless service beyond self-interest. These ideas demonstrate that something constructive can be done without ambition, possessiveness, and personal gain. Each, however, only partakes of the phenomenon, and each does not exhaust its aspects of how intentional action is reorganised when it is no longer motivated by the basis of the ego-centred striving.

Self-transcendence is the explanation of going beyond egocentric concerns. According to Frankl (2010), fulfilment is related to something other than oneself. Reed (1991) views self-transcendence as an expansion of personal boundaries, and Wong (2016) identifies meaning, compassion, and existential responsibility as factors contributing to flourishing. However, self-transcendence captures what is directed at motivation, rather than the change of agency.

Detachment and non-attachment clarify freedom from possessiveness, but do not fully explain the positive agency that arises once possessiveness has been overcome.

There is yet another dimension of flow and phenomenology. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) identifies absorbed and intrinsically motivated action as defining aspects of flow, while Dreyfus (2002), Gallagher (2017), and Thompson (2017) highlight embodied and participatory action. These narratives describe the fluid performance, not the deeper motivational shift that takes place beyond the point of accomplishment or self-confirmation. It is also demonstrated through relational and virtue-based approaches that agency is social and moral. Although MacIntyre (1981), Taylor (1989) and Ricoeur (1992) offer some limited explanations of action, none of them does so in terms of the decentralisation of ego-centred motivation. So, the current scholarship needs to be preserved, but in a fragmented form. A missing component is an integrative theory that attempts to explain what happens when people take intentional, effective, and responsible action without an "ego-centred" motive.

2.3 Wu Wei and the Reconfiguration of Agency

One of the key principles of classical Daoist philosophy is wu wei. In the Dao De Jing and the Zhuangzi, it is translated as "non-action," "non-forcing," or "effortless action" and seems to refer to the understanding of action, cultivation, leadership and harmony with the natural order (Ames & Hall, 2003; Kohn, 2009; Slingerland, 2003). However, modern scholarship on the concept of wu wei has come to understand it as responsive action rather than passive, and to interpret it as a way of being effective through alignment with the Dao, not by the forceful assertion of the individual will.

Slingerland (2003) sees wu wei as the action of doing without trying too hard or being overly conscious of it. Ames and Hall (2003) place it in a relational ontology – one in which humans are involved in the unfolding of relationships rather than stand-alone actors. It is relevant to self-cultivation, spontaneity, leadership, and non-coercive action, as demonstrated by Kohn (2009), Ziporyn (2009), Xing and Sims (2012), and Tan (2023). Present interpretations, however, have emphasised the attributes of Daoist action rather than the agency produced when the practice of ego-centred striving is eliminated. The unanswered question is how intentionality persists when "I am Mine" is no longer the driver of action?

2.4 Nishkama Karma and Detached Engagement

An influential description of action without attachment to action's fruits is provided in the Bhagavad Gita. It is set within the context of Karma Yoga and asks what is required of people to be morally responsible while remaining free from possessiveness, anxiety, and ego-centred desire. Gita does not call for killing the activity of the world but the change of the consciousness that gives rise to the activity (Matilal, 2002; Mohanty, 2000; Radhakrishnan, 1948).

The modern literature indicates that Krishna's discourse with Arjuna is not about the abandonment of action, but the rejection of attachment. True freedom lies in doing dharma, abandoning the belief in success and failure, and not depending on recognition (Radhakrishnan, 1948). Matilal (2002) and Mohanty (2000) explain nishkama karma as the disciplined cultivation of oneself, which releases from the identification with ego-centred desire. Ethical leadership and responsible management (Vashishtha & Gambhir, 2026) are the application of nishkama karma, dharma, and selfless service in leadership.

2.5 Comparative Philosophy and the Missing Vocabulary

Comparative philosophy is the study of the similarities and differences of traditions in answering the same sets of human questions, while maintaining conceptual coherence. It allows discussion to take place between conceptual worlds without reducing traditions to sameness or isolation (Chakrabarti, 2015; Clooney, 2010). It is essential that concepts such as Dao, wu wei, dharma, and karma cannot simply be translated from one metaphysical system to another, as this would violate the systems themselves (Ames & Hall, 2003). Thus, comparison needs to be able to play in the public light of a shared philosophical issue without obscuring the differences.

Comparative philosophy also indicates that, apart from discovering similarities, comparison can give rise to theory, as has recently been demonstrated (Ennen, 2023). The literature that has emerged so far in comparative studies of wu wei and nishkama karma has highlighted points of convergence in the ideas of 'non-attachment', 'selflessness', 'disciplined engagement', and 'freedom from possessive striving'. It is, however, largely descriptive and lacks the vocabulary to explain the common transformation in intentional agency that both traditions bring into view.

The present study aims to fill this gap by proposing a higher-order interpretive model, Post-Egoic Action. It is not a substitute for wu wei, nishkama karma, self-transcendence, or detached action. It is, however, the opposite of a self-serving and amoral action; it goes beyond the self and is based on moral responsibility. In this sense, Post-Egoic Action is a theory of transformed agency which maintains the unique commitments of Daoism and the Bhagavad Gita.

3. Methodology: Comparative Hermeneutics and Theory Generation

A comparative hermeneutic methodology is used in this study to help us see the commonalities between the two philosophical traditions, the Daoist concept of wu wei and the Bhagavad Gita's doctrine of nishkama karma, in light of a transformation in human action, while preserving their conceptual and metaphysical distinctiveness. Comparative hermeneutics is well-suited to this inquiry, as it is more than a mere comparison of ideas across traditions; it is an interpretive dialogue that fosters philosophical understanding. This perspective does not equate traditions with one another, nor does it minimise the meaning of one by reducing it to the typology of the other; rather, it recognises that the meaning of the philosophical tradition must be understood within the context of the language, culture and metaphysics in which it was expressed.

The methodological approach developed is based on the present-day comparative philosophy. Clooney (2010) asserts that it is important to engage with traditions on their own terms before drawing any broad philosophical connections. Chakrabarti (2015) argues that it is not the difference of opinion that should be forgotten; it needs to be reflected upon. In addition, Ennen (2023) proposes that comparative philosophy could generate new ideas rather than merely identifying similarities. As such, the concepts of wu wei and nishkama karma are not merely parallel but rather separate attempts to answer the same question about intentional human action.

The basic textual sources in the Daoist philosophical tradition are the Dao De Jing and the Zhuangzi, while in the Hindu philosophical tradition, the Bhagavad Gita is the primary text. These texts were chosen because they provide key statements of the concepts of wu wei and nishkama karma, and have influenced classical and contemporary interpretations. The analysis is based on established translations, authoritative commentaries, and recent research in Daoist

Post-Egoic Action: A Theory of Transformed Agency through Daoist Wu Wei and the Bhagavad Gita's Nishkama Karma studies, Bhagavad Gita scholarship, comparative philosophy, philosophy of action, leadership studies, and humanistic management.

The comparison is based on philosophical rather than superficial similarity. It is true that the two traditions have different metaphysical assumptions, ethical frameworks, and conceptions of ultimate reality, yet both question how people can be fully engaged in action without being controlled by attachment, anxiety, possessiveness, and/or self-centred striving.

Analysis was done under the four interrelated dimensions. It first explored the concept of action and agency in each tradition. Second, it examined the connection between intentionality, selfhood and the ego. Thirdly, it examined the alignment with a higher order, such as the Dao in Daoism and the dharma in the Bhagavad Gita. Fourth, it viewed transformation as a discipline, a self-cultivation process, and a spiritual development process.

The interpretative process was a rolling one. Each tradition was first studied on its own to maintain its integrity, then placed in comparative dialogue. To prevent selective parallelism, convergences and divergences were analysed together. In this process, the study developed the construct of Post-Egoic Action as its main interpretive framework. The concept is not claimed as a specific part of either tradition; it is a higher-order concept developed via comparative investigation. Preserving the unique commitments of Daoism and the Bhagavad Gita, it accounts for a common transformation in intentional agency. This study starts with the primary texts and the comparative hermeneutic analysis before it culminates in the higher-order theory of transformed agency, which is Post-Egoic Action, as illustrated in Figure 1.

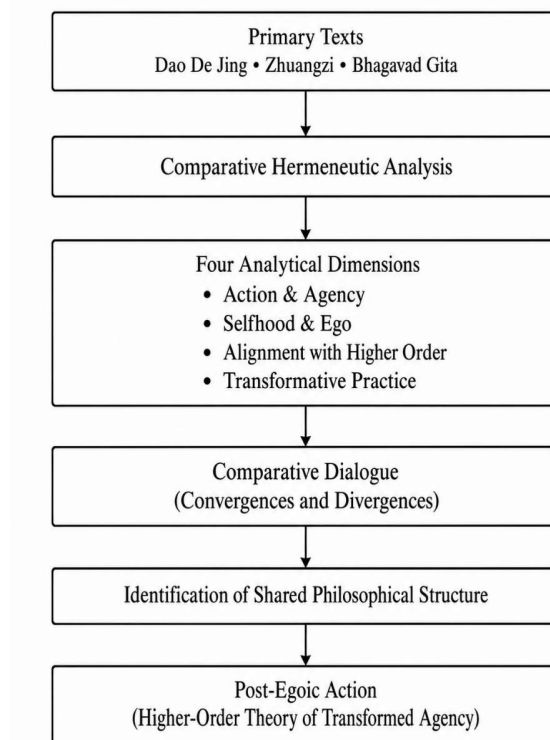


Figure 1. Comparative Hermeneutic Process for Theory Generation

4. Theory Development: Post-Egoic Action

4.1 The Philosophical Necessity of a New Theory

The analysis above reveals that what scholars have already contributed is important in providing alternative perspectives on action beyond the ego-centred striving, such as self-transcendence, detachment, embodied responsiveness, relational agency, and ethical responsibility. Similarly, Daoist wu wei and Bhagavad Gita nishkama karma are both types of action in which effectiveness, responsibility, and freedom from attachment are all present.

However, these models fall short of providing a complete account of the coherence of intentional agency beyond the presence of ego-centred motivation as the primary organising principle of agency.

This is not just a moral issue about doing something; it also concerns the way things are organised. In both traditions, action goes on when attachment to personal gain has been let go. There is no loss of responsibility, no deliberate surrender of intention and no lack of involvement with the world. What transformation is the motivating centre that action comes from? This transformation is explained in the present study by introducing a higher-order interpretive theory of transformed agency: Post-Egoic Action.

Post-Egoic Action refers to a state of deliberate agency in which actions remain purposeful, ethical, and socially motivated when the usual drivers of action (outcome, recognition, possessive self-interest) are no longer in play. The theory thus moves from evaluating action from an ethical point of view to reorganising agency from a philosophical standpoint.

4.2 Defining Post-Egoic Action

4.2.1 Construct Definition

Post-Egoic Action emerges from the comparative dialogue between Daoist *wu wei* and the Bhagavad Gita's *nishkama karma*. It does not belong to either tradition. Instead, it is a higher-order interpretive construct developed through their comparison.

The construct is not the same as a lack of action, a breakdown in intentionality, or a withdrawal from responsibility. Instead, it describes how action can remain purposeful, disciplined, responsive, and socially embedded through a new motivational architecture that is no longer organised around self-centred striving, but around participation in a broader moral, relational, or existential order. Post-Egoic Action has five interrelated characteristics.

First, it is a conscious approach. People still think, decide, and purposefully move and act, but their intentionality is no longer directed towards the personal acquisition, recognition, or affirmation of the ego.

Secondly, it requires detachment without diminishing responsibility. Detachment does not imply a lack of accountability. Action remains ethically responsible and socially involved but is no longer psychologically dependent on success, failure, or external rewards.

Thirdly, it entails relational embeddedness. The concept of agency is not only personal, but relational, institutional, community, and moral/cosmological. They participate; they are not dominated.

Fourth, it addresses responsive effectiveness. Post-Egoic Action does not mean "no action", or "no control". Effective action comes from discernment, responsiveness, and acting in tandem with the realities of a situation, not from assertive will.

Fifthly, it is an issue of transformative selfhood. In place of the self, the self is reconfigured. A more expansive sense of self, that of responsible action, emerges, rather than one centred on the self and constantly needing to be affirmed.

These qualities taken together distinguish Post-Egoic Action from detached action, selflessness or non-attachment while conceptualising a coherent form of agency as opposed to a set of desirable psychological qualities.

4.2.2 Defining Attributes

4.2.3 Distinction from Related Constructs

Post-Egoic Action is not synonymous with other related terms in philosophy, psychology and leadership research. Whereas self-transcendence refers to the state of transcending self-interest (Frankl, 2010; Wong, 2016), Post-Egoic Action concerns the structure of intentional action that follows this transcendence. It differs from detachment or non-attachment, which are characterised by non-possessiveness, in that it involves a positive form of agency that arises beyond attachment. It is not a temporary psychological state, as in flow, it is a stable philosophical attitude towards action (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). It differs from relational agency

not only in its emphasis on the social constitution of action, but also in its elucidation of the transformation of the motivational centre from which action flows.

It should be noted, however, that Post-Egoic Action is not a contradictory approach, but rather an integration to understand the relationship between these different approaches.

4.2.4 Scope of the Theory

Originally produced in the comparison of Daoism and the Bhagavad Gita, Post-Egoic Action goes beyond these philosophies. Conceptually, it can help engage with issues of agency, intentionality, ethics, and human flourishing, as it provides a language of action that is not limited to ego-centred motivation. In the field of leadership and organisational learning, it elucidates the possibility of a combination of responsibility, effectiveness and ethical motivation that is not dependent on recognition, reward or instrumental self-interest. Meanwhile, the theory is confined to a limited scope. It is not saying that Daoism and the Bhagavad Gita share the same teachings, nor that all traditions of detachment are the same.

4.3 Ontological Assumptions of Post-Egoic Action

There are four assumptions of Post-Egoic Action. In the first place, agency is not what it was; it is changing. It is not just about being self-reliant or having a rational will, but about a process of development that can be reorganised through motivation. The ability to act is not lost with the reduction of ego-centred attachment; rather, the foundation for action changes.

Secondly, the 'ego' is a motivational orientation and not the self itself. Ego is a motivational pattern characterised by attachment to results, possessiveness, self-validation, and self-affirmation. Although it is decentralised, it does not mean that the self is lost, but a more expansive agency is found.

Thirdly, human action is essentially relational. People are involved in relationships, institutions, traditions and moral and cosmological orders. In Daoism, this is manifested in harmony with the Dao, and in the Bhagavad Gita, it is expressed through action in dharma; in both cases, it is achieved by aligning with larger realities beyond the self-interest of a single individual.

Fourth, freedom is not a turning away from action, but is a change in motivation. Freedom is not to be disengaged from the moral, social or professional life. It involves being free from the addiction to desired results, appreciation and control. The motivational basis has been changed, and action becomes free and responsible.

4.4 Core Principles of Post-Egoic Action

There are five principles that are the basis of Post-Egoic Action. The first is when you are using it for a purpose, but not holding it. People do not need to feel 'ownership' of the outcomes of their meaningful actions. There is still a strong focus on purpose; however, success, recognition and achievement are no longer used as methods of self-validation.

The second one is responsibility, without ego-identification. Detachment is not an operator of unethical behaviour but, on the contrary, makes it more stable, since it relies on discrimination and commitment rather than on the promise of reward, fear, or approval.

The third is relational participation and not instrumental control. True action does not primarily occur in an era of domination of situations, but rather in an era of response and positive engagement in a relational system. Agency is no longer instrumental, but collaborative and adapting to the process.

The fourth is the continual transformation of oneself. Post-egoic agency does not occur in only one way, nor is it a state to be reached. It is developed through reflection, discipline, and the cultivation of morals. People are still open to attachment, but transformation is ongoing and repeated through continual reorientation.

It is the fifth that is thriving out of transformation. Human flourishing is not found when things are done for the best of the individual; it is found when things are done in a purposeful, responsible and relationally embedded manner. Flourishing is the result of a changed relationship rather than an end sought by the ego.

These are all indicators that Post-Egoic Action is neither passive nor anti-intentional. It maintains intention, responsibility, relational participation, self-cultivation and thriving without losing the groundedness of intent and responsibility and the relationality of participation. It clarifies how these elements work together when action is not organised primarily around the self's motivation.

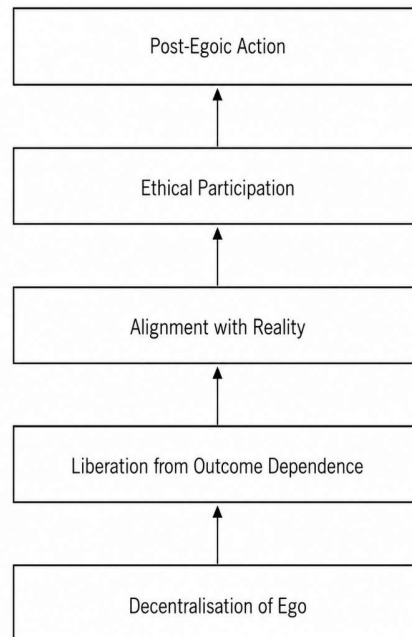


Figure 2. Foundational Structure of Post-Egoic Action

4.5 Processual Dynamics of Post-Egoic Action

The concepts of Post-Egoic Action are not individual or fixed elements but rather a set of concepts being explored and practised. Instead, they are a related developmental process that slowly shifts the human agent from ego-centred action to ethical, relational, and purposive engagement. The idea of Post-Egoic Action is not, therefore, one of a state of consciousness but one of process, of a theory of agency, as summarised in Figure 2.

It starts with an action oriented towards personal achievement, recognition, control, and attachment to desired outcomes, which is the primary organisation of conduct; it is ego-centred. Nevertheless, when the ego "takes over" as the central source of motivation and action, anxiety, possessiveness, defensiveness, and a need for others to validate one's actions and feelings often accompany it. Success, failure, praise, or recognition becomes the basis for identity, thereby decreasing the chances for an ongoing ethical freedom (Frankfurt, 1971; Taylor, 1989).

The first step to transformation is to identify attachment. At this point, people realise that they are engaging in purposeful behaviour more for the reasons it will lead to rather than the intrinsic value of the engagement itself. The recognition is vital as it brings to light the difference between doing something on purpose and doing it for one's own purposes. The traditions of both Daoism and the Bhagavad Gita regard this awareness not as a withdrawal from action but as the beginning of self-cultivation: examining the motives for action (Ames & Hall, 2003; Slingerland, 2003; Mohanty, 2000; Radhakrishnan, 1948).

Early on in recognition, the ego disperses. This is not to say that it is the erasure of the self, the denial of personal identity, or the denial of rational deliberation. Instead, it is a gradual shift in motivation towards a more re-organised self in which possessiveness becomes less. People still deliberate, choose and act intentionally, but their agency is no longer so reliant on self-assertion, personal validation, and external achievement (Slingerland, 2003; Wallace, 2023).

When the urge to action is no longer ego-driven, it takes on the characteristics of freer action that is not outcome-dependent. This is not the same as a lack of interest in consequences or

lower standards of excellence. The opposite of that is people taking responsibility for their actions, but not being psychologically motivated by success, failure, reward or recognition. The realisation of freedom is in both wu wei and nishkama karma, not in rejection of action but in change of action and one's relationship to action and its consequences (Matilal, 2002; Mohanty, 2000).

Escaping from outcome dependence allows for alignment with reality rather than self-fulfilment. In Daoism, it is by following the Dao; in the Bhagavad Gita, it is through disciplined participation in dharma. While both traditions have different metaphysical frameworks, they indicate that an empowered agency may find coherence when it acts with an orientation towards realities larger than a single self-interest, while still holding responsibility (Ames & Hall, 2003; Chakrabarti, 2015).

This is a movement that comes to an ethical participation, which is the highest form of Post-Egoic Action. Detachment does not lead to passivity but to a deeper involvement in the world with responsibility. Ethical participation is a socially situated, discriminative action not done for the sake of reward, status, or self-validation. Responsibility is transformed into agency, and action is from ego-centred striving to ethical responsiveness and relational participation (Pirson, 2023; Huijser & Nullens, 2024).

Most importantly, this process is not linear and/or closed. Human agency is also still in play, and when new situations present themselves, the feelings of attachment, anxiety and self-centred striving may be triggered once again. Therefore, transformed agency can be understood as a continuous process of moral evolution rather than a static mindset or a higher spiritual level (Frankl, 1966; Wong, 2016).

Accordingly, Post-Egoic Action is a dynamic theory of motivational transformation. It explains how intentional agency progressively shifts from ego-centred striving towards ethically responsible participation, integrating insights from Daoist and Bhagavad Gita traditions while extending beyond both. The processual development of Post-Egoic Action is illustrated in Figure 3.

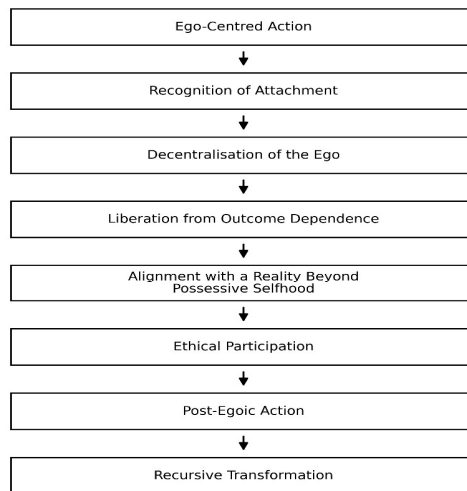


Figure 3. Processual Dynamics of Post-Egoic Action

4.6 Theoretical Propositions

The theory of Post-Egoic Action proposes five conceptual propositions that build upon the ontological assumptions, core principles and developmental process discussed above. The ideas presented in these propositions are the central tenets of the theory and serve as a basis for further philosophical development and operationalisation in the empirical realm.

Proposition 1: Agency Beyond Ego

After ego-centred motivation is dropped, intention remains coherent through other modes of organisation such as ethical responsibility, relational participation and intrinsic commitment and not simply by means of possessive self-interest. Therefore, it would not be correct to equate the reduction of ego-centred striving with the loss of agency, but rather its metamorphosis.

Proposition 2: Responsibility Without Attachment

Freedom from attachment to outcomes increases ethical responsibility, not because it reduces that responsibility, but because the focus of action shifts from external approval or personal affirmation to informed choice and determination. Detachment is not passivity or being insensitive, but rather a more solid foundation for responsible action.

Proposition 3: Relational Effectiveness

Post-Egoic Action occurs when individual control is not asserted, but rather, responsive participation takes place in relational and moral settings. Successful action is therefore seen as intelligent participation within complex relational systems, and is adaptive, collaborative and contextually responsive.

Proposition 4: Transformation as Development

Post-Egoic Action can best be seen as a developmental posture in which an agent's transformation occurs continually through ongoing self-cultivation rather than as a state or a permanent personal achievement. Transformation is a continuous, not definitive, process, as people continually negotiate among attachment, responsibility, and ethical discernment.

Proposition 5: Flourishing Through Transformed Agency

Human flourishing emerges as a consequence of transformed agency rather than as the primary objective of action. It arises through sustained participation in purposeful, ethically responsible,

Moreover, relationally embedded action whose motivational centre has shifted beyond ego-centred striving.

Collectively, these propositions translate the philosophical foundations of Post-Egoic Action into a coherent conceptual framework. They offer a systematic account of transformed agency and identify directions for future research across philosophy, leadership studies, organisational behaviour, ethics, psychology, and humanistic management. The central theoretical propositions of Post-Egoic Action are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of the Theoretical Propositions of Post-Egoic Action

Proposition	Central Claim	Theoretical Contribution
P1	Agency remains coherent beyond ego-centred motivation.	Reframes the nature of intentional agency
P2	Responsibility is strengthened through non-attachment	Reinterprets ethical responsibility
P3	Effectiveness emerges through relational participation.	Redefines effective action
P4	Transformed agency is developmental.	Positions the theory as processual rather than static.
P5	Flourishing is an outcome of transformed agency	Links agency to human flourishing

5. Theoretical Integration and Contributions**5.1 Reinterpreting Wu Wei through the Lens of Post-Egoic Action**

The concept of Post-Egoic Action offers a new perspective on the meaning of wu wei in philosophy. It has been demonstrated in modern scholarship that wu wei is not passivity and

withdrawal, but a way of acting that is responsive, skilful and harmonious (Ames & Hall, 2003; Slingerland, 2003; Kohn, 2009). These interpretations provide understandings of the experiential and ethical nature of Daoist action, but Post-Egoic Action develops these understandings by elucidating the change in agency that enables such action.

Through this perspective, the essence of wu wei is not that there is no effort but that the sense of self is not the central focus of action. Daoist literature warns against striving too hard, overthinking, and forcing one's will on nature. This is sometimes interpreted today as a rejection of the idea of instrumental rationality (Ames & Hall, 2003; Slingerland, 2003) or coercive action. The current framework extends this reading by suggesting that Daoist philosophy implies a shift in motivational architecture. Purposiveness still happens, but it will increasingly move away from the self-asserting, possessive, and ongoing affirmation of the ego.

This is also an interpretation of what it means for something to be spontaneous but also intentional. Spontaneity, known as *ziran*, is often interpreted as uninformed action, and that may lead one to think that action without purpose is a form of wu wei. In Post-Egoic Action, spontaneity does not replace intentionality; rather, it is the full expression of re-organised agency. The ease of action is not a result of the absence of intention, but rather of the absence of separate deliberation and of a response to the embodied stimulus. Action comes effortlessly, not because of a loss of intention, but because of the integration of deliberation and embodied response, which is no longer divided by attachment to control or personal validation.

Another concept of the Dao, as explained in Post-Egoic Action, is alignment with the Dao. It is fitting that existing scholarship on wu wei views it as a more harmonious approach to participating in the unfolding processes of reality rather than controlling them (Ames & Hall, 2003; Kohn, 2009). The present theory holds this harmony to be a transformation of the motivational centre of agency to transcend possessive selfhood. Being aligned with the Dao is, then, more than just the harmony of metaphysics; it is a shift of the will's focus from the isolated ego to something beyond it. The effective movement from the source of control to the source of participation, from the source of assertion to the source of responsiveness, from the source of possessiveness to the source of relational attunement.

This is also a model for Daoist leadership. In organisations, wu wei leadership is sometimes viewed as non-coercive, humble, adaptable and trust-based (Xing & Sims, 2012; Tan, 2023). Post-Egoic Action proposes that these behaviours are not just techniques, but an expression of a changed agency. When leaders engage in post-egoic action, it is not just a decrease in controlling behaviour; it is a shift in the way in which responsibility is organised, that is, a motivational shift in which responsibility is not organised around authority,

recognition or dominance. So wu wei can be read as 'action without effort' and also as a 'philosophy of agency transformation'.

5.2 Reinterpreting Nishkama Karma through the Lens of Post-Egoic Action

The Bhagavad Gita's concept of nishkama karma can equally be seen as an explanation of Post-Egoic Action. Today, the expression nishkama karma is understood to mean action without attachment, ethical responsibility, and proper participation in one's activities related to dharma. (Matilal, 2002; Mohanty, 2000; Radhakrishnan, 1948). Such interpretations have led to the conclusion that the Gita does not advocate passivity or dependence on reward. The current framework takes this further by exploring the question of what it means for intentional agency to stay committed to ethical action when attachment to the results is sacrificed.

The main contribution of nishkama karma is that responsibility is not related to possessiveness, as seen through the lens of Post-Egoic Action. Krishna does not tell Arjuna to stop doing what he does, but he tells him to perform his dharma even if he is uncertain, even if he has emotional conflicts, even if he does not gain anything from it. Interpretations such as detached engagement are rightly emphasised, as are others, and they are important. This is further explored in Post-Egoic Action, which reveals that the Gita concerns a change in the motivational structure of agency itself. The action is as intentional and as serious as ever, but its focus moves beyond "self" and "self-ego" to a responsibility grounded in a moral order, not in self.

Another dimension of the duty/freedom connection is highlighted in this reading. From several moral perspectives, responsibility is regarded as a limitation on individual freedom. The Bhagavad Gita takes a slightly different approach: freedom is not achieved by avoiding responsibility; it is achieved by releasing oneself from the bondage of attachment to the results of action. The paradox is explained with Post-Egoic Action, which differentiates action from the motivation that sustains it. People are still engaged in action but no longer determined by the fear of failure, fear of success, fear of recognition or fear of reward.

This also provides a clear understanding of dharma's role. The current scholarly understanding of dharma is as either moral duty, righteous conduct, or involvement in cosmic order (Matilal, 2002; Mohanty, 2000). Moreover, post-Egoic Action states that dharma gives the orienting context to which agency is added as a coherence, not within the space of the possessive self. Ethical responsibility is not just about performing a duty; it is a state of being in alignment.

This retranslation also serves as the basis for the inspirational leadership teaching based on the Gita. In recent years, nishkama karma has been used in ethics in leadership (Rana et al., 2026), Servant leadership (Aithal & Srinivasan, 2025), Resilience (Hegde & Nayak, 2025), and Responsible management (Hegde & Nayak, 2025). Post-Egoic Action goes beyond behavioural and normative leadership; it is a motivational shift that changes the reasons for taking responsibility: status, authority, and reward are no longer the basis for action. So, nishkama karma can be interpreted as detached action, and also as a philosophy of a changed mindset toward action.

5.3 Comparative Synthesis: Towards a Unified Theory of Transformed Agency

The nature of wu wei and the Bhagavad Gita's nishkama karma, as shown above, is that they share a common philosophical insight, while maintaining their separate metaphysical starting points. Both reject this assumption that 'meaningful action' has to be based on 'possessive self-interest,' attachment to 'results,' or 'egoic assertion. Rather, they offer ways of deliberate interaction where responsibility, effectiveness, and freedom are harmonised beyond selfish motivations.

Meanwhile, they stay on a different road. The former is about spontaneous harmony, non-coercive responsiveness and conforming to the Dao. At the same time, the latter is about disciplined responsibility, dharma fulfilling and breaking free from attachment to the fruits of action. These differences do not impede comparison; rather, the transformed agency can arise from various orientations of the metaphysical and the ethical.

These traditions do not coincide in doctrine. Nevertheless, both illuminate a broader shift in the organisation of human agency. This shared transformation is referred to as Post-Egoic Action. It explains how agency remains purposeful, ethical and socially embedded even when ego-centred motivation is no longer the primary organising principle of action. Table 2 compares Post-Egoic Action with wu wei and nishkama karma.

Table 2. Application of the Theory of Post-Egoic Action: A Comparative Interpretation of Daoist Wu Wei and Nishkama Karma

Foundational Principle of Post-Egoic Action	Daoist Wu Wei	Bhagavad Gita's Nishkama Karma	Theoretical Interpretation
Decentralisation of the Ego	The sage relinquishes forceful self-assertion and acts through harmony with the Dao. The ego no longer dominates action.	Arjuna is encouraged to transcend ahamkara (ego-consciousness) and perform dharma without self-identification.	Authentic agency persists after the ego ceases to function as the primary organising principle of action.
Liberation from Outcome Dependence	Effective action arises through non-coercive responsiveness rather	One performs action without attachment to its fruits while	Meaningful action is sustained by commitment rather

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	than compulsive control of outcomes.	remaining fully committed to duty (Bhagavad Gita 2.47–48).	than psychological dependence upon success, failure, or recognition.
Alignment with a Reality Beyond Possessive Selfhood	Action is oriented through participation in the Dao, the spontaneous order of reality.	Action is aligned with dharma and devotion to Krishna within a moral and spiritual order.	Distinct metaphysical foundations produce a common structural transformation in the source of intentional action.
Ethical Participation	Responsive engagement preserves harmony through humility, discernment, and non-domination.	Ethical responsibility is expressed through disciplined fulfilment of one's svadharma without attachment.	Transformed action culminates in responsible participation rather than withdrawal from the world.
Overall Contribution	Wu Wei demonstrates spontaneous, non-coercive participation.	Nishkama Karma demonstrates disciplined, duty-oriented participation.	Post-Egoic Action explains the structural convergence of transformed action while preserving the philosophical distinctiveness of each tradition.

In the comparison, it is found that both traditions start from the same diagnosis of the condition of humanity. Ego-centred striving, attachment to outcomes, and excessive identification with achievement are recognised as causes of suffering and as blocks to real flourishing. However, neither the Daoist wu wei nor the Bhagavad Gita's nishkama karma preaches retreat from action. The two traditions do not see freedom as the withdrawal from the world, but as a change, like the motivation for doing a thing, for acting. However, the psychological framework of action is fundamentally changed as action, responsibility, and ethical participation go on.

Although converged, paths for transformation are nonetheless philosophically different. In the Daoist wu wei, the concept of agency is revealed through responsive participation in the processes of the Dao, emphasising spontaneous action, relational attunement, and non-coercive action. The Bhagavad Gita's nishkama karma, on the other hand, places transformation in the context of committed adherence to dharma (one's duty), an emphasis on ethical responsibility, self-control and aversion to the results of action. One tradition is based on spontaneous harmony and the other on disciplined responsibility. The differences are not a contradiction but rather an indication that transformed agency could occur through several orientations of the metaphysical and the ethical that can be similar in the reorganisation of intentional action.

This distinction is important to the theory presented in this study. Comparative scholarship has largely been read into these traditions in terms of thematic similarities, with detachment, selflessness, harmony, or non-attachment as the usual readings. Comparisons like these can be helpful, but may be limited to description. The analysis of the underlying structure of agency presented here, rather, compares the concepts that reveal it. It is then that the focus shifts from the traditions' teachings to how they reshape intentional action. At this deeper level, wu wei and nishkama karma do not seem to be in opposition or recite a very different version of the same universal teaching, but rather complement each other as philosophical approaches to the same structural transformation.

These traditions are not merged into a single philosophical system within the framework of Post-Egoic Action. These unique conceptions of selfhood and cosmology, of liberation and of

ethical responsibility, are intact. Post-Egoic Action is not a merging or a cancelling out of differences but is rather a higher-order interpretation. It is a tool to elaborate on the change in agency evident in their dialogue, not to replace wu wei or nishkama karma. The framework introduces a vocabulary for thinking about this transformation, thereby allowing these traditions to be productively compared philosophically while remaining conceptually intact.

5.4 Theoretical Contributions of Post-Egoic Action

The theory of Post-Egoic Action extends debates in comparative philosophy, philosophy of action, leadership studies, and humanistic management, thereby making a contemporary scholarly contribution. While it has been developed through a comparative discussion between Daoist wu wei and the Bhagavad Gita's nishkama karma, it has broader significance than merely interpreting these traditions. It provides a new level of language for comprehending transformed agency, synthesises disjointed scholarship, and demonstrates the potential of comparative philosophy to produce new theoretical thinking, not just the recognition of commonalities across traditions.

5.4.1 Reframing Human Agency

The first contribution of Post-Egoic Action is the notion of reconceptualised Human Agency. Classical and contemporary theories tend to look at agency in terms of autonomy of will, purposeful deliberation, identity in practice, or rational self-direction (Frankfurt, 1971; Korsgaard, 1996; Ricoeur, 1992; Taylor, 1989). These views are somewhat conflicting but tend to hold that a person's own self is the main organising axis for intentional action. Post-Egoic Action is an extension of this, in proposing that agency does not cease when ego-centred motivation is given up. Rather, agency can be redefined in terms of ethical responsibility, relational participation and a willingness to be in the world of things other than one's own possession.

5.4.2 Extending the Philosophy of Action

The second contribution is in the domain of the philosophy of action, expanding discussions there. The existing scholarship on intention, autonomy, practical reasoning, and moral responsibility (Bratman, 1987; Wallace, 2023), as well as more recent studies on relational autonomy and socially embedded agency (Lee, 2023), have all contributed to understanding these concepts. However, little consideration has been paid to the continuity of conscious action beyond the point of attachment to personal consequences. Post-Egoic Action aims to fill this void by considering transformed agency as an alternative to intentional action, rather than as the elimination of agency. It reveals that responsibility, deliberation, and meaningful interaction remain available even in the absence of egocentrism and the desire to excel.

5.4.3 Advancing Comparative Philosophy as Theory Generation

The third contribution comes in the methodological field. Comparative scholarship sometimes highlights similarities or similarities can be stressed as "irreducible differences" (Chakrabarti, 2015; Clooney, 2010). Both are useful, but comparison will not generally be generative. A second approach to this is offered in Post-Egoic Action, which relies on comparative hermeneutics to advance conceptual innovation. In the dialogue between wu wei and nishkama karma, there is a higher-order theoretical construct that neither tradition can express alone. Still, each of them can do it in its transformation of agency. The study corroborates the argument that comparative philosophy can serve as a means of developing philosophical theory in this regard.

5.4.4 Integrating Fragmented Literatures on Human Flourishing

The fourth contribution concerns the integration of the scattered literature on human flourishing. There have been significant studies on self-transcendence, detachment, relational agency, embodied cognition, flourishing, and humanistic management, which have yielded rich but disjointed insights into human development (Frankl, 1966; Wong, 2016; Gallagher, 2017; Pirson, 2023). The literature covers important aspects of flourishing, but it provides little information on the process of change in agency that links the two. The common philosophical language of self-transcendence, non-attachment, relational participation, and ethical responsibility is motivational transformation, as defined in Post-Egoic Action.

5.4.5 Extending Leadership and Humanistic Management

Lastly, Post-Egoic Action serves leadership and humanistic management. Recent scholarship has suggested that the ideal of leadership is not only instrumental (as in doing something well) but also based on dignity, relational responsibility, ethical purpose and human flourishing (Pirson, 2023; Huijser & Nullens, 2024). The current theory enhances this discussion by adding insights into the motivational change that occurs in responsible leadership. Ethical leadership is not just a collection of behaviours, competencies or management practices, but is the result of an organisation of agency that transcends possessive self-interest. Ethical decision-making, relational trust, stewardship and organisational flourishing are thus the outcomes of the transformation of agency rather than imposed ideals on the organisation.

Taken as a whole, these essays make Post-Egoic Action more than a comparison between two philosophies. The theory provides a conceptual language for transformed agency, an extension of the philosophical language of action, a theoretical contribution to comparative philosophy, a theoretical contribution to the literature on human flourishing and a philosophical basis for responsible leadership and humanistic management. The study goes beyond the theme of comparison to the concept of innovation. It demonstrates the potential of intercultural philosophical dialogue to produce new theoretical approaches for both philosophical research and interdisciplinary studies. From the comparative philosophical dialogue to the generation of theory and scholarly work is described in Figure 4

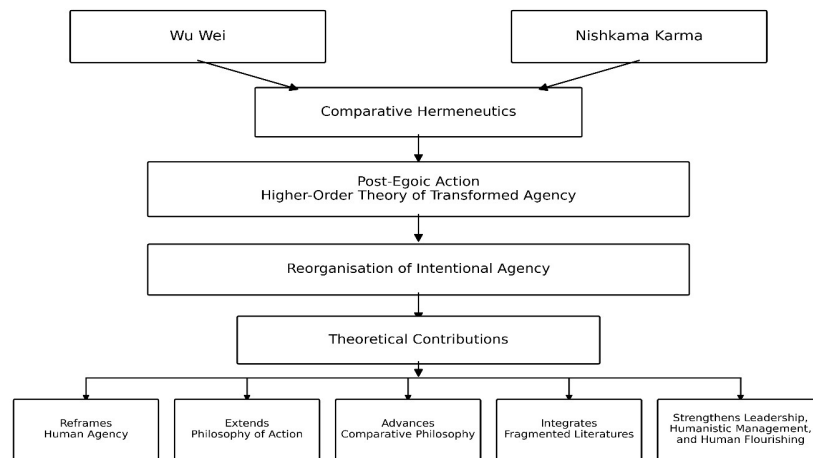


Figure 4. From Comparative Philosophy to Theory: The Development and Scholarly Contributions of Post-Egoic Action

6. Conclusion

This research began with the question of how humans can be purposeful and responsible without being motivated by an "ego-centred" motive. The analysis was carried out through a comparative discourse between the Daoist wu wei and the Bhagavad Gita's nishkama karma, which demonstrated that both traditions have demonstrated the effectiveness of action without possessiveness, attachment to results, or constant self-assertion. The study posited Post-Egoic Action as a second-order theory of transformed agency, grounded in this insight. The framework analyses wu wei and nishkama karma as two separate practices, while seeing the intentional agency as being re-organised in both, as made apparent by their dialogue. It demonstrates how meaningfully, ethically and socially accountable action can be coherent even when ego-centred motivation is not the basis for organising them. By virtue of this, the study not only contributes to the discussion of agency, comparative philosophy, philosophy of action, leadership, humanistic management, and human flourishing, but also brings them into the conversation. More broadly, it shows how to expand the scope of comparative philosophy beyond a mere focus on similarities and differences to create new concepts. Finally, Post-Egoic

Action invites further exploration of steps to become responsible for one's behaviour, not by increasing one's egocentricity, but by moving towards a progressive decentralisation of the ego.

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