

## Daoism, humanity, and the Way of Heaven

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**Abstract:** This article argues for a cross-culturally pluralistic conception of spiritual exemplarity. Three main modes of exemplarity are identified, distinguished by their underlying aspirations, which I label ‘allegiance’, ‘enlightened insight’, and ‘emulation’. After challenging some attempts to privilege the modes of exemplarity characteristic of theistic religions, I argue that perhaps the fullest example of the aspiration to emulation is the form of Daoism presented in *The Book of Zhuāngzǐ*. I conclude that what one finds across different cultures and traditions is a plurality of modes of spiritual exemplarity that should be acknowledged and explored, rather than given more reductive analyses that narrow our sense of the variety of ways of living a spiritual life.

### Spiritual aspirations

An obvious feature of the world’s spiritual traditions is the central role of *exemplars*, persons whose lives are exemplary as ones of aspiration to, or attainment of, certain spiritual goods. Such figures include saints, sages, prophets, gurus, yogis, shamans, and other holy persons, often organized institutionally into ecclesiastical ranks, such as Buddhist Patriarchs, Masters, monastics, lamas, abbots, and bodhisattvas.

Spiritual exemplars, as we might dub them, have a variety of roles within and relations to their respective traditions. Some enjoy an elevated role as founder or saviour, others are teachers or theoreticians, while others are reformers or sources of additional mystical insight. Within some traditions, certain exemplars are worshipped, while in others this is proscribed: think of the distinction, within Christian theology, between the permissible veneration of saints and their hagiolatrous worship, say, or the Islamic concept of *shirk*, which refers to the worship of things other than God, as in idolatry and polytheism (see Hawting (1999), 68f., discussing Qu’ran 4:48 and 4.116). Within some traditions, exemplars may be esteemed due to their status as incarnations of god, or rebirths

of enlightened beings, while others achieve their status through prolonged spiritual discipline, moral endeavour, or edifying encounters with adversity (see Kidd (2018a) and (2018b)).

Spiritual exemplars also vary in their activities, attitudes, concerns, habits, practices, and values. Some urge close attention to animals and natural places, which others may downplay or derogate as distractions from spiritual practice. Some are highly intellectually engaged in doctrinal disputation, which others condemn as a distraction from, even a threat to, spiritual life. Similar differences are evident in attitudes towards civic life, music, political participation, sensual pleasures, and much else – all of which poses an obvious challenge to there being any singular category that can accommodate all these spiritual exemplars. Certainly, one ought to resist a tendency to ignore, dismiss, or gloss over their differences, for instance by reductively insisting that they all preach an essentially uniform message – a bland insistence on wisdom, compassion, and ‘self-discovery’, for instance, of the sort retailed in the ‘Mind, Body, Spirit’ sections of bookstores.

My claim is that there is an irreducible plurality of *modes of spiritual exemplarity*, which we can distinguish in terms of conceptually and phenomenologically distinct *spiritual aspirations*. The three I will sketch are not exhaustive and can be combined to form hybrids, as we ought to expect given the ways different spiritual traditions have interacted in the course of their entangled histories. Moreover, a single spiritual tradition can arguably incorporate different aspirations, at least to some degree, depending on the richness of its internal resources and the flexibility of its members – whether and how they do this, of course, will depend upon the tradition in question. The aspirations manifest in distinctive forms of spiritual exemplarity, and shape the sorts of activities, habits, interests, sensibilities, and virtues taken to be salient to, if not constitutive of, an authentic spiritual life.

I propose that there are, at a minimum, three main types of spiritual aspiration, evident in at least the major Western and Asian traditions. Aspirations will usually be articulated in terms specific to the tradition and culture within which a person is contingently embedded, finding expression in terms of the concepts, vocabularies, metaphors, and ideals available within a ‘form of life’. The first is an *aspiration to allegiance*, where the exemplar is a model of a life of allegiance to the felt or received commands of a divine being – a life of faith, love, obedience, or devotion, most obviously found in Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. Such allegiance can be conceived on the model of commandments, legalistic edicts, or collectivized forms of public worship. What is crucial is that the aspiration manifests itself as faithful, loving, or devoted allegiance to the divine creator of the world and supreme moral authority. Signs of an aspiration to allegiance are theoretical concerns with the nature of god, the justifiability of faith, and Euthyphro-style questions about the relationship between divine and moral imperatives.

A second type of spiritual aspiration might be labelled that of *enlightened insight*. Within these traditions, the exemplar is a model of a life shaped and guided by

profound insight into certain deep truths about the nature of reality – what Buddhists call ‘Noble Truths’ (*ariya-saccāni*), a deeply cultivated understanding of which spontaneously transforms how one thinks, feels, and acts within the world. Exemplars of this type do not show ‘allegiance’ to these truths nor would it be apt to talk about devoted or loving relationships to them. Buddhists, certainly, allow certain forms of faith (*śraddhā*), but more in the sense of ‘resoluteness’ or ‘confidence’ in the ways of life animated by enlightened insight into those truths. What is morally transformative about Buddhist exemplars is their enlightened insight into the truths that all things are ‘empty’ (*śūnya*) of ‘own-being’ (*svabhāva*), understanding of which is inseparable from a transformed comportment – compassionate, mindful, released from ‘grasping-craving’. Such enlightened insight does not fundamentally involve any sort of allegiance to a divine person; the exemplarity is characterized by understanding of the nature of the world, which, at least for Buddhists, does not include divine lawgivers (the gods recognized in most forms of Buddhism are also part of the cycle of rebirth, and lack any elevated status and role).

The aspirations to allegiance and enlightened insight are most prominent within the Near Eastern monotheistic religions and the ancient Indian traditions, respectively. The third aspiration, by contrast, has a broader if also more diffuse presence within certain of the spiritual dispensations of ancient Greece and China. The best name I can think of is the aspiration to *emulation*: certain persons are exemplary insofar as they successfully emulate certain aspects or qualities of the grounds or source of the world, which manifest, within human beings, as virtues. By emulating the source of the world, sages achieve a degree of intimacy or rootedness that shows itself in their equanimity, tranquillity, or harmony. The Stoic sage, for instance, emulates the Logos which generates and orders the material world, thereby manifesting in human form its rational, providential qualities and its disposition to order the world for the good of the whole. Similarly, the Neoplatonic sage tries to emulate the One, the ineffable, immaterial source of all things. Plotinus explains how sorts of spiritual practice – restraining sensual appetites, cultivating intellectual dispositions – help one to ‘attain Likeness’ to ‘the source of what in the soul becomes virtue’, the One (*Enneads* 1.2.6).

The existence of these different fundamental spiritual aspirations encourages a pluralistic conception of spiritual exemplarity, according to which saints, sages, and other figures might be models of allegiance, enlightened insight, or emulation of the ground or source of things. Unfortunately, such cross-cultural pluralism is challenged by a tendency, among some writers on religion and the spiritual life, to privilege certain ways of conceptualising the spiritual life. Put in my terms, the worry is that some commentators implicitly privilege one of the spiritual aspirations and its associated modes of exemplarity, thereby occluding the other aspirations.

Consider some recent remarks by John Cottingham, who writes of what he calls ‘authentic spiritual experience’, characterized as involving ‘a sense of being

confronted with something beyond myself', something felt to be 'worthy of my admiration or love or respect' (Cottingham (2017), 21). Such experiences flow from certain 'deep yearnings', 'sensibilities and impulses' that underlie and sustain certain forms of life (Cottingham (2009), 15, 19), which compel us to live in ways 'harmonious and integrated' with the wider order of things (Cottingham (2005), 145). Cottingham construes this in terms of an intersubjective relationship with God, as does Zagzebski, at least in her book *Divine Motivation Theory*, where God is the supreme exemplar, the being pre-eminently 'worthy' of 'loyalty, respect', and 'devotion' – emotions and virtues most obviously salient in the context of interpersonal relationships (Zagzebski (2004), 90, 123).

The aspiration to allegiance seems to fit naturally a conception of spiritual life organized around the cultivation of an intersubjective relationship between human persons and a divine being. Admiration, love, respect, and devotion are the sorts of qualities appropriate to richly textured relationships between persons, human or not, making them quite appropriate to the vocabulary of allegiance. But those qualities are not *exclusive* to intersubjective relationships, and allegiance is not the only form of spiritual aspiration. I worry that these points are occluded in accounts that privilege certain forms of aspiration, thereby confining spiritual exemplarity to just one of its forms.

An example is Cottingham's claim that 'authentic' forms of spiritual experience are unavailable within the forms of spiritual life more characteristic of 'Eastern traditions'. His reasoning is that their ethical values are not 'intrinsically connected' to their 'underlying vision of the cosmos' as 'an impersonal continuum of conditions that arise and pass away' (Cottingham (2017), 26). If so, the exemplars of those traditions can be morally admired – as actively compassionate, say – but still fall short of genuine spiritual attainment, which Cottingham characterizes as the effort to achieve 'a balanced and harmonious and integrated life' (Cottingham (2005), 145).

Such claims are doubly problematic. In the first place, there is no exploration of the texts and doctrines of the relevant traditions, therefore no supporting investigation of those claims about the relationship between the ethical values and metaphysical visions of those vaguely named 'Eastern traditions'. Within the Buddhist tradition, to take one example, there is clear explanation of the relationship between their ethical and metaphysical claims – of how, say, such concepts as 'dis-ease' (*duḥkha*), ignorance (*avidyā*), and 'grasping-desire' (*taṇhā*) should be understood in relation to the vision of a world of impermanent phenomena lacking 'own-being' (*anātman*).

The second problem with Cottingham's negative verdict on the 'Eastern traditions' is the implicit privileging of the specific forms of spiritual exemplarity associated with the aspiration to allegiance. As David E. Cooper points out, 'a desire to draw close to one's God is not the only form in which people manifest a yearning to experience a unity with the reality that encompasses them' (Cooper (2012), 8). To privilege the forms of exemplarity and aspiration is doubly problematic: the

personal and cultural contingency of the forms of spiritual life to which one is exposed is one – a problem recently discussed in detail by Guy Axtell (2018) and Helen de Cruz (2019) – and the other is the consequent occlusion of the plurality of forms of spiritual life, as revealed by a properly informed historical and anthropological stance. It is not the case that ethical values can only be connected to a metaphysical vision through a relationship of allegiance by morally aspirant mortals to one or more divine beings who vouchsafe those values and created the world. The philosophical study of spiritual exemplarity should be taken as a cross-cultural exercise in exploration of spiritual life, not a culturally specific exercise in spiritual advocacy, at least if it aims to understand the range of forms of spiritual life.

My own position follows that of Mikel Burley, who also criticizes Cottingham's 'normative approach' to the philosophy of religion:

[T]he tendency of the normative approach . . . to portray itself as primarily an exercise in *understanding* religion has potentially distorting implications, since the approach is operating with a particular set of normative assumptions about what religion *ought* to be. . . . [I]nsofar as purveyors of the normative approach claim also to be offering an accurate description of religion, they are in danger of misleading their readers, as what their apologetic motivations spur them to construct is really a picture of religion that, because it is based on highly selective and sanitized examples, is also severely one-sided. (Burley (2018), 438, 443)

I also agree with Burley that the best way to counteract such tendencies is to adopt a 'radical pluralism' that describes the 'enormously variegated nature of religious forms of life' (*ibid.*, 440). Such pluralism ought to include the morally disturbing aspects of the forms of spiritual life thus described, rather than gloss over them, which in the specific case of spiritual exemplarity entails attention to the often-disturbing character of many exemplars.

In the following sections, my aims are therefore to describe in some detail one of the forms of spiritual aspiration neglected by Cottingham, the aspiration to emulation, and show how it sustains the form of spiritual life described in the one of the most important Daoist texts, *The Book of Zhuāngzǐ*. As one of the 'Eastern traditions', early Daoism offers us modes of spiritual life without any whiff of allegiance between human exemplars and divine beings. It also offers us a form of spirituality that has alarming moral and existential aspects, mainly due to the apparent 'inhumanity' of the *zhēnrén*, the 'true' persons celebrated in those texts as models of authentic integration with the wider order of things.

### **Daoist exemplars**

Daoism in its early, 'philosophical' forms emerged during the Period of the Warring States in China (c. 475–221 BCE), a period of acute cultural change, later developing into an organized and still-extant religion. Its foundational texts are the *Dào dé Jīng* ('The Classic of the Way and Virtue (or Power)', once attributed to a sixth-century BCE sage, Laozi, although actually a work of the third century

BCE, and the book attributed to Zhuǎngzǐ (c. 369–286 BCE), whose opening seven ‘Inner’ chapters are attributed to its eponym. Several other texts also merit mention, such as the *Neiye* (‘Inner Cultivation’, c. 350 BCE) and the book of *Liezi*, probably compiled around the fourth century BCE.<sup>1</sup>

Daoism is often presented as a rival to Confucianism, the more influential of the classical Chinese traditions, with the former often presented as the natural, romantic alternative to the decorous, formal character of the latter. But such easy contrasts can tend to obscure the common themes of the two traditions and the subtleties of their relationship in both the Chinese tradition and the lives of many millions of Chinese. Among the deep shared themes are the following: the ultimate aspiration for human beings is to live harmoniously by cultivating a certain array of *dé* (‘virtue’, ‘potency’) through emulation of certain exemplars – the Confucian ‘consummate person’ (*jūnzǐ*), the sage (*shèng rén*), the Daoist ‘true person’ (*zhēnrén*) – whose lives exemplify the relevant sort of harmony (*he*) or active attunement to the wider Way of things (see Angle (2009), chs 1–4).

Naturally, this schematic picture admits of the considerable variety that one finds across and within the major currents of classical Chinese philosophy. A crucial difference concerns the relationship of human beings to *Dào*, a term meaning ‘way’ or ‘path’, in the nominal and dynamic and nominal senses of *a* way and the *making* of a way. It has many senses, varying within and across the Chinese schools, including the sense of *Dào* as the Way of Heaven (*Tiāndào*). Within Confucianism, this referred to wider cosmological patterns evident in nature, to which the good person ought to align their life, something about which Kǒngzǐ himself was famously silent (*Lunyu* 5.13). Whatever his reasons, one finds a fuller conception of *Dào* and its significance to human life within the school that came to bear its name – *Dàojiào*, the ‘School of the Way’.

Across the early Daoist texts, one finds at least five types of exemplar, of persons whose life manifests an ‘attunement’ to *Dào*. To start with, there are ‘knackmasters’, those ordinary, humble persons whose practical activities, such as carving and swimming, manifest a degree of spontaneity, suppleness, and naturalness only available to those attuned to *Dào*. Many of the most famous are described in Book 19 of the *Zhuāngzǐ*, such as the bell-stand maker, the butcher Cook Ding, and the old man found swimming in a pool too turbulent even for the fish. A second type is sage-kings, who by the time of the *Dàojiào* were mostly confined to antiquity, such as the legendary Yellow Emperor. Adaptable, subtle, and unobstructive in their actions, they are mainly described, albeit sparsely, within the *Dàodé Jīng*:

To be a true king is Heavenly.  
To be Heavenly is to embody the Way. (D 16)

A third type of Daoist exemplar are ‘philosophical sages’ (*shèng rén*), pre-eminently Zhuǎngzǐ, who, almost uniquely, are intellectually reflective about the

Way. Generally, Daoists are very suspicious of ‘cleverness’ – Zhuāngzǐ himself warns that it ‘comes forth from *conflict*’, breeds ‘plots and schemes’, and is a cause of ‘disorder’ (Z 4, 10). Actually, what is criticized is not reflection or deliberation as such, but rather ‘rigidifying’ attitudes, fed by an urge to impose upon things, through which cleverness ‘turns into cunning’ (Z 10). *Shèng rén* are cautious, even ambivalent, about intellectualism and theorizing, since they are acutely aware that a zeal for ‘cleverness’ is apt to ‘block the Course’ (Z 23).

Outside the *Dàodé Jīng* and the *Zhuāngzǐ*, two further types of exemplar emerge: painters and poets, who embody the Way in their works, and, interestingly, children, whom the *Liezi* offers as exemplars of innocence and spontaneity, like the young boy who chides a visiting dignitary for failing to grasp the Way’s apportionment of things (L 8). Within the set of Daoist exemplars, there is considerable variety: the modest occupations of ‘knackmasters’ contrast with the imperial or philosophical predilections of sage-kings and *shèng rén*, whose ways of embodying the Way differ again from the painters, poets, and children. All of them, however, exemplify a way of experiencing and engaging with the world that ‘follows the Way of Heaven’ (D 9). I want to show that they ought to be understood as culturally specific ways of realizing the spiritual aspiration to emulation.

The Daoist term for these figures is *zhēnrén*, the ‘true (or authentic) person’, whose humanity is fully realized through their embodiment of the Way. Such authenticity can be easily dampened by the forms of ‘artifice’ (*wen*) celebrated by Confucians, such as ritual, learning, and moral codification, that spoil what is natural or genuine to human beings. Kim-Chong Chong warns us that *zhēn* does not refer to an ‘original simple nature’ that is inevitably ‘destroyed’ by systems of artifice, even if that emerged as a main theme of the Outer Chapters of *Zhuāngzǐ*. Aside from their polemical character, such talk narrows our sense of *zhēn*, insofar as it confines it within the binary of natural and artificial, obscuring the ‘greater and more imaginative possibilities’ for exemplarity presented in the first seven, ‘Inner’ Chapters (Chong (2011), 335, 327). Put another way, there is more to the true person, celebrated by Daoists, than their resistance to the artificialities of human life, a difference that resides in their special relations to the Way of Heaven.

Grasping the depth of *zhēnrén*, across their various forms, means attending to one of their most characteristic features – their spontaneity (*zì rán*, literally, ‘self-so-ness’). Unlike the modern Western senses of ‘spontaneity’, what *zì rán* registers is neither mindless caprice nor reckless surrender to the passions. Daoist spontaneity consists of an alert, supple, adaptable ‘responsiveness in the impersonal calm when vision is most lucid’ (Graham (2001), 12). It is a way of engaging with things and situations guided by an unobstructed, flexible receptiveness that is the theme of the descriptions of *zhēnrén* in the *Zhuāngzǐ*.

Consider the account of an old man whom Kōngzǐ comes across, swimming in the pool under a waterfall, whose waters are so turbulent that ‘fish and turtles and crocodiles could not swim’ in them. Astonished by the ‘daemonic’ ability of the

man, Kǒngzǐ questions him, asking if he has some special way or technique, which elicits the reply:

I have no Way. I began in what is native to me, grew up in what is natural to me, matured in what is destined for me. I enter with the inflow, and emerge with the outflow, follow the Way of the water and do not impose my selfishness upon it. (Z 19)

The old man's spontaneity has several aspects: the denial of any specialized skill or technique; the willingness to 'follow along with things'; the refusal to impose his own plans onto things; the expression of what is 'native' or natural to him; the sustained immersion in a certain way of acting that enables a cultivated improvisation. Acting in these ways, the old man was an exemplar of spontaneity, and therefore of the Way itself, honouring a conviction first heard in the *Dào dé Jīng*:

People model themselves on the Earth.  
The Earth models itself on Heaven.  
Heaven models itself on the Way.  
The Way models itself on what is natural [spontaneous, *zì rán*]. (D 25)

My aim is to show how exercising the virtues of spontaneity enables one to live authentically and so 'follow the Way of Heaven', thereby realizing the aspiration to emulation. To do this, I describe striking parallels between those virtues and certain qualities of *Dào*, which are best explained in terms of an emulative relationship between *zhēnrén* and *Dào*.

Before doing so, though, two other ways of explaining their relationship ought to be ruled out. First, *Dào* is not a divine being who commands or invites people to exercise the virtues of spontaneity. Despite efforts by Christian missionaries from the sixteenth century to interpret *Dào* in monotheistic terms, *Dào* lacks the personality, substance, and purposes of a divine being, as do other cognate concepts, such as *Tiān* (Heaven), as shown by Xiaomei Yang (2008). Second, since *Dào* is not a person, it does not literally possess virtues so cannot act as an object of emulation in the way that, for instance, Christians can try to emulate God's love by performing acts of loving care. But this does not rule out the possibility of *Dào* as a model for virtues, since emulation need not take the intersubjective form presupposed by Zagzebski (2017, ch. 5).

A second form of emulation can, to borrow a term from the Stoics, be labelled a *cosmic mode of emulation*. The core claim is that the ultimate model for an exemplary human life is the ground or source of the world, that which generates or sustains all things – the Logos for the Stoics, the One for the Neoplatonists, and *Dào* for the Daoists. Underlying the aspiration to emulation is precisely a felt conviction that one can achieve integration, unity, or intimacy with the world by becoming more like its ground or source, specifically by emulating certain of its qualities. Within Daoism, this aspiration was explored and developed in many ways: my focus will be on the *Book of Zhuāngzǐ*.



### Spontaneity and emulation

Early Daoism has many of the components typical of spiritual traditions, such as practices, exemplars, narratives, a conception of the good life, and a vision of the grounds or source of reality. As it is a tradition to which the aspiration to emulation is central, one should look for those tell-tale parallels between, on the one hand, the virtues of its exemplars – sages, ‘knackmasters’, and other *zhēnrén* – and, on the other hand, the qualities or attributes of the ground or source of the world, *Dào*.

The best place to look for those parallels will be in the most characteristic feature of *zhēnrén*, ‘spontaneity’. It rarely figures in Western lists of the virtues, usually being associated with impulsiveness or caprice, especially within Romantic writings. Within Daoism, it refers to an adaptable, flexible responsiveness to the things and situations that one encounters. The Chinese term, *zì rán*, literally means ‘self-so-ness’, a capacity to act, think, and feel in ways that are ‘natural’ or ‘spontaneous’, in the sense of their flowing from one’s own nature, rather than being effects of external compulsions or pressures. A. C. Graham describes actions as *zì rán* when they are marked by ‘the spontaneous incipience of the act when reflecting the situation objectively’ (Graham (1989), 191). Spontaneity is undistorted action, flowing from one’s own nature or dispositions, rather than forced upon one by externalities.

The *zhēnrén* are exemplars of spontaneity insofar as they experience things as they are, rather than in more narrow registers generated by conventions, discriminations, and projects that select only certain aspects of things and creatures. In the poetic terms of the sage, Guanyin:

Within yourself, no fixed positions:  
Things as they take shape disclose themselves.  
Moving, be like water,  
Still, be like a mirror,  
Respond like an echo. (Z 33)

The exemplary spontaneity of *zhēnrén* shows itself in their ways of experiencing and engaging with things and creatures that manifest an array of *dé* – a term, recall, that can be rendered as ‘virtues’, ‘potencies’, ‘powers’. Although Daoist texts do not compile lists of *dé*, we can usefully think of spontaneity in terms of *clusters* of virtues, each capturing a mode of spontaneity (see Fraser (2014)). By articulating these modes, we are better placed to see how their cultivation enables one to realize the aspiration to emulation within the specific terms of Daoism.

Three clusters of virtues of spontaneity stand out as among the most central, which I will label those of ‘impartiality’, ‘constancy’, and ‘nurturance’. The virtues of impartiality are shown in the ability of *zhēnrén* to experience things in ways that are not rigidly circumscribed by a set of parochial classifications,

discriminations, and goals: they do not ‘follow any specific course’, but rather ‘follow the rightness of the way [of] each thing’, without ‘the least bias’ (Z 2, 7). A *zhēnrén* is impartial, not in the sense of *lacking* any concerns or interests, for without these, one could not *have* a world. Without any preferences or discriminations, one could not inhabit a world, construed as the arrayed whole of the ‘ten thousand things’, each characterized by their own ‘self-so-ness’. By experiencing things as they are, rather than within the narrower terms of a partial perspective, a *zhēnrén* can ‘see through to the way things fit together’, to know ‘which activities are of the Heavenly’ (Z 17).

The second set of virtues of spontaneity comprises those of ‘constancy’, those which enable one to achieve a manner of life and activity marked by a continuous, uninterrupted stability. Zhuāngzǐ often bemoans the harassed character of most people’s lives, constantly agitated and disrupted under the pressure of the ceaseless, battering intrusion of the world’s torrent of imperatives and pressures. Such people are ‘confined by things’, caught up in the endless ‘busyness’ of life, alternately ‘worried’ and ‘sad’, as they ‘rush’ in an ever-demanding world in which they are ‘submerged’ (Z 24) – a dark, ‘chilling’ vision of human life as a realm of ‘misery and sad delusion’ quite at odds with the popular cheerful, romantic image of Daoism (Møllgard (2007), 20). In contrast with the restless, unstable lives of most people, the lives of *zhēnrén* manifest a ‘flow’ and ‘stability’ that reflects that of ‘the Constant *Dào*’, envisioned as a great river – constant and ever-changing, dynamic without being destructively so, with a stability and rhythm of its own, endlessly regenerating itself without its being either so slow that it stagnates or too rapid that it becomes unstable.

Spontaneity, in this sense, is a mode of constancy and stability that comes from being unaffected by external intrusions or interruptions. Zhuāngzǐ is critical of urges or imperatives to acquire profit, exercise technique, and to impose upon or contend with things, which, if indulged, mean we will be forever tossed back and forth as tastes, fashions, and demands change. Such constancy is shown in the conduct of *zhēnrén*, like the ‘flowing, unforced, and uncontrived’ music of the Yellow Emperor, an ancient sage-king (Z 14). The relevant Chinese term, *cháng* – ‘constant’, ‘sustainable’ – means that which is ‘capable of being maintained over a long period of time, without exhausting or destroying itself’ (Ziporyn (2009), 213). By living spontaneously, *zhēnrén* ‘follow along with’ and ‘find [their] place in the flow’ of the world, which releases them to a life that is still, calm, and ‘serene’ (Z 3).

The virtues of impartiality and constancy could make *zhēnrén* appear rather passive figures whose ways of life are characterized by apathetic disengagement, so a third cluster is needed to emphasize the more engaged dimension of their life. Given the popular images of Daoist sages as mellow and ‘chilled-out’, the risk is seeing them as essentially spectators, as indifferent, detached, and unconcerned with the ‘ten thousand things’. What this lacks is a proper appreciation of

the role in the lives of *zhēnrén* of certain ‘virtues of nurturance’ – of a cluster of dispositions that manifest attention to, care for, and cultivation of the particular needs and natures of other creatures.

The relevant metaphors here are aquatic and horticultural: the *zhēnrén* is like water in both giving life to creatures and providing them with a habitat in which they can move and flourish, but – switching metaphors – only if the water is properly directed to those creatures, ensuring that enough is given at the right time. Too much or too often and the plant drowns; too little or too rarely, and the plant is parched – which is why Sarah Allan describes Daoism as ‘the watercourse way’, this being ‘the most powerful metaphor in early Chinese philosophical thinking’ (Allan (1997), 95). The importance of horticultural metaphors is also marked in another venerable characterization of Daoists – that of ‘gardeners of the cosmos’, men and women who, like good gardeners, attend carefully to the needs and natures of things as ‘opened up and arrayed’ by *Dào*, who, gently and responsively, are disposed to ‘take joy in clearing the way for things’ (Z 6, 23, 26), a metaphor and vision deeply entrenched within East Tradition traditions (Cooper (2015)).

The virtues of impartiality, constancy, and nurturance are means of articulating some of the modes of spontaneity that are characteristic of *zhēnrén*. Crucially for the aspiration to emulation, each is a manifestation, in human form, of qualities or attributes to *Dào*. Since as the opening lines of the *Dàodé Jīng* remind us, the true Way cannot be spoken of, the qualities cannot be rendered in literal, propositional language. Working out the character of the virtues of spontaneity cannot therefore involve inferences from some set of propositions describing *Dào*. Although different arguments are given for the ineffability of *Dào* in the *Dàodé Jīng* and the *Zhuāngzǐ*, the favoured strategy within those texts is to use figurative language, especially subtle use of a variety of metaphors – aquatic, horticultural, and, of course, the very term *dào* itself, which in its nominal and dynamic senses can mean ‘a way/path’, ‘making a way’, and ‘clearing a path’ (see Slingerland (2007), ch. 6; Harrison (2015)). The task is therefore to use the associations set up by the metaphors to ‘translate’ qualities of *Dào* into the *dé* of humans, the distinctive ways of being given to us by the Way.

The impartiality of the *zhēnrén* is an emulation of the aperspectival character of *Dào*, its lack of purposes, projects, or perspectives. Only things have a perspective on the world, a certain structure of interests, concerns, and goals which reflect their distinctive natures and needs – a point Zhuāngzǐ liked to make by describing how the preferences of different animals reflect the particularities intrinsic to the sorts of creatures they are (Z 2, 17). *Dào*, by contrast, lacks concerns, needs, or interests, so from its perspective, as it were, nothing seems ‘worthy or unworthy’ (Z 17). Whereas the ways of creatures are partial, humans are distinctive for their capacity to recognize ways other than their own, those ‘opened up and arrayed’ by *Dào* (Z 23). The *zhēnrén* regard their ways of experiencing the world

as contingent, porous, and particular – as one way, among the many others, ‘given’ by *Dào*, and insofar as they can do so emulate the impartiality of *Dào*.

The virtues of constancy are conveyed using aquatic metaphors, of *Dào* as the ‘source’ or ever-giving ‘wellspring’ which ‘gives forth’ the ways of the ‘myriad things’ – flowing and maintaining its vitality through its constant change and transformations (Z 17). Whereas the rivers of the world could be dammed or diverted, however, nothing could do this to the Way – so, for one historic commentator, Shi Dewing, *Dào* is the ‘Great Course’, ‘what stands as a source to all beings’ (in Zhuangzi (2009), 362). The *zhēnrén* manifest constancy, stability, and sustainability in their own ways of thinking, acting, and feeling, like the old man swimming in the pool, whose ability to survive for so long in the turbulent pool was due to his willingness to ‘follow the Way of the water’ (Z 19). By swimming with rather than struggling against the current, he models the constancy of *Dào*, which courses through all things, thus giving them direction and vitality.

The cluster of virtues of nurturance are also clear in the aquatic metaphors, where the associations of water with life, habitat, cleansing, motion, and the processes of nurturing one can call ‘watering’ are all exploited. *Zhēnrén* are disposed to nurture things by ensuring their needs are met – filling what is empty, quenching what is parched, without ever overwhelming or drowning things. In so doing, they emulate the nurturing activity of *Dào*, for they inherit its activities by helping ‘bring things to completion’ and allow things ‘to accomplish their own mandates’ (Z 14). Indeed, as a testament to the richness of the Daoist metaphors, these many different associations are often combined in a single metaphor. Sarah Allan gives the example of *Dào* being like water insofar as it ‘provides life, gurgles up unbidden’, ‘moves of its own accord’, and takes ‘a multiplicity of forms’ (Allan (1997), 4). Here one sees the virtues of impartiality, constancy, and nurturance, all rolled together in one single act of metaphorizing that offers a model for the character of an aspiring *zhēnrén*.

By cultivating the virtues of spontaneity, a person thereby manifests, in human form, certain of the qualities or attributes of *Dào*. Insofar as they are successful, they emulate the deep ground or source of the world, thus realizing the aspiration to emulation. By ‘following the Way of Heaven’, a person satisfies the spiritual aspiration for integration or intimacy with the wider order of reality to become a *zhēnrén*, a ‘true’, ‘authentic’ person.

### **Spirituality, exemplarity, and plurality**

I have argued that early Daoism is best understood in relation to the aspiration to emulation. What characterizes the *zhēnrén* are certain virtues of spontaneity, which are manifestations, in human conduct and comportment, of qualities or attributes of the ground or source of the world, *Dào*. By cultivating spontaneity, those Daoist exemplars become models of intimacy or integration with the wider order of things, an achievement the *Zhuāngzǐ* describes in terms of ‘following the

Way of Heaven'. Since the relationship of *zhēnrén* to *Dào* is not characterized by loyalty, devotion, or obedience, it lacks the intersubjective form that is constitutive of the aspiration to allegiance.

With this account of Daoist exemplarity in place, let me make three comments on how it relates to the opening theme of spiritual aspirations. First, one should be extremely wary of nominating any specific mode or form of spiritual experience and exemplarity as 'authentic', as the proper or privileged expression of those deep 'yearnings', 'sensibilities', and 'impulses' for integration, unity, or intimacy with the wider order of reality. Cottingham and Zagzebski share the conviction that authentic spiritual experience involves a sense of confrontation with a divine person, which, given appropriate practices and communities, can modulate into a relationship structured by admiration, devotion, and love.

By doing so, they tacitly privilege forms of spiritual life primarily expressive of the aspiration to allegiance, the one most visible within their own cultural and spiritual tradition. One of the costs of doing so is the premature rejection of the forms of spiritual life sustained by the other aspirations. Cottingham, recall, argued that the 'Eastern' religions do not connect their ethical values with their vision of reality as impermanent, 'conditioned arising'. But they do connect them, albeit via the mode of spirituality that I labelled enlightened insight, rather than allegiance: most Buddhists regard attainment of *nirvāṇa* as requiring forms of personal transformation – ethical, affective, experiential – which are themselves enabled by the 'attainment of deep insight into reality' (Harvey (2013), 40). In the words of the *Majjhima Nikāya*, spiritual aspirants ought to achieve 'the stilling of all constructing activities, the relinquishing of all attachments, the destruction of craving, non-attachment' (*M.i.436*). Without going into the details, clearly this testifies to a means of connecting ethical values and a metaphysical vision at work, whose general form is enlightened insight into 'Noble Truths' (see Harvey (2013), ch. 9).

Second, the aspiration to emulation shapes the sorts of spiritual practices and virtues judged salient within a given spiritual dispensation. Given the intersubjective form of the aspiration to allegiance, for instance, one might naturally expect practices of thanksgiving and worship and such virtues as faith and piety. Although we find them in Western monotheistic religions, they are absent from early Daoism, where one finds practices of 'wandering' (*you*) and 'fasting of the heart-mind' (*xinzhai*): by 'fasting' from our tendency to treat our judgements and classifications rigidly and objectively, they become more porous, enabling one to explore other ways of encountering the world, other schemes of 'likes and dislikes', and 'roam' among the ways of other creatures, until 'the outside world slides away', until one experiences 'the vastness at the root of things' (Z 22, 19, 33) – a claim whose connection to the aspirations to emulation are described by Cooper (2018) and Kidd (2019). Without insisting that aspirations must be rigidly connected to a set of practices, one can expect certain natural 'couplings', but the real test will be careful investigation of specific spiritual dispensations, shorn of normative expectations about the proper forms of spirituality.

A third comment is that it is quite possible for different aspirations to merge within a spiritual dispensation, such as early Daoism. Although the emulationist aspiration is primary, other remarks may attest to the others: the praise of the person who ‘knows which activities are of the Heavenly’, and so ‘understand the Course’, recalls enlightened insight (Z 17). But it is not so clear-cut, again, since Daoism has complex attitudes towards *zhi*, a term that can be rendered ‘wisdom’ or ‘discernment’, but also as ‘cleverness’, ‘the mind bent on knowledge’ (cf. Ziporyn (2009), 219). Once again, the better strategy will be patient investigation of a specific spiritual dispensation, asking how its internal resources and cultural context structure and shape the expression of the aspiration – for instance, of how enlightened insight would be inflected in a tradition, such as Zhuāngzīst Daoism, where it is warned that ‘loyalty and faithfulness . . . are all just ways of forcing yourself to labour your own Virtuosity’ (Z 14). Such subtle issues can only be explored properly through close-up enquiry, setting aside culturally contingent expectations, and then ‘look and see’.

I conclude that there is a plurality of spiritual aspirations, including those of ‘allegiance’, ‘enlightened insight’, and ‘emulation’. Since these can merge, at the level of individuals or of traditions, the differences between them are likely to be of prominence, rather than presence – a reminder of Wittgenstein’s curt advice, ‘What’s ragged should be left ragged’ (Wittgenstein (1998), 51). Since early Daoism seems primarily emulative in its aspirational structure, attempts to reduce this aspirational structure to another, such as allegiance, risk failing to show fidelity to the texts and testimonies of Daoism or, worse, falsifying the lives of its adherents.

Investigation of the plurality of modes of spiritual exemplarity and their underlying forms of spiritual aspiration ought to guard against tendencies to privilege and derogate. Early Daoism certainly challenges many of our inherited preconceptions about the forms and character of a spiritual life – there are no gods, no saviour, no miracles, no such familiar virtues as faith or piety, and its outstanding exemplars include such quotidian figures as butchers. An automatic response to the unfamiliar, though, should be to make a double enquiry – into the unfamiliar itself, through careful and patient investigation, and, at the same time, into one’s own operative normative conceptions of what ought to be regarded as natural, sensible, and intelligible. Such self-reflexiveness can be attempted in many ways, depending on one’s own preferences and resources, ranging from appreciation of the contingency of one’s spiritual to cultural imagination or investigation into the tacit ‘certainties’ built into our ‘form of life’. But what matters is that one makes some attempt.

By investigating the aspirations guiding the lives of those early Daoist exemplars, we can hopefully see ways to explore culturally distinct forms of spiritual life. My aim throughout was to follow Burley’s warning that we ought not to ‘privilege a particular subsection of the category of religion that corresponds to a specific vision of what is good for human beings’ (Burley (2018), 445). Looked at

through the lens of the aspiration to allegiance, then, the *zhēnrén* seems peculiar in ways that generate puzzlements that develop into scepticism about its integrity as an authentic mode of spiritual life. Looking at it as an historically and culturally specific effort to explore and express the spiritual possibilities afforded by the aspiration to emulation, we can come to appreciate its distinctive character properly – something essential if we are really to achieve what Burley calls ‘a broader and deeper comprehension of the diversity of forms that religiosity can take in human life, including those that diverge from the inquirer’s own moral and religious values’ (*ibid.*, 440, 446).

Alongside the epistemic merits of this sort of approach, it seems pleasingly consistent with the Daoist imperative to surrender presumptive privileging of our own ‘ways’, thereby freeing us into a more open, expansive appreciation of the many forms of human life.<sup>2</sup>

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### Notes

1. References to the Daoist texts use the following abbreviations: D for *Dàodé Jīng*, Z for *The Book of Zhuāngzǐ* (Zhuangzi (2001)), and L for *The Book of Liezi* (Liezi (1990)). References to the editorial comments for these texts use the editor's name (e.g. 'Ziporyn (2009)').
2. I am grateful for the comments and discussion of an audience at the 'Philosophy of Religions: Cross-Cultural and Multi-Religious Approaches' conference at the University of Leeds and to Mikel Burley for inviting me to contribute this article and for his thoughtful, diligent comments on an earlier draft.