



‘Following the Way of Heaven’: Exemplarism, Emulation, and Daoism*

ABSTRACT: *Many ancient traditions recognise certain people as exemplars of virtue, the models for the good or flourishing human life. Certain traditions, however, incorporate a cosmic mode of emulation, where the virtues are manifestations, in human form, of qualities or aspects of the ground or source of the world. I defend this claim using the sustained case study of the forms of Daoist exemplarity found in the Book of Zhuangzi, then consider the charge that the aspiration to cosmic emulation is inhumane. It emerges that there are forms of emulation where the ultimate model for the good or flourishing life as manifested by the exemplar is nothing human.*

KEYWORDS: Daoism, exemplars, virtue, Zagzebski, Zhuangzi

Exemplars and emulation

Central to many of the world’s ancient philosophical traditions are exemplars—persons who exemplify a life characterized by aspiration to, or attainment of, a set of moral or spiritual goods. Such exemplars fall into broad types, including moral heroes, spiritual teachers, and philosophical sages, who function within their respective communities as living symbols to inspire and guide others in the pursuit of a good life. Within recent years, exemplarism, as it may be called, has been most fully explored by Linda Zagzebski (2017); in *Exemplarist Moral Theory* she develops an account of moral formation built on encounters with exemplars. Such encounters with exemplars provide the material and motivation for developing oneself into a morally or spiritually admirable, flourishing person.

A main concept in Zagzebski’s account of the exemplarist process of moral formation is *emulation*, ‘a form of imitation in which the emulated person is perceived as a model in some respects’ (2017: 131). To emulate *x* is to take *x* as a model for oneself through active imitation of some or all of *x*’s qualities or characteristics as a way of acquiring them for oneself. A person may be an exemplar of a virtue, a role, or a way of life, providing practical guidance and, in some cases, theoretical instruction, too. Within the ancient Greek tradition,

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exemplars often articulated philosophical visions of the good life to lend depth and cogency to certain ways of acting—a theme of Pierre Hadot's (1995) classic study, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*. But exemplarism is also evident in ancient Indian and Chinese cultures, too, where yogis, gurus, sages, and other persons act as encounterable objects of imitation. The exemplars of the Buddhist tradition, for instance, include monastics, lamas, enlightened *bodhisattvas*, and Zen masters (see Kidd 2017, 2018).

There are two lacunae in Zagzebski's account, which become evident once we look to other moral and spiritual traditions, Eastern and Western, that include exemplars. First, there is not a set of detailed accounts of the character and comportment of the exemplars, descriptions of their attitudes, behavior, demeanor, gestures, moods, ways of speaking, and their general 'way of life', as Amy Olberding (2012) documents in the case of Kongzi as depicted in the *Lunyu*. Crucially, this must include depictions of the difficulties, frustrations, and pains the exemplars encounter and respond to in their efforts to achieve or maintain exemplarity (see Kidd 2019). Second, a set of emulative practices that aspirants ought to follow in their efforts to model themselves on their respective exemplars, without which the aspiration to emulation would be idle. After all, emulation can take general forms, such as *habitation* and *observation*, but also specific forms in particular traditions. Buddhist monastics, for instance, have a practice of scrutinizing the comportment of *kalyāṇamitra* (roughly, 'morally beautiful friends'), involving circumambulating them, scrutinizing the details of their voice and manner, and committing these to memory (cf. Kidd 2017: §4).

Consulting other traditions that include exemplars also indicates another feature of Zagzebski's exemplarism that invites attention. All of the exemplars she mentions are *human persons*, whether historical and contemporary figures, such as Kongzi or Jean Vanier, or legendary or fictional characters (see Zagzebski 2017: chs. 3–5). Such figures are deeply impressive human beings, for sure, although exemplarism should also recognize the wider array of more quotidian exemplars, those less famous but no less admirable or outstanding—the wise friend, generous colleague, or selfless caregiver. The focus on human exemplars makes sense, too, insofar as it naturally fits Zagzebski's focus on interpersonal emulation, on admiration as the primary form of emotional response to exemplars, and on the processes of moral education, for instance, between children and adults. Indeed, some may wonder what other models of virtue there could be, other than human beings whose life or conduct invites admiration and sustains emulation.

Without denying the centrality of human exemplars as concrete models of virtue and excellences, there is a further possibility: that something other than a person could function as a model of virtues or excellences and of a mode of emulation whose ultimate object is nonpersonal. In certain spiritual traditions, we find a range of objects of emulation, including both human persons and nonhuman objects, the latter identified as the ground or source of reality, of the world as experienced. Borrowing a favorite term of the Stoics, this can be called a *cosmic mode of emulation*. In its general form, an aspirant emulates the ground or source of the world, whose excellent qualities or features, when embodied by a human being, manifest as virtues, *de*, or other forms of excellence. In this case, certain of

the virtues of an exemplar are, therefore, emulations of features or qualities of the cosmos, of whatever is understood, within the terms of those traditions, as the fundamental nature or source of the world.

The aim of this paper is to establish the existence of this cosmic mode of emulation by demonstrating its presence and importance in the form of Daoism expressed in *The Book of Zhuangzi*, whose first seven ‘Inner Chapters’ are attributed to Zhuangzi (ca. 369–286 BCE). The other twenty-five chapters are works of multiple authors and are responses to and receptions of the main text, offering commentary and developing themes. There are also cosmically emulative themes in the other text associated with early Daoism, the *Daodejing*, ‘The Classic of the Way and its Power (or Virtue)’, attributed to a legendary figure, Laozi, and dating to at least the fourth century BCE. Despite their shared themes and concerns, though, these two texts differ substantially, only being classified together as ‘Daoist’—not a term used or recognized at the time—by later scholars. I therefore focus on Zhuangist Daoism, with only occasional references, as and when appropriate, to the *Daodejing*.

Studying forms of cosmic emulation across exemplarist traditions can involve a set of different strategies because these forms will differ in their conceptions of exemplarity, virtue, and the relation of these to the ground or source of the world. An important strategy is what one might call the *parallelist* strategy, of identifying and exploring parallels between the virtues of an exemplar and the qualities of the cosmos—ones too striking to be dismissed as coincidental, especially within traditions including systematic theoretical superstructures. My proposal is that a tradition that incorporates a cosmic mode of emulation will contain substantial parallels between the admirable qualities of the exemplar and the excellent or characteristic qualities of the ground or source of the world. Such parallels occur because the exemplar succeeds at emulating those qualities, manifesting as virtues or excellences, typically by engaging in a set of emulative practices, certain ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that enable them to emulate the way of the world, as Daoists might put it. If so, the existence of these types of exemplarity shows that there are forms of exemplarism where the object of emulation is not in any way a person.

Daoism and *dao*

Exemplarism has deep roots within the ancient Chinese philosophical tradition, which offers a diverse set of objects and practices of emulation. Confucianism enjoins emulation of many different persons, ranging from one’s parents and ancestors, the emperor, the ancient Sage Kings, and such exemplar-types as the ‘consummate person’ (*jūnzǐ*) and the sage (*shèngren*). Throughout its texts, such as the *Analects Lunyu*, there are descriptions of the character and conduct of such exemplars, emulation of whom is presented as a primary practice of moral and social development (*dejiào*). The normative and persuasive significance of these features are best articulated using an exemplarist framework, as demonstrated compellingly by Amy Olberding (2012).

Within Confucianism, the main focus is interpersonal emulation of human persons. A single remark in the *Lunyu* (5.12) refers to the ‘Way of Heaven’

(*Tiandao*), one of two subjects on which Kongzi refused to speak, the other being human nature (*xing*). Later Confucians, in particular Mengzi, went on to develop an ideal of the ruler as the ‘Son of Heaven’ (*Tianzi*), whose mandate to rule derives from displaying what Joshua Brown (2019) calls ‘filial devotion’ to the rhythms and patterns of *Tiandao*, the Way of Heaven. But devotion is not emulation: while devotion often entails a transformation of oneself, this need not occur by modelling oneself on the person to whom one is devoted. Similarly, the ideal rulers could, as Julia Ching (1997: ch. 2) argues, be exemplary insofar as they ‘mediate’ between heaven and earth. But such mediation does not require the ruler to emulate heaven, if only because the activity of mediating is often easier when one is significantly different from what one is mediating between.

Cosmic emulation therefore requires a more intimate form of relationship between the exemplar and the emulated than is captured by concepts such as devotion and mediation. It requires a more substantive process of modeling, where the qualities of the emulated state or indicate the virtues or excellences that the emulator ought to possess. The object of the emulation is a model although not necessarily a total model, complete in every detail. What is being modeled is a general set of qualities and a ‘character’, which, in the case of Daoism, is expressed figuratively in the talk of the Dao as gentle, spontaneous, and noncontending. This intimate sort of cosmic emulation is evident in the *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi*, as suggested by David E. Cooper (2012).

Initial problems arise, though, since the central term, Dao, requires careful handling. The Chinese term, *dao*, has dynamic and nominal forms, referring to a ‘way’ or ‘course’ as well as to the activities of following a way or making a path. Within ancient Chinese culture, there were *dao*—ways—for activities from singing and dressing to practicing archery and living one’s life, bound up into a certain way of life. Although the *Lunyu* refers once to the Way of Heaven, the term *dao* acquired deepened and extended forms within the *Daodejing*. The Way now became the ineffable source of the world that ‘cannot be named’, ‘generates’ the ‘myriad things,’ and gives them their natures or potentialities (*Daodejing*: 1, 10; hereinafter: DDJ). The sage described, albeit sparsely and poetically, is a model of a life that is ‘on the Way’, figuratively depicted as water: ceaselessly flowing, adapting to what it encounters rather than contending with things, nourishing the creatures of the world, and flowing down to the lowest places, thereby evincing virtues such as constancy, gentleness, and humility. By cultivating and exercising these virtues (*de*) in his own life, the sage ‘joins with the world’ (DDJ 35, 49). In the *Daodejing*, we therefore see parallels between the virtues of the sage and the qualities of Dao, consistent with its explicit injunction to human beings to try to emulate or ‘model oneself’ on Dao, to ‘follow the Way of Heaven’ (DDJ 9).

Unfortunately, the *Daodejing* lacks the dense, detailed descriptions of the character and comportment of its sages, and it does not stipulate a complex set of emulative practices. In itself this may not be problematic because some aspirants may prefer fairly sparse sketches of what the life of a sage is like to denser, more meticulous exercises in ‘moral portraiture’ (Olberding 2012: 85), especially given the ancient Chinese aesthetic taste for suggestiveness rather than definiteness (Gu 2003). Still, a need for detailed practical instruction may trump aesthetic

preferences, especially for so different a task as attaining exemplarity. If so, the lack of dense, detailed descriptions of the everyday comportment of sages might disappoint, as will the *Daodejing*'s failure to specify similarly detailed emulative practices, performance in and of which enables aspirants to model themselves on the Way. To be sure, there are remarks to the effect that a sage 'abides in the practice of not acting' (*wu-wei*) by acting in ways that are supple, adaptive, unconstrained by artificial imperatives and priorities (DDJ 2, 77–79). An aspirant needing more, however, would have to turn elsewhere, namely, to the *Zhuangzi*.

The *Zhuangzi* offers vivid descriptions of 'true' or 'genuine' persons (*zhen ren*), exemplars of lives of the spontaneity, responsiveness, and mindfulness that mark out a person 'on the Way' (*Zhuangzi*: 6; hereinafter: Z). Some of the best-known are the butcher Cook Ding, a bell-stand maker, an elderly man swimming in the torrent beneath a waterfall, and a hunchback skilled at catching cicadas—all of whom 'fathom the real character of life' (Z 3, 19). Such people are quite unlike the subtle, unobtrusive sage-kings of the *Daodejing*, since their activities and lives are ordinary and humble, focused on practical activities—carving, swimming—without any pretension to gain influence, let alone rule the state. Indeed, *Zhuangzi* openly derides being 'ambitious' and 'aggressively proactive' as a 'sham Virtuosity', since a true person's guiding concern is 'rectifying himself', not trying to 'rule anything outside himself' (Z 7).

The question is whether the *Zhuangist* exemplars are emulating Dao, in the sense of using it as a model for the *de*—virtues, potencies, dispositions—that make them exemplary. An initial difficulty is the ineffability of Dao, which is affirmed in the famous opening line of the *Daodejing*—'the true Way cannot be spoken of'—and echoed in *Zhuangzi*'s warning that whatever is said is 'merely how the Course [*dao*] is described . . . not the Course itself' (Z 22), something neatly captured by Alan Watts's translation of that opening line: 'The course that can be discoursed is not the true Course' (in Allan 1997: 63). Although Dao's ineffability is argued for on various grounds, what each ground rules out is the use of literal, propositional language, which crucially keeps open various roles for more figurative, metaphorical language. Indeed, the *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi* extensively employ allusive, poetic styles, and metaphors that serve to evoke, intimate, or attune one to Dao (see Harrison 2015 and Møllgard 2007: ch.5). Dao is not an entity object or god with will, purposes, or desires that can be identified and theorized. It is, as the *Zhuangzi* puts it, the active 'wellspring' that 'gives forth' the 'ways' of 'the myriad things', not 'something that causes the world'. Dao is formless and therefore not some very striking thing or being, but rather that which 'forms forms' and 'things things' (Z 17, 22, 25). These uses of figurative language continues, with the *Zhuangzi* offering that the Way is 'handed down but not received', 'apprehended but not seen', 'above the highest point without being high', 'prior to Heaven and Earth without being long-lasting' (Z 6).

To understand better the relation of the *Zhuangist* exemplar to Dao, we should focus on the theme of *spontaneity* (*ziran*, literally 'self-so-ness'), the primary Daoist virtue, for this is the most important characteristic of *zhen ren* and Dao alike. Edward Slingerland (2006: 4) remarks that being 'fully in harmony' with Dao requires living in a way that is 'completely spontaneous'. What that term

captures is a set of virtues or dispositions that are qualities of Dao as manifested in human form, preeminently in the conduct and lives of the *zhen ren*.

Spontaneity

Ziran is typically translated as ‘spontaneity’ and names a cluster of capacities and dispositions, but it is more literally rendered as ‘self-so-ness’. The mode of spontaneity admired is not that of caprice, passionate impulse, or thoughtless reactivity, since, as A. C. Graham (1989: 189) emphasizes, the Zhuangist exemplars are often acutely concentrated on the task at hand. Cook Ding, for instance, ‘comes to a halt’ at ‘gnarled joints of bone’, relying not on ‘mere skill’, but the ‘promptings of the spirit’, until—suddenly—the ox lies ‘dismembered’ at his feet (Z 3). Asked to explain his preternatural skill, the old man swimming in a pool under a waterfall, too turbulent even for the fish, replies that he ‘had no way’, but would simply ‘enter with the inflow and emerge with the outflow’, to ‘follow the Way of the water’, rather than try to ‘impose’ his own way upon it (Z 17). Spontaneity in the relevant sense is a supple responsiveness, apt to be spoiled by processes of analyzing possibilities, weighing options, and applying rules.

Since spontaneity has a special significance to the Zhuangist exemplars, it offers the best place to look, as it were, for evidence of the cosmic mode of emulation. The *Daodejing* explicitly states that the sage, by ‘following the way of the earth’, thereby ‘follows the way of *dao*’, which itself ‘follows the way of spontaneity’ (D: 25). If so, we ought to be able to find in the character and comportment of *zhen ren* specific parallels with the way. To do this, we can look for more specific parallels between figuratively rendered attributes of Dao and a set of virtues of spontaneity. To start with, there are what we might call virtues of impartiality, which emulate Dao, from whose perspective, nothing is ‘worthy or unworthy’ (Z 17) or otherwise rated as more desirable, valuable, or attractive than any other thing. Without the particular natures and needs of the ‘ten thousand things’, there is no basis for such partial evaluations of things. We see such virtues of impartiality in the *Zhuangzi*. The *zhen ren* do not ‘follow any specific course’, where that means being ‘partisan to any one course’, but they ‘follow the rightness of the way each thing already is without . . . the least bias’ (Z 2, 6, 7). A Daoist sage steps back, for instance, from conventional classifications of animals into pests or pets or the cute and cuddly and instead recognizes the ‘true inborn nature’ of all of these and sees in this impartiality the possibility of living closer to birds and beasts (Z 9). Playing on the aquatic metaphors, the *zhen ren* follows along with things, emulating the impartiality of water—adapting to rather than contending with them, like the old man who ‘follows the course of the water itself’, or the bell-stand maker who adapts to the ‘inborn Heavenly nature of the trees’ (Z 19). By bracketing prevailing classifications and judgments and then attending to natural phenomena, like water, the *zhen ren* emulates the impartiality of Dao.

A second cluster of virtues of spontaneity concerns constancy, a set of capacities that emulate the ‘flow’ and ‘stability’ of ‘the Constant Dao’, again characterized aquatically as an ever-flowing river or spring. Such constancy is an attribute of Dao, understood as a stability born of the flow, rhythm, or steadiness or

something—a river, say—not constantly subject to external disruption, pressures, or interference. This is a mode of spontaneity, since it enables a person to engage with the world in ways that are not constantly interrupted or controlled by things outside of oneself, such as the directives and imperatives of the social world. Spontaneous things and creatures, for Daoists, are ones that express their own natures—a term for which, in classical Chinese, is *xing*, ‘the course in which life completes its development if sufficiently nourished and not obstructed or injured from outside’ (Graham 1989: 124). Throughout the early texts, there are regular references to ‘the Constant Dao’, as in the opening line of the *Daodejing*, while the term *dao* can itself be translated as ‘course’, which connotes something steady, regular, and active—the course of a river, say. In the *Zhuangzi* the relevant term, *chang* (‘constant’, ‘sustainable’) has the specific sense of what which is ‘capable of being maintained over a long period of time, without exhausting or destroying itself’ (Ziporyn’s comment in Z 2009: 213). It is this mode of constancy that the *zhen ren* emulate in their practice and activity, exemplified by the ‘flowing, unforced, and uncontrived’ music of the famed Yellow Emperor (Z 6, 14). By living in ways guided by one’s own dispositions, rather than being buffeted about by externalities, the sage enables the ‘promptings of the spirit to begin to flow’, enabling the sage to ‘follow along with’ and ‘find his [or her] place in the flow’ (Z 3).

A final set of virtues of spontaneity that are modelled on attributes of Dao refer to its nourishing role, this time exploiting both the aquatic and maternal metaphors. Recall that Dao is like water in providing ‘nourishment and support’ for the ‘ten thousand things’, a medium in which things ‘come together’ (Z 6). Just as water nourishes plants and creatures, Dao sustains the ‘ten thousand things’, according to their needs and natures. Likewise, the Zhuangist exemplars emulate the nourishing way of Dao by acting in ways attentive to the needs and natures of the things they encounter: they ‘nurture life’, try to ‘clear the way for things’, and honor the ‘self-so-ness’ of the things that Dao has ‘opened up and arrayed’ (Z 6, 23). Gathering these various aquatic images together, a Zhuangist sage will ‘take joy in clearing the way for things’, alert to the ‘uncontrived inclinations of things’, ‘alive to the portents of every transformation’, and helping things and creatures to ‘accomplish their own mandates’ (Z 6, 14, 26). When engaging with animals, for instance, a *zhen ren* is sensitive to the needs and natures of different creatures, unlike the ruler who kills a captive bird by giving it rich food and an opulent environment inappropriate to an animal that eats ‘wiggly things’ and is at home in ‘deep forests’ (Z 19). Similarly, a *zhen ren* will avoid treating horses in ways that are insensitive to their ‘true inborn nature’ of horses—to eat grass and gallop across fields—but that render them more valuable relative to human interests—for instance, branding, shaving, clipping, bridling, and penning them (Z 9; cf. Cooper 2014).

By cultivating and exercising these three clusters of virtues of spontaneity, *zhen ren* emulate various attributes of Dao as figuratively rendered using the aquatic and maternal metaphors and other images taken from natural phenomena that aptly symbolize or evoke them. When expressed in human character and conduct, the impartiality, constancy, and nourishing character of Dao manifest as a clear set of virtues, which explain how and why a *zhen ren* is ‘taking Heaven as [their] model’

(Z 31). The attributes of Dao provide normative criteria that pick out certain virtues or dispositions as attractive and desirable, which certain persons are then disposed to emulate. Some *zhen ren* seem to do this naturally, enjoying an evident native receptivity to Dao, perhaps as a result of their naturally being ‘on the Way’—a natural attainment often characterized as ‘daemonic’, especially by Kongzi. Other *zhen ren* evidently have to engage in more structured emulative practices, ones that enable them to evince an adaptable, flexible, responsive, uncontrived style of life—for instance, by actively nourishing the ‘mandates’ of things, tending and attending to the creatures they encounter without invidiously imposing their own ways upon them.

Spontaneity expresses parallels between the virtues of the Zhuangist exemplars and the figuratively and metaphorically rendered characteristics of Dao, achieved through emulation of a sort broadly consistent with Zagzebski’s description of it as ‘a form of imitation in which the emulated person is perceived as a model *in some respect*’ (cf. 2017: 131, my emphasis). Dao cannot be a model in every respect, because it lacks affective dispositions, but it is still a model for certain virtues, notably of ‘profound virtue’ (*xuande*). An important difference, however, is that emulation of Dao does not—indeed, cannot—involve encounters with that which is the ultimate model. To be sure, Dao is not an abstract theoretical postulate, but something experienced—‘apprehended but not seen’ (Z 6)—by at least some people some of the time. By temperament or through self-cultivation, *zhen ren* enjoy a peculiarly stable, acute sense of Dao that guides their emulative practice. They have an intimation or apprehension of Dao, which is amplified by certain experiences, actions, and phenomena—water, notably, exemplifies various aspects of Dao, in a way clouds or stones do not. Indeed, an important reason why Daoists urge close attention to the natural world is that it affords better ciphers or symbols of Dao than artificial, urban environments. So, there is indeed emulation of Dao, insofar as it provides the model for the virtues of the *zhen ren*, without direct interpersonal encounter.

The second desideratum of a cosmically emulative tradition is the specification of *emulative practices*, ways of acting that guide those who aspire to ‘wander in the Heavenly’, attuned to the Way (Z 33). The *Zhuangzi* offers at least two: the notions of ‘wandering’ (*you*) and ‘fasting of the heart-mind’ (*xinzhai*). David E. Cooper (2018) argues that when wandering and fasting, the Zhuangist sages cultivate and exercise the spontaneity or naturalness that makes them an exemplar of the way. When doing so, they develop and display the ‘responsiveness in the impersonal calm when vision is most lucid’; in the words of A. C. Graham (1989: 12), that is the human manifestation of the spontaneity of Dao.

Zhuangzi uses the metaphor of ‘wandering’ or ‘roaming’ to describe the *zhen ren*’s capacity to transcend their own ways of experiencing and engaging with the world. When wandering, the sages can ‘roam’ among the ‘ways’ other creatures and things, no longer confined to their own parochial schemes of ‘likes and dislikes’, no longer disposed to ‘run away from’—to judge and reject reactively—‘any particular thing’ (Z 22). Throughout the *Zhuangzi* this is presented as a precondition for the various attainments of the ‘genuine person’, who can ‘unify their inborn energies, nourish their vital energies, and merge their

virtuosities' (Z 19). By recognizing their own perspective for what it is—one way among the many 'given' by Dao—the Zhuangist *zhen ren* are able to roam among other beings. A. C. Graham (1989: 189) describes the wandering sage as 'soaring above the restricted viewpoints of the worldly', experiencing 'the vastness at the root of things', and so 'arriving up beyond them to the source of things', to Dao (Z 33). Wandering enables the sage to 'see through to the way things fit together' and thereby to emulate the impartiality of Dao, which has no perspective—no scheme of 'likes or dislikes'—and the sage can therefore appreciate that 'true Virtuosity resides in the Heavenly', not in the projects and activities of the human world (Z 17).

A second emulative practice described in the *Zhuangzi* is 'fasting of the heart-mind', which prepares one for 'wandering' by emptying the mind of tightly held plans, purposes, and preconceptions. Since the ancient Chinese did not distinguish the cognitive and affective, *xin*— 'heart-mind'—includes our tendencies to 'classify and evaluate', to 'affirm some things as right and some others as wrong', our evaluations and interpretations (Z 4, 5). *Zhuangzi* constantly urges us to regard our judgments and orderings as transient conveniences, an alert responsiveness made difficult by our tendency to rigidity, to forget that 'the human realm [is] like the tip of a hair on the body of a horse' (Z 17). But a sage still has concerns and makes judgments, of course, since these are constitutive of having a world—a way of experiencing and engaging with a world. The difference is that *zhen ren* are not closed-minded about their concerns or dogmatic about their discriminations. Human ways are not privileged because, from the perspective of Dao, nothing can be 'worthy or unworthy', and forgetting this leads one to interfere with its 'allotment of things' (Z 17). The bell-stand maker describes his fasting:

When I am going to make a bell stand, I dare not let it deplete my vital energy. Rather, I fast to quiet my mind, and after three days, I no longer presume to care about praise or reward, rank or salary. After five days, I no longer care about honour or disgrace, skill or clumsiness. After seven days, I become so still that I forget I have four limbs or a body. When this happens, for me it is as if the royal court has ceased to exist. My skill is concentrated and the outside world slides away. Then I enter into the mountain forests, viewing the inborn Heavenly nature of the trees. (Z 19)

The Zhuangist exemplars actively abstain from rigid, inflexible attachment to the ambitions, concerns, and preoccupations that obstruct experience of things as they are. Having thus 'fasted', a sage is free to 'roam', escaping from the confinement in a single way that characterizes other creatures: while fish 'come together in water', to which their movement and awareness is confined, humans alone 'come together in the Way' (Z 6). The true person, at least when roaming, conceives of the world as a whole—of the many particular ways given by the way—which, in turn, can enable an awareness of the way.

By considering the notions of wandering and fasting, the process of emulating Dao is located within the wider structure of activities and metaphors offered by

the *Zhuangzi*. Such resonances confirm that the parallels are tracking deeper features of the vision of a genuine or true human life that ‘follows the Way of Heaven’ (DDJ 25). The Zhuangist virtues of spontaneity, impartiality, and expansiveness are modelled on Dao, which is why ‘true Virtuosity resides in the Heavenly’ (Z 17). But such true persons are very rare, partly because cosmic emulation is extremely difficult, partly because of the corrupting effects of human life. Zhuangzi’s attacks on Confucians, Mohists, and others reflect his alarm at their promotion of forms of artifice (*wei*), such as morality, ‘rites’, and learning, that distort or destroy our capacities for spontaneous, natural ways of living (see Chong 2011: 333ff.). By fasting and wandering, a person slowly abandons these forms of artifice, thus becoming able to emulate Dao and so to ‘wander in the Heavenly’. This is made possible through the rich array of metaphors, emulative practices, and illustrative accounts of *zhen ren* offered throughout the *Zhuangzi*.

Humanity and the Heavenly

The cosmic emulationist reading of the *Zhuangzi* can gather together the various rhetorics and metaphors used by scholars of Daoism to articulate the relation of the sage to Dao, and show their underlying unity. When striving to ‘attain harmony in life’, writes Livia Kohn (2009: 36), the sage will ‘flow along smoothly with the course of Dao’, while, as Bryan van Norden explains, the ‘ultimate goal’ for a Daoist is to ‘model oneself on the Way’ by ‘engaging in ‘non-action’ in one’s everyday activities’. David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames (1998: 92) refer variously to ‘analogues’, ‘correlation’, and ‘continuity’ between the sage and Dao, at one point using the term ‘emulate’, albeit only of the ‘patterned natural processes’ within the natural world, citing chapter 25 of the *Daodejing*. Indeed, Ames is notable for use of the term ‘emulate’, for instance, when explaining the Daoist conception of ‘human consummation’ as requiring one to ‘emulate the natural *tao*’, thereby achieving ‘integration and ultimate identity’ with it (Ames 1994: 39).

Continuing this theme, Ames argues that what is distinctive to Daoism is an insistence that models of human excellence be ‘opened up to [the] cosmic order, from the emulation of only human exemplars to the emulation of the natural order broadly’, of the ‘orderly, elegant, and harmonious processes of nature’ (Ames 1998: 2). Ames continues:

Throughout the philosophical Daoist corpus, there is a ‘grand’ analogy established in the shared vocabulary used to describe the conduct of the achieved human being on the one hand, and the harmony achieved in the mutual accommodations of natural phenomena on the other. (Ames 1998: 6)

If my account is correct, the relation is fundamentally emulative not analogical and directed not at natural phenomena and processes but rather at their source—Dao. No doubt this is one reason that Daoists employ distinctive types of practice, such as wandering and fasting, rather than those more familiar in neo-Aristotelian virtue theories.

Underlying the rhetorics and metaphors—of harmony, integration, correlation—is the concept of cosmic emulation. What makes that term preferable is that it captures the direct and intimate character of the sage’s relation to that source, to Dao. Ultimately, what is exemplary about the *zhen ren* is not their stillness, equanimity, bodily vitality—admirable as these surely are. Instead, their exemplarity consists of their success in the profound task of emulating Dao, of becoming a ‘true person’, by ‘following the Way of Heaven’.

This is a distinctive form of exemplarism, differing from Zagzebski’s in two respects. The first is that the ultimate object of emulation is not a human person, but the cosmos, the ground or source of the world. The second is that the Zhuangzi rejects the claim that genuine exemplarity requires that one has a reflective relationship with one’s moral convictions, an inheritance from Aristotelian virtue theory (cf. Zagzebski 2017: ch. 4). Daoists reject the idea that being a ‘true’, ‘genuine’ human being requires a sophisticated cognitive attainment: most of the *zhen ren* are uneducated people without intellectual abilities or inclinations, but this does not damage their status as exemplars of a life ‘on the Way’. Insisting that exemplarity needs a reflective component establishes a ‘bias against goodness’ (Olberding 2012:4), confining true *de* to those intellectually able and disposed. Moreover, there are warnings in the text against developing or indulging an intellectual, ‘scholarly’ stance on virtue and Dao, usually expressed in the hostility to ‘learning’, theory, and scholarship (DDJ 18–19; Z 22). In the *Zhuangzi*, the main objection is that theoretical impulses reflect and reinforce invidious zeal for ‘cleverness’, wisdom, and theoretical understanding (*zhi*) that distorts or obstructs our unforced spontaneity. By a fasting of the ‘heart-mind’, these impulses can be ‘stilled’, so that they no longer ‘block the Course [Dao]’ (Z 23).

The Zhuangist sages do, however, invite a more substantive challenge to their proffered status as exemplars of a truly *human* life. Typically, the perception of Daoism tends toward romantic visions of cheerful sages, wandering barefoot, and singing along the riverbanks, free from the stuffy formality of Confucian consummate persons. Although this image is both attractive and entrenched, the overall vision of human life in the *Zhuangzi* is arguably much bleaker: a misanthropic vision of ‘dark despair’, ‘pitiless’ and ‘chilling’ in its depiction of the ‘misery and sad delusion’ of typical human life, in the words of Eske Møllgard (2007: 17ff.). Lacking the way, human beings are ‘confined’ by artificial pressures, fluxing unstably from ‘worried’ to ‘sad’, alienated and confused as their life ‘rushes on like a galloping horse’ (Z 2, 4, 24). Such failures are, moreover, peculiar to human beings: only we can forget or lose the Way, for, as A. C. Graham in his translation (Z 2001: 6) puts it, ‘while all other things move spontaneously on the course proper to them, [only] man has stunted and maimed his spontaneous aptitude’.

Although the lives of those who have lost or forgotten the way are depressing, one should demur before endorsing wholeheartedly the lives of the *zhen ren*. During the classical period, Confucians criticized the Daoist vision of a life attuned to Dao for derogating or marginalizing certain essential dimensions of human existence. An important statement of this critique was Xunzi’s (21.5) protest that Zhuangzi was

‘blinded by nature and insensible to men’, forsaking the rituals, conventions, and other forms of artifice (*wen*) integral to the attainment of a consummate human life. Modern critics also share the worry that Zhuangzi tends, as Eric S. Nelson (2014: 723) remarks, to ‘ignore the properly human and ethical in upholding the supremacy of an indifferent, impersonal, and fatalistic dao’. The worry may seem confirmed by declarations like ‘forgetting the Human makes you a man of the Heavenly’, a state attained when one ‘finally forgets about all human viewpoints’ (Z 23).

The charge of inhumanity against Daoist exemplarity may seem inevitably amplified by the concept of cosmic emulation. Taking Dao as model for an exemplary life may provide an insufficiently rich basis for a truly human existence, such that attempting to emulate Dao risks atrophying certain integral components of a human existence—the forms of ‘artifice’, celebrated by Confucians, such as cultured learning and worldly ambition. In the terms of Zagzebski’s account, the Zhuangist exemplars may invite *admiration*, but also many other affective responses, including alarm, curiosity, disquiet, and even horror. When Zhuangzi’s wife died, a friend went to comfort him, only to find the sage singing loudly and banging on his drum (Z 18). Without rushing into judgment about the meaning of this episode, it does underscore the complexity of Zhuangist exemplars as intelligible models of an authentically human life. Emulating Dao may be a way to a life that is ‘true’ and ‘genuine’, but perhaps it is also intolerably ‘insensible’, as Xunzi warned, to what belongs to humanity.

Engaging with the charge of inhumanity will be a crucial task for those who wish to defend the ideal of cosmic emulation. Without taking sides, one should certainly avoid the hasty assumption that cosmic emulation must confirm or amplify the charge. The *zhen ren* in the text are, after all, engaged in human activities, such as swimming and carving, and at least some of them, such as the Yellow Emperor, were actively involved in social life, unlike the sparer sages of the *Daodejing* who do not ‘reveal’ or ‘manifest’ themselves (DDJ 22, 72). There is no rejection of human life *tout court*, despite those popular images of Daoist sages dwelling far away in the mountains, away from the cities. Moreover, though one can easily find remarks to confirm the charge of inhumanity, other sections of the *Zhuangzi* emphasize the reciprocity and mutual harmonization of the human and the Heavenly.

In chapter 6, ‘The Great Source as Teacher’, Zhuangzi remarks that to become a ‘Genuine Human Being’, ‘neither the Heavenly nor the Human . . . win out over the other’, as illustrated by the music of the Yellow Emperor, which he himself explains was ‘performed with the Human . . . but attuned to the Heavenly’ (Z 6, 14). But other remarks go further, affirming that the potentialities that constitute our ‘Humanity’ are only truly realized in the Heavenly. Aspiring *zhen ren* should ‘insatiably partake of the Heavenly [but] not neglect the Human’ because only ‘the radiance of Heaven . . . reveals the humanness of the human’ (Z 19, 23). Dao gives all things their own essential natures—their own ‘ways’—and for humans these include the distinctive capacity to understand and so ‘come together in the Way’ (Z 6). If so, following the Way of Heaven is the truly human way.

As enticing as this may be, the fact remains that the forms of human life manifested by the Zhuangist exemplars are ones that elicit a variety of responses. Zagzebski argues that admiration is the primary positive emotional response elicited by exemplars, activated by a *zhen ren*'s joyful pleasure in the lives of fishes and birds or the vibrant spontaneity of their lives. But such admiration sits alongside other responses, including the alarm reported by Xunzi. At its root, the complexity of our responses to exemplars reflects a deep set of issues, ultimately about the nature of a human life, exemplary or otherwise. Sustained reflection on the complex figures presented in the *Zhuangzi*—not least its titular character—offers us ways to think about historical forms of exemplarity and the nature of humanity, by scoping out something of the range of possible forms that an authentically human life could take. If so, there is deep value to the study of the cosmic mode of emulation, a project already underway among ancient practitioners and modern scholars of Chinese philosophy.

Conclusions

There is a cosmic mode of emulation, present within Zhuangist Daoism, focused not on any human person but on the ground or source of the world. Certain persons are exemplary for manifesting, within their conduct and character, qualities of features of the cosmos at least as they are conceived within the terms of their respective traditions. Such cosmic emulation typically shows itself in parallels between the virtues of the exemplar and qualities of the cosmos—a fact that, in the case of Daoism, explains why characterizations of the Way are usually given through ‘implicit descriptions of the sage’ (van Norden 2011: 133). Moreover, there will also be signs of cosmic emulation within the distinctive practices, metaphors, and other features of those traditions—for instance, in emulative practices, such as ‘fasting of the heart-mind’.

As a final thought, there is no reason to suppose that cosmic emulation was confined to ancient philosophical traditions, whether Chinese or not. Taking a wider view, there are promising candidates from, among other times and contexts, a set of *fin-de-siècle* European philosophies. True to the strategy employed earlier, these examples evince tell-tale parallels between the virtues of a set of exemplars and the qualities or attributes of the ground or source of the world.

Nietzsche's later vision is of the world as will-to-power, as preeminently manifested within certain ‘types’ of hero—the Overman, ‘free spirit’, or ‘philosopher of the future’. Such exemplary persons ‘make and create’ their world, directing their energies to ‘organise’ and impose their will. In so doing, these Nietzschean exemplars are consciously emulating the unconstrained energy, creativity, and superabundance of the will-to-power, hence they are the true, exemplary human beings. A deep reason for hostility to the Judeo-Christian religion, drab materialism, and other of Nietzsche's targets is that they militate against the aspiration to emulate will-to-power (cf. Nietzsche 1968: §§ 585, 409).

A closely related candidate is the ‘vitalism’ espoused by the still neglected early twentieth-century French philosopher Henri Bergson, who envisioned the world as animated by *élan vital*, a vital force—an energetic, creative, flowing ‘stream of

life'. Bergson's heroes include the creative artist, whose life consists of 'creating oneself endlessly', striving to bring forth 'new forms', such that the artist's 'inner life' emulates the 'pulsing' energy of the *élan vital* that surges up through and gives shape and vitality to the world (cf. Bergson 2002: 174f., 223f.).

Many other candidates could be offered for investigation, presenting new forms of cosmic emulationism and expressing in varying conceptions of human exemplarity. This would indicate that the cosmic mode of emulation has a longer, deeper presence in the history of philosophy, across its major traditions, than is currently recognized.

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