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Knowledge without Effort: Epistemological Aspects of Wu Wei and Sprezzatura

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Abstract:

In most contexts, a good way for scholars to enhance the credibility of their findings is by emphasising the amount of effort that they have expended in reaching them. Scholars may accentuate the painstaking way in which they have followed protocols and checked for sources of error, for example. Some lines of thinking in various cultural settings, by contrast, suggest that conduct is most effective when it is uncontrived and effortless. Relevant concepts include *wu wei* in ancient Chinese thought and *sprezzatura* in Renaissance European court culture. In this talk, I will explore the cognitive and epistemic applications of these concepts, discussing how underplaying the amount of expended effort can allow a researcher to heighten the objectivity of a result. This rhetorical strategy of effortlessness has both rational and emotional aspects.