

Article

# Ziran: Authenticity or Authority?

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**Abstract:** This essay explores the core Daoist concept of *ziran* (commonly translated as spontaneity, naturalness, or self-so) and its relationship to authenticity and authority. Modern scholarship has often followed the interpretation of Guo Xiang (d. 312) in taking *ziran* as spontaneous individual authenticity completely unreliant on any external authority. This form of Daoism emphasizes natural transformations and egalitarian society. Here, the author draws on *Heshanggong's Commentary on the Daodejing* to reveal a drastically dissimilar *ziran* conception based on the authority of the transcendent Way. The logic of this contrasting view of classical Daoism results not only in a vision of hierarchical society, but one where the ultimate state of human *ziran* becomes immortality. Expanding our sense of the *Daodejing*, this cosmology of authority helps unearth greater continuity of the text with Daoism's later religious forms.

**Keywords:** Heshanggong; Guo Xiang; *ziran*; authenticity; authority; transcendence; hierarchy; immortality

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## 1. Introduction

*Ziran* stands as one of the key pillars of Daoist philosophy, and, following the immensely influential theory of Guo Xiang (d. 312), has, in modern times, mostly been viewed as the spontaneous and natural “authenticity” of each self-generating thing.<sup>1</sup> This conception of *ziran* logically results in the immanent, individualist, and egalitarian conception of Daoism that remains so popular, though one that also has intensified the contrast of “pure” Daoist philosophy and its “corruption” by Daoist religion.<sup>2</sup> After all, how can a tradition that idolizes the spontaneity of *ziran* living and dying possible relate to immortality? How can its egalitarianism abide by any hierarchal organization? Such a shift appears illogical and one that does violence to the “original” Daoism.

Yet, what if the *ziran* in early Daoist classics need not only be read as “authenticity” but instead can also be logically understood as “authority”? That is the possibility this essay aims to explore by drawing on the Chinese commentarial tradition, specifically *Heshanggong's Commentary on the Daodejing*, to reveal the logical results of an alternative hermeneutic where *ziran* represents transcendent authority.<sup>3</sup> At the three levels of cosmos, individual, and society, this authoritative *ziran* not only functions as a transcendent ideal that generates imperfect replications of itself, but also one that provides space for proactive striving because *ziran* produces both what “is” and what “ought” to be. This is–ought division means people need not remain their inborn “authentic” selves, but can

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<sup>1</sup> Historically, Guo Xiang represents merely one particularly radical reading of Daoist philosophy, but for modern scholars his vision has had undue influence and represents the polar opposite of the Daoism discussed in this article.

<sup>2</sup> The author does not ignore the rich scholarship that exceeds the bounds of this Daoism narrative, but in this paper aims to contrast fundamentally different views of *ziran* and critique what he considers a dominant stance.

<sup>3</sup> This commentary, which can be loosely dated to the 1st c. CE, was one of the most important and influential interpretations of the *Daodejing* in imperial China and Japan. For more on *Heshanggong's Commentary*, see Chan (1991) and the Tadd (2013).

strive after the authoritative standard of *ziran*. Taken to its logical extreme, *ziran*, radical though it sounds, becomes the actual *source* of immortality. As for the level of society, imperfect *ziran* manifests as the natural hierarchical state of creation, with the ruler gaining his authority by embodying and enhancing *ziran* in the world. Altogether, shifting this interpretation of *ziran* drastically alters our notion of Daoism and how continuity between its classical texts and later “religious” forms might not be illogical after all.

## 2. *Ziran* as Authenticity

In modern Daoist scholarship, the pairing of *ziran* with a type of authenticity can be found in many sources and has dominated the discourse as the “logical” way of understanding the *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi*. A key originator for this reading is the famous *Zhuangzi* commentator Guo Xiang, who, with his compelling and brilliant arguments on *ziran*, has significantly impacted how modern scholars have received this tradition. For simplicity, we will just mention a few in the summary below—Brook Ziporyn, Herrlee G. Creel, and Joseph Needham—though their views are hardly unique.<sup>4</sup>

Considering Guo Xiang’s definition in light of modern scholarship, one finds *ziran* as authenticity on the three levels of cosmos, individual, and society. *Ziran* is the authentic state of spontaneous and self-generating “Nature,” the state where the individual operates fully as himself or herself in the midst of this spontaneous generation, and the ideal state of society where these spontaneous individuals exist in egalitarian harmony unencumbered by the artificial authority of culture or political hierarchy. This reading has its own logic and presents an enticing vision of idyllic human existence.

Undoubtedly, Guo is quite a sophisticated thinker, and it is not our purpose to present his philosophy in detail or to “prove” that Guo’s reading of *ziran* is wrong and Heshanggong’s<sup>5</sup> is right, or to confirm that these two visions are the only major strands of Daoist thought. Instead, we aim to simply articulate Guo’s, and related positions, that have dominated much of modern scholarship, in contrast to a reasonable alternative that should not be dismissed as a simple appropriation or contortion of “authentic” Daoist philosophy.

Guo holds particular fondness for the concept of *ziran* and makes it the foundation of his entire Daoist cosmology. For example, he says:

“Heaven and earth” is just a blanket term used to indicate all beings. It is all individual beings that form the very substance of heaven and earth, and it is each being’s self-so [*ziran*] that aligns true to itself. “Self-so” [*ziran*] means what is so of itself [*ziran*], without being done by anyone or for any purpose. Thus, Peng’s ability to fly high and the sparrow’s ability to stay low, the great tree’s ability to last long and the mushroom’s ability to perish quickly, all these are done spontaneously, all are self-so [*ziran*]; they are beyond the ability of anyone’s particular activity. Because these are self-so [*ziran*]. (Ziporyn 2009, p. 132; Guo [1961] 1985, p. 20)

This passage, as translated by Brook Ziporyn, presents an egalitarian vision of the cosmos.<sup>6</sup> First, it explains that the term “Heaven and Earth” does not refer to two cosmic powers, but simply signifies the totality of things. Second, it argues for the equality of the great Peng bird and the lowly sparrow, as they both are completely “self-so” and “align true to [themselves].” Or to translate the relevant phrase slightly differently, “the myriad things indeed take their self-so [*ziran*] as what is proper,” a wording that clarifies Guo’s assertion that no transcendent or external standards exist. Every thing has

<sup>4</sup> Many other scholars fall into this basic tradition of interpretation. We can definitely include exemplars like Chan (1969); Schwartz (1985); Graham (1989); Wu (1990); Hall and Ames (1995); Hansen (2000); Moeller (2006).

<sup>5</sup> Though the author of *Heshanggong’s Commentary on the Daodejing* remains lost to time, we will refer to him as Heshanggong for convenience.

<sup>6</sup> The choice to rely on Ziporyn’s translation intends to reveal both Guo Xiang and his modern reception.

its own standard, its own “self-so” *ziran* state. Peng and the sparrow cannot be compared: they are that they are.

In addition, it is worth noting that the line “‘Self-so’ means what is so of itself, without being done by anyone or for any purpose” defines being *ziran* as the opposite of *wei* 為 (purposeful action). This pairing of *ziran* with *wuwei* (non-action) occurs quite commonly in readings of Daoist thought, and Guo Xiang binds the two key concepts here. Of course, as we will see below, action and purpose are not always conceived as antithetical to *ziran*.

When Ziporyn translates *wei* as doing with “purpose,” he reveals his own views, not radical by any stretch, to be in line with that of numerous modern scholars of Daoism who consider *ziran* to be the internal measure of each free and spontaneous individual. Ziporyn summarizes his interpretation of Guo, reflecting the position of many, as follows:

Guo’s staunchly anti-metaphysical, anti-foundationalist, and anti-theistic interpretation of Zhuangzi rejects any notion of the Course [Dao] as creator or source of beings, and with it any ontological hierarchy between Heaven and Man or between the Course and things. Instead, he stresses the concept of spontaneity, or “self-so,” (*ziran*, 自然) reading Zhuangzi’s Course as *literally* nonbeing, so that claims of the Course’s creation of things are to be understood as meaning that nothing interferes with the self-so self-creation, and also intrinsic rightness, of each individual thing. “Self-so” is the antonym of deliberate activity and of the purposive knowledge that goes with it. (Ziporyn 2009, pp. 222–23)

In summarizing Guo’s thought, Ziporyn clarifies his view of an egalitarian world of *ziran* “self-so” things that are self-creating and have no need for external standards by contrasting it with the hierarchical structure implicit in any metaphysical or theological vision of the cosmos. This comparison highlights Guo’s understanding of authority and how for him each thing in the cosmos is its own authority and hence is truly authentic. Per Ziporyn, *ziran* functions as Guo’s key concept employed to critique and oppose any type of transcendence or hierarchy of values.

This non-hierarchical spontaneous cosmos, identified with Daoist philosophy, at times has provided the foundation for critiquing Daoist religion as a contortion of its pure original form. One scholar who famously, or perhaps infamously, promotes this view is Herrlee G. Creel. He asserts that an original form called “contemplative Taoism” initiated the tradition, a tradition that considers the life and death of each individual as simply part of a “vast cosmic process” (Creel 1970, p. 42).<sup>7</sup> Only later did this wonderful teaching unfortunately become associated with “Hsien Taoism,” or the Daoism focused on becoming an immortal (*xian* 仙). Creel explicitly, and relevant for us, connects that “corrupted” form of Daoism to Heshanggong (ibid., p. 23), which he views as completely overturning the logical foundations of the ancient unadulterated tradition. He says:

The mere idea of all this toiling for immortality is repugnant to that of *wu wei*, not striving. The Confucian moral tone, the concern for rank in the heavenly hierarchy, conflict with the moral indifference and robust anarchism of Taoist philosophy. (ibid., p. 9)

Though this passage mentions nothing of *ziran*, its conception of *wuwei* as “not striving,” and thus antithetical to immortality, along with its rejection of possible hierarchy in Daoist thought, is particularly pertinent to the present discussion. We must note that Creel’s understanding of Daoist conceptions of death as unavoidable and properly faced stoically comes from his reading of Zhuangzi (ibid., pp. 14–15). Thus again Guo Xiang’s notion that each thing having its own *ziran*, like the tree or the mushroom having its own “natural” life span, frames the discussion.

This dynamic cycle of life imbedded in Guo Xiang’s reading of Daoism and Daoist *ziran* belongs within an organicistic and non-hierarchical cosmos that shares much with the modern conception

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<sup>7</sup> Creel follows Qian Mu in believing the *Zhuangzi* was the original text of Daoism, and he takes the *Daodejing* as a more politically minded work belonging to the later form of philosophical Daoism he called “purposive” (Creel 1970, p. 5).

of Nature. Joseph Needham, the famous scholar of Chinese science, seized upon this vision when he proclaims that *ziran* represents the character of natural phenomena, and classifies the Dao as an organic causal existence possessing no consciousness. He extends this logic to propose that nothing in the world requires any internal or external conscious controller (Needham 1956, pp. 51–52). Such a description radically rejects any smidgen of “authority” in the Daoist cosmos.

Needham further builds on this contra-control view when discussing Daoist society. Drawing on chapter 80 of the *Daodejing*, he explains how “Taoists were the spokesmen of some kind of primitive agrarian collectivism, and were opposed to feudal nobility” (ibid., p. 100). In proper Daoist society, hierarchy or any socially oppressive “authority” is non-existent. People are able to naturally live on, with, and off the land, growing and feeding themselves in peace and harmony. Needham further describes this by explaining, “The Taoist, then, condemned the differentiation of society into classes. Rightly they associated the process with artificiality and complexity of life, and urged a return to the pure Primordial Solidarity” (ibid., p. 112). Such is the social result of Daoist cosmic holism where everything exists together as one: nothing and no one is divisible by class or wealth, and it is impossible to stand beyond or above any other. This is the world of *ziran* as authentic living and simple human freedom. Any hierarchy in this world, any radical distinction between things, contradicts *ziran* and remains fundamentally artificial and against the cosmos.

The above condensed account of the three levels of *ziran* as spontaneous, individualistic, natural, and non-hierarchical draws on some scholarship that might be considered outdated. Specifics, like the rigid boundary between “philosophical” and “Hsien Taoism,” the gloss of *ziran* as “Nature,” or the identification of Daoism with primitive society have all been heavily critiqued. However, the basic framing of these views, and their associated assumptions about the *Daodejing* and Daoist thought remain influential.<sup>8</sup> Such issues are often positioned as the barrier between philosophical and religious Daoism; after all, how can the *Daodejing* condone going against the natural order to become immortal? How could that be *wuwei* or *ziran*? It contravenes the basic logic and values of the early texts.

However, assuming that this view, which draws on a reading of Wei-Jin Daoism interpreted through the lens of Guo Xiang,<sup>9</sup> is the “original” Daoism is actually quite problematic. In fact, Heshanggong, if the author and the current majority of scholars are correct, lived during the Eastern Han and therefore predates Guo Xiang.<sup>10</sup> That means his commentary is not some later overturning of the logic of the tradition, as Creel suggests, but one important early strand with its own basis. Still, our purpose here is not to make historical claims or seek the “Ur” meaning of *ziran*, but to confidently state that Heshanggong’s vision of *ziran* is compelling, internally logical, and reveals in the *Daodejing* space for transcendence, immortality, and social hierarchy.

### 3. The Way’s Nature is *Ziran*

Just as with the more familiar *ziran* model depicted above, Heshanggong’s interpretation of the *Daodejing*’s *ziran* concept exists on the three levels of cosmos, individual, and society, but, and in contrast to Guo Xiang and company, it emphasizes the term’s fundamental transcendent nature.

Beginning at the level of cosmos, *ziran* as manifest in the relationship between the Way and the myriad things can be further subdivided into three levels of meaning. First, Heshanggong considers the root nature of the Way to be *ziran*, which indicates that it is “self-so” in so far as it does not rely on or is influenced by any external thing: it is solitary and transcends all. In this sense, *ziran* could actually be a gloss for the state of transcendence itself. Second, *ziran* defines the relationship between the Way

<sup>8</sup> See note 4 above.

<sup>9</sup> Guo Xiang’s idiosyncratic philosophy does not represent all of Wei-Jin Daoism, as scholars like Xi Kang or Wang Bi offer quite different visions generally and of *ziran*. For more on this, see Lynn (2015) and Henricks (1983).

<sup>10</sup> Though this dating issue has been heavily debated, the majority of scholars now generally accord with Rao Zongyi’s Eastern Han conclusion (Rao 1956; Ofuchi 1967; Yoshioka 1977; Yu 1983; Seidel 1992; Robinet 1977; Chan 1991; Wang [1993] 1997; Tadd 2013).

and the manifest world. Although Heshanggong articulates a notion similar to the “Will of God” with his term the “Will of the Way” *Daoyi* 道意, the Way does not directly command or control the myriad things. It simply causes them to follow and imitate the Way’s *ziran*, and thus each creature, leaf, and stone has a portion of freedom that arises from the independent “self-so” state of *ziran*. Third, the Way creates a *ziran* order, something akin to the cosmic rules that govern the creation and development of all things. This type of *ziran* must not be mistaken for Nature, but represents the order that underlies Nature and emerges spontaneously from the Way. For Heshanggong, this *ziran* order rests on the system of yin and yang, and denotes a form of cosmic authority.

Heshanggong’s key philosophical move, on which the logic of his entire system rests, involves making *ziran* the basic nature of the transcendent Way, and a quality that only partially manifests in other things. Commenting on the famous Chapter 25 line “The Way emulates *ziran*,” he says, “The nature (*xing* 性) of the Way is *ziran*; there is nothing that it emulates.”<sup>11</sup> This statement undergirds Heshanggong’s entire conception of *ziran* and requires thorough investigation. To start with, it makes two key points. First, *ziran* is a kind of nature or quality. Second, the quality of *ziran* means not having to rely on or be contingent on any external thing.

While the first point that the Way has a *ziran* “nature” reveals a bold innovation that later influences all the Chinese Three Teachings (Zhang 2013), the second point that “there is nothing that it emulates” forms the keystone to this particular reading of *ziran*. Without it, identifying what quality *ziran* indicates as the nature of the Way would be difficult. With it, we can conclude that as nothing precedes the Way for it to emulate, *ziran* designates the quality of being self-so, self-existing, self-generating, and self-defining.

This state of *ziran* is particularly striking when compared with those of Heaven, Earth, and humanity, as mentioned earlier in *Daodejing* chapter 25. The famous lines declare, “humanity emulates Earth, Earth Emulates Heaven, Heaven Emulates the Way.” This structure of emulations leads us to conclude that the three great existences of Heaven, Earth, and humanity by virtue of emulating something else cannot possess a pure state of *ziran*. They are contingent on and transcended by the *ziran* Way that uniquely emulates nothing. Thus *ziran* is identified with transcendence and independence, in contrast to the state of all that relies on and is influenced by what is external to itself.

Interestingly, because the relationship between the transcendent and contingent involves emulation, we must admit that all things, including Heaven, Earth, and humanity, possess a measure of *ziran*, that fundamental quality of the Way. Their imperfect *ziran* results from the process of creation as division (chp. 42) and emulation, and thus logically must differ from the self-contained unity of the Way on which they necessarily rely. Humans, in particular, have a complex relationship with the perfectly *ziran* and the imperfectly *ziran* that demands a careful parsing in regard to the levels of *ziran*.

This split between the transcendently unified total *ziran* and the world of division that partially embodies *ziran* reveals the fundamental difference between Heshanggong’s cosmology and those conceptions of Daoism that follow Guo Xiang. It shifts away from a model where everything equally possesses its own unique *ziran*, to one where each thing slots into a hierarchy according to the quantity of the universal *ziran* it embodies. Such a fundamental philosophical shift, just based on an alternative reading of “The Way emulates *ziran*,” opens space for a logical and consistent Daoism rooted in authority.

While this authority relates to the Way as creator and ruler of the myriad things, we must stress its nature as a *ziran* and non-active power. In contrast to the anti-theistic vision of Guo Xiang, et. al., Heshanggong’s Way has dominion and will, specifically *Daoyi* 道意 (Will of the Way), but it never directly controls the myriad things or establishes explicit rules and laws.<sup>12</sup> This suggests that the

<sup>11</sup> All Heshanggong quotations follow (Wang [1993] 1997), unless otherwise noted.

<sup>12</sup> Taking Heshanggong’s Way as the ultimate authority, as the ruler of the cosmos, does not suggest an Abrahamic law-giving and law-enforcing type God. Such a conflation was made by early missionaries and sinologists, like that which can be found in the first translation of the *Daodejing* by Jesuit missionaries. Those translators drew on their own mystical tradition, taking

commentator contradicts Needham's assertion that the Way has no consciousness. It does have a will and a consciousness, even if never directly asserting or forcefully imposing it on the world. The Way is by nature *ziran* (self-so, spontaneous, carefree), and it interacts and maintains a relationship with the myriad beings according to this quality. This includes the sense of *ziran* found in chapter 23's "Few words are *ziran*," which explains why the *ziran* Way does not speak and never dispenses laws or issues commands even though it possesses a will.<sup>13</sup>

Although the Way does not engage directly or linguistically with the myriad things, they still respond spontaneously (*ziran*) to it. In his comment on the chapter 51 passage "This venerating of the Way and honoring of virtue is not commanded, but is constant and spontaneous (*ziran*)" Heshanggong explains, "Though the Way and the One do not issue commands or decrees, the myriad things constantly and spontaneously (*ziran*) respond to them like shadows and echoes." This type of "spontaneous" *ziran* does not depict the myriad beings as having their own individual and independent "selves," per Guo Xiang. They are not self-generating or spontaneously moved to action by their authentic inner natures; they follow and rely on the Way. This *ziran* state of the myriad things is only a semblance of true *ziran*. Things appear spontaneous because no command is heard; however, they are still being directed by an unseen order. They are still emulating the orders of the Way, Heaven, and Earth, even if they seem fully spontaneous and self-so.

The Way and the myriad things relate to each other like form and shadow or sound and echo, and this relationship vaguely recounts Kant's *numenon* and *phenomenon*: the ideal existence and its imperfect manifestation. Yet, Heshanggong seeks to emphasize how the Way obliquely and subtly directs the myriad things. Even without brute force or the power of word and command, the Way profoundly impacts everything. Such is the power of its primary quality of *ziran*. While the Way never barks orders, its status vis-à-vis all manifest things remains clear. For just as definite logical priority exists between a sound and the echo it produces, this represents a hierarchical relationship, a relationship of authority and subtle domination.

The hierarchical status between the transcendent and independent Way and the contingent myriad things brings us again to the concept of the *Daoyi* (Will of the Way). Heshanggong says, "I only dread enacting something for fear of losing the Will of the Way" (chp. 53). This comment suggests that *wuwei* (non-action) relates to this concept of the "Will of the Way." Not being *wuwei* results in going against the Will of the Way.<sup>14</sup> In this context, does *Daoyi* then equal *ziran*?

Heshanggong further states, "Petty people do not know the Will of the Way, but wantonly engage in the business of exaggerating their knowledge of it to make themselves prominent. This internally harms their essence and spirit, reducing their lifespan and lessening their years" (chp. 71). This passage reveals that following the Will of the Way results in health and longevity, while opposing it has the reverse effect. Such a moral-universe framework heavily resembles the theories used to explain natural disasters during the Han. In those models, when people, especially the ruler, go against

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the non-being of the Dao as the supreme nature of God (Liber Sinicus Tao Te Kim; Von Collani 2015). The reaction to this history is partially what fuels the certainty of scholars who present Guo Xiang's *ziran* as the only "authentic" view. After all, many scholars reject any resemblance between Laozi's Way and the Judeo-Christian God as Orientalism or the result of Western scholars self-projection, arguing they are opposite in conception because the Way has no "will" and cannot be a creator God that is Lord of the universe. Marcel Granet famously situates China as having "neither God nor Law," being the perfect opposite of the Judeo-Christian law-giving-God worldview (Granet [1934] 1950, p. 586). Yet, if this were true, Heshanggong's transcendent *ziran* and his Way that possess a will would not be possible. Heshanggong, along with many other Han Daoist thinkers, not to mention later "religious" Daoist thinkers, do mention the concepts of the *Daoyi* 道意 (Will of the Way) and the *Tianxin* 天心 (Mind of Heaven). Because of these notions, we must not prematurely reject the possibility of real similarities between the God of the Bible and the Way of the *Daodejing*, specifically the transcendent vision of the Way found in Heshanggong's writings.

<sup>13</sup> While many other readings of the *Daodejing* and early Daoism focus on the rejection of languages as an epistemological stance, Heshanggong often presents it as a political critique aimed at the ruler's power of performative utterance (chp. 34, 54, 57).

<sup>14</sup> Reading *wuwei* to mean "working to align with the Will of the Way" defuses much of the paradox of this concept. Instead of meaning "trying not to try," it suggests trying to avoid contradicting the divine authority. For more on the paradoxical reading of *wuwei*, see Slingerland (2003, 2014).

Heaven, they are punished with natural disasters, a causality called the mutual resonance of Heaven and humanity (*Tian ren ganying* 天人感應).

In Heshanggong's case, the resonance functions between the Way and things, with the implication that the myriad things can know the Will of the Way and can work with or against it. Because these things, and especially in the case of humans, have some portion of *ziran*, some portion of independence, they possess free will choice within the context of the larger *ziran* natural order. Thus, they can reject or ignore the Will of the Way and behave chaotically, but bound by their contingent status must inevitably face consequences for such inappropriately applied freedom.

Nevertheless, this raises a core question: How do we know the Will of the Way? For one, it lacks explicit commands akin to the prohibitions of the God of Heaven (*Tianshen* 天神) found in the Shanghai Museum text *The Three Virtues* (Ma 2005; Wang 2016). It is simply *ziran*. But how do we know this *ziran*'s will so that we can avoid acting against it? One possible answer comes from the theory of *ziran* in the *Taipingjing*, though that text goes even farther than Heshanggong in proclaiming that principle's transcendent authority. It says:

Heaven fears the Way and the Way fears *ziran* . . . *Ziran* is what maintains the Way of Heaven and Earth, enacts the Way unceasingly, and brings about the mutual movement, conquest, and generation of yin and yang . . . If the Way of Heaven does not accord with *ziran*, it cannot attain completion. Thus, the myriad things all attain completion by following *ziran*. Without *ziran* they would never attain completion. (Wang [1960] 2014, p. 719)

When compared to Heshanggong, the *Taipingjing* articulation of *ziran* has a stronger flavor of authority or even dominance.<sup>15</sup> Yet, the *Taipingjing* also clarifies the close connection between *ziran* and flourishing, for even Heaven and the Way must accord with *ziran*, lest they cease to function or thrive. More importantly, *ziran* is what "brings about the mutual movement, conquest, and generation of yin and yang." This underscores the vital connection of *ziran* and the yin-yang pair and offers a hint at how to know the "Will of the Way."

Although the Way proclaims no laws and issues no decrees, the Will of the Way does appear as the order or "law" of *ziran*. This brings us to the third layer of *ziran* regarding the Way and things. Just like the anonymous author of the *Taipingjing*, Heshanggong emphasizes the role of yin-yang in the order of *ziran*. For example, when chapter 42 famously speaks of the cosmic One, Two, and Three birthed by the Way, Heshanggong interprets these numbers as *qi*, yin-yang, and Heaven, Earth, and humanity respectively. This type of sequential, and thus hierarchical, creation contrasts with Guo Xiang's sense that "Heaven and Earth" simply denotes the totality all self-generating things.

More than this, Heshanggong's comments reveal the primal status of yin-yang in his cosmology and suggests the pair's role in the *ziran* order that emerges from the Way, confirmed in the following excerpt summarizing chapter 23:

This chapter explains that categories of things return to each other. The same sounds respond to each other. The same *qi* seek each other. Clouds follow from the Dragon, and winds follow from the Tiger. Water flows in the damp, and fire resides in the dry. These are *ziran* categories.<sup>16</sup>

Strikingly, this paragraph nearly duplicates one from the *Yijing*, where the original states:

The same sounds respond to each other. The same *qi* seek each other. Water flows in the damp, and fire resides in the dry. Clouds follow from the Dragon, and winds follow from the Tiger. The Sage creates and the myriad things follow. Those rooted in Heaven are superior and those rooted in Earth are inferior, as everything follows their category. (Lau 1995, p. 2)

<sup>15</sup> *Ziran* holds an especially important place in the *Taipingjing*, where it appears 154 times. It is one of the texts that highlight the historical value of a transcendent reading of the term (Tadd 2013, p. 583).

<sup>16</sup> Long quotes like this from Heshanggong appear with the original *Daodejing* lines in italics and the comments in roman type.

Aside from a shifting sentence order, the essential divergence in these two passages appears in the final statements. The *Yijing* has “everything follows their category,” while *Heshanggong* states “These are *ziran* categories.” Both texts depict a cosmos based on the resonance of yin-yang categories; however, *Heshanggong* identifies this order with the term *ziran*. Therefore, for the commentator, the fundamental *qi*-types of yin and yang remain integral to this order of *ziran*, with water and fire existing as particular manifestations within said order, and most importantly these categories functionally frame the spontaneous (*ziran*) resonances between things as articulated by the lines “The same sounds respond to each other. The same *qi* seek each other.” This “spontaneous” resonance explains part of the logic for terming this system *ziran*, aside from the status *Heshanggong* gives it as the “nature” of the Way.

Still, *Heshanggong* is not the sole Han work to combine *ziran* and yin-yang, which brings us back to the *Taipingjing*,<sup>17</sup> though more revealingly to the other major Han commentary on the *Daodejing*, the *Laozi zhigui* 老子指歸, which states:

Yin creatures live in burrows, and yang creatures live in nests; the flames of fire move upward, and the fluids of water move downwards. The myriad things are luxuriant: emerging in spring, growing in summer, ripening in fall, and coming to completion in winter. All return to the soil. This is not from governmental disciplining: things are *ziran*. (Wang [2004] 2014, p. 75)

This quotation expresses the state of *ziran*, where things are spontaneously themselves according to categorizations of yin and yang. This *ziran*-type system specifically contrasts with an authoritarian one that disciplines and commands. The yin-yang order of *ziran* never forces the myriad things to obey or follow some articulated law. It only provides a framework within which they can “spontaneously” (*ziran*) develop and interact with other things according to their own minds. It is a hidden and mysterious order.

Now, while this *ziran* yin-yang order, with its spontaneous transformations of the myriad things, might sound like Needham’s vision of *ziran* as organic process, for the commentator it is nothing of the sort. His Way transcends the yin-yang order it creates, an essential fact already confirmed by chapter 25 and chapter 42. Thus the worldly order, though seemingly spontaneous, exists in a deterministic and causal system, one where the myriad things are forever dependent on the pure *ziran* state of the Way. In other words, the spontaneity of Nature epitomizes a lesser and imperfect reflection of true *ziran*.

Based on the preceding discussion, we can resolutely conclude that *Heshanggong*’s *ziran* conception does not depict spontaneous transformation of self-so individuals existing without any overarching order or root origin. For the commentator, *ziran* is a transcendent quality of the Way that its creations embody to different degrees. *Ziran* in the world also underlies the way in which the order of the cosmos functions, an order described in terms of yin-yang, but this spontaneous “Nature” merely mimics the supreme *ziran*. Furthermore, because that transcendent level exists, humanity has the possibility of free will choice and can stand with or against this core principle of our creator. For *Heshanggong*, we *should* model the transcendent *ziran* of the Way, but this is something that we must strive for. It is not our “natural” state from birth. The truly *ziran* state for humans, to repurpose the language of philosophy, does not signify the authentic state of what “is,” but represents an authoritative state of what “ought” to be.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> The *Taipingjing* goes so far as to call this order a type of law. It says, “Yin and yang alternate and become their opposite. When yang is ascendant, yin declines; when yin is ascendant, yang declines . . . this is the *ziran* law of Heaven” (Wang [1960] 2014, pp. 604–5). This expression “*ziran* law of Heaven” (*Tian ziran zhi fa* 天自然之法) raises the specter of “natural law” in China, if we consider this *ziran* to be “nature,” but that is a debate for another time.

<sup>18</sup> The author understands this application may stretch Hume’s original sense used to critique the naturalistic fallacy (Hume [1739] 2007). Our purpose is to reveal the potentially dual nature of *ziran* as a term that can refer to both what “is” and what

#### 4. Humanity and the Supernatural Authority of *Ziran*

The previous discussion of *ziran* in the context of the relationship between the Way and the myriad things raises a major issue. From the perspective of humanity, do we consider *ziran* a state that “is” or one that “ought” to be? The author believes that Heshanggong does not ultimately select one or the other, but places them on different levels.<sup>19</sup>

The nature of the Way is *ziran*, which means that its relationship to the things it has created must also “be” *ziran*. Thus, even though there exists the “Will of the Way,” the Way never issues commands, simply allowing the myriad things to spontaneously develop without fatalistic external constraints. Furthermore, because the Way is *ziran* and the model for all contingent things, the myriad things inevitably preserve some *ziran* in themselves. In summation, the non-oppressive Way provides space for its creations to be partially independent and self-so, and they also intrinsically possess such qualities by virtue of emerging from the *ziran* Way.

In the case of humans, this portion of *ziran* means that people have free will, have some of the autonomy possessed by the completely transcendent Way. This is the “is” level of *ziran* for humans. Furthermore, the *ziran* order of yin and yang mentioned in the last section also “is.” Yet, because we humans have choice and thus the potential to change ourselves, the fully transcendent form of *ziran*, the type of *ziran* inherent in the Way, offers an ideal “ought” to strive for. This “ought” level of *ziran* transcends the limits of the *ziran* order of the world. In other words, the higher level of *ziran* transcends the realm called “Nature” in Western parlance, and those who attain it, in Heshanggong’s view, become true immortals.<sup>20</sup> That achievement reveals the full authority of the transcendent Way, that authoritative way of being which we “ought” to emulate.

This conceptual space between the “is” of normal human existence, even within the *ziran* order of yin-yang, and the “ought” of transcendent *ziran* undermines the rigid division scholars like Creel erect between philosophical Daoism and immortalist Daoism. If the state of *ziran* is something one must strive toward, then the logical conclusion of a *ziran* ideal, based in its root meaning of being completely oneself without reliance on anything external, becomes the state of immortality. Heshanggong’s articulation of a proactive *ziran* shifts the cosmos so markedly that continuity between the *Daodejing* and immortalists achieves clear reason.

How might this specifically be so? To start with, Heshanggong’s *ziran* conception, as a transcendent state, includes space that allows for radical transformation of one’s lifestyle and even one’s body. From the perspective of what “is,” each person is born with unique qualities or individual natures. This is a result of the *ziran* yin-yang order that always is spontaneously changing and varying the admixtures of yin and yang in each person or thing. The imperfect worldly manifestations of *ziran* initiate variety and plurality, and thus each person that exists in the world created by the *ziran* Way is distinct. When Heshanggong comments on the chapter 1 line “the profound and once again profound,” he says, “This means that within Heaven resides another Heaven, and so endowed *qi* can be scant or abundant. Those who obtain central, harmonious, and clear [*qi*] become worthies and Sages; those who obtain blundering, confused, and sullied [*qi*] become the greedy and licentious.” To paraphrase, the yang *qi* substance that comes from Heaven determines the overall yin-yang balance in a person.

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“ought” to be. Heshanggong could possibly function as a critique of Guo Xiang’s reducing *ziran* from what “ought” to be to simply what “is”.

<sup>19</sup> A. C. Graham wrote an article titled “Taoist Spontaneity and the Dichotomy of ‘Is’ and ‘Ought’” in which he suggests, drawing on *Zhuangzi* as paradigmatic of Chinese thought, that the spontaneous Daoist is not ruled by emotion or subjectivity, but responds with awareness to changing objective goals that accord with the transformations of the Way (Graham 1983, p. 11). He suggests that Daoism provides an answer to the is-ought problem by confirming that one can never step out of the spontaneous (ibid., p. 19). This sophisticated analysis assumes a very different type of *ziran* as spontaneous Nature that does not apply to Heshanggong.

<sup>20</sup> Of course, not all early Daoists found *ziran* and immortality compatible. For example, the famous supporter of Huang-Lao Daoism Han Wendi wrote the following in his posthumous edict: “Death is the order of Heaven and Earth and the *ziran* of things, so why should you mourn for me?” (Sima 1963, p. 433).

Those with copious amounts of yang become Sages and worthies, while those with minimal amounts become lechers and gluttons.

Due to the *ziran* quality of the Way, this wide possible range of bodily substances and the various correlated inborn character traits do not signify “natural” fated circumstances, states of *ziran* that simply “are” and can never be changed. With our portion of *ziran* we can and “ought” to purposely seek the pure totality of *ziran*, something articulated in the next and final line of the chapter: “the gate of total sublimity.” The commentator says, “He who knows that within Heaven resides another Heaven, and therefore that endowed *qi* can be abundant or scant, will expel emotions and remove desires to preserve the central harmony. This is called knowing the gate of the Way’s potency.” Put simply, if we understand the reality behind why everyone receives different amounts of yang *qi*, we can apply that knowledge to cultivating and changing ourselves into more bountifully yang people.

This affirms that Daoism can encourage altering one’s innate qualities, and that we should not necessarily identify doing so with the problematic *youwei* (forced action), which Creel argues contravenes the spontaneous self-so *ziran* order of the Way. After all, Heshanggong rejects this fatalistic type of *ziran*. For him, we have the power, because of *ziran*, to become more *ziran*, more independent, more removed from the influences and disruptions of manifest and sensory things, and thus more transcendent.

In chapter 48, Heshanggong comments on the line “Engaging the Way they decrease daily” saying, “‘Way’ refers to the Way of *ziran*. ‘Decrease daily’ means emotions, desires, and patterned ornaments diminish and decrease daily.” This suggests that *ziran* contradicts emotions and desires often classified as belonging to human nature. Desires result from being drawn out of ourselves towards some external object and thus pull us away from the independence of *ziran*. This is a natural process that “is,” being part of our basic self-so human selves, but represents the opposite of what Heshanggong means by this term.

The commentator’s *ziran* is a transcendent state and principle. It is not ultimately the authenticity of unadulterated Nature, inborn human “nature,” or what “is,” but, for humans, is a transcendence we “ought to seek.” It is not some idealized Rousseauian “State of Nature” that humans have lost.<sup>21</sup> We are born into the state of imperfect *ziran*, but we are not fallen: we are simply contingent. Our *ziran* facilitates evil, both because of what we lack and because the portion we retain empowers us to choose, even if our choices clash with the order of the Way. Thus Heshanggong does not endorse the *return* to our “State of Nature,” instead suggesting we seek the Way’s “State of *ziran*.” We must return to a state prior to our creation, and thus although his calls to “reject emotion and expel desire” might go against “human nature,” one finds no logical conflict. The true goal lies beyond what “is” for humans and human nature by grasping the nature of the Way: *ziran*.

According to the more common reading of Daoist *ziran*, learning and education, associated with Confucianism, are seen as anathema to this foundational ideal.<sup>22</sup> Yet, Heshanggong seeks to have it both ways with his embrace of a transcendent *ziran* that we ought to seek. While unpacking the chapter 64 passages “desires the undesired” and “studies the unstudied,” the commentator explains, “The Sage studies what others do not. Others study knowledge and trickery, while the Sage studies *ziran*. Others study regulating the world, while the Sage studies regulating his bodily-self through

<sup>21</sup> The famous Rousseau critic Irving Babbitt argues pre-Qin Daoism closely resembles Rousseau’s philosophy (Babbitt 1919, pp. 395–98). Many scholars of Daoism similarly suggest the tradition aims to return to our original natural state, and rejects actively seeking self-improvement. For example, Alan Chan in his review of Laozi’s teachings says, “Conscious efforts at cultivating moral virtues only accentuate the loss of natural goodness, which in its original state would have been entirely commonplace and would not have warranted distinction or special attention (chp. 18, 38)” (Chan 2018). While this view might be a fine reading of the *Daodejing* original, Heshanggong argues that original state is still not *ziran*, and thus we need actual effort to return to the transcendent Way.

<sup>22</sup> Alan Chan also says, “Confucian ethics assumes that learning and moral self-cultivation can bring about personal and social improvement. From the Daoist perspective, artificial effort to ‘improve’ things or to correct the order of *ziran* only fuels a false sense of self that alienates human beings from their inherent ‘virtue’” (Chan 2018).

preserving the Way's perfection."<sup>23</sup> This means that *ziran* can be learned. To study it does not return one to a childlike "State of Nature," but enables the realization of the Way's perfection. The other related comment says, "The Sage desires what others do not. Others desire prominence, while the Sage desires to conceal his brilliance. Others desire patterned ornamentation, while the Sage desires unadorned simplicity. Others desire sensuality, while the Sage desires virtue." The simplicity depicted here does not suggest a state of primitive society like that promoted by Needham, but one where the powerful have no selfish desire. It is the state without emotion or lust for what dazzles the senses because it is pure virtue.

Yet, what does realizing the full *ziran* of the Way look like for humans? Heshanggong suggests that instead of a return to the state of "authentic" human spontaneity, it appears more like longevity or perhaps even immortality. Quite strikingly the commentator raises this topic in the very beginning of his work, and as part of the basic definition of his "constant Way" (*chang Dao* 常道). Concerning the *Daodejing*'s second line "Is not the constant Way" he says, "It is not the Way of *ziran* longevity. The constant Way simply employs non-action to nourish the spirits and non-engagement to pacify the people." This "*ziran* longevity" (*ziran changsheng* 自然長生) might simply refer to "naturally" living out one's lifespan. Certainly, the *Laozi zhigui* implies that meaning when it states, "If you weaken the people's emotions and desires, follow their natures and lives, cause the people to be without knowledge, then they will achieve longevity and live long" (Wang [2004] 2014, p. 64). This type of worldly *ziran* longevity enables one to reach old age and could be described as authentically fulfilling one's self-so existence, whether it be long like the tree or short like the mushroom. Heshanggong's worldview again suggests a different reading.

Instead of proposing people "follow their natures and lives (*xingming* 性命), the commentator urges them to "recover their nature and life." This is the distinction between following what "is" and recovering what "ought" to be. The full chapter 60 comment on the latter says, "This explains that those who are peaceful and still recover their nature and life, and thus avoid death." There can be no doubt that this type of *ziran* longevity means seeking the transcendent level of *ziran* beyond even the influence of death. This is the logical result of reading *ziran* as total independence from any external influence, total self-existence.

Due to Heshanggong's alternative foundational definition of *ziran*, this term often translated as natural, naturalness, or even Nature thus becomes bound to the most unnatural of human acts—overcoming death. This contrast between spontaneous and natural existence and the radical goal of immortality led Creel to doubt the continuity between "Philosophical Taoism" and "Hsien Taoism." Yet, we find logic within Heshanggong's approach. *Ziran* as the state of non-death could be described as the absolute extreme manifestation of the two levels of "is" and "ought." Socrates "is" mortal, but for Heshanggong he "ought" not die if he becomes fully *ziran*.

In his articulation of *ziran* as the state of human transcendence, Heshanggong asserts concretely, "If I had no bodily form, attaining the Way's *ziran*, lightly ascending on clouds, entering and exiting where there are no openings, joining the Way, and connecting to the spirits, how then could I suffer?" (chp. 13). Thus the commentator depicts the reality of a fully *ziran* human being that has transcended all limitations and external restrains. It is not the *ziran* of the yin-yang order, but that of the Way. Heshanggong never uses the expression "Immortal" (*xianren* 仙人) to describe such a person, but once mentions "Perfected Person" (*zhenren* 真人), a term in later times referring to the supreme state of immortality. In a chapter 54 comment he says, "Cultivating the Way in one's bodily-self, one cherishes the *qi* and nourishes the spirits. This increases longevity and extends one's lifespan. If one's virtue is thus, only then will one become a Perfected Person." This passage remains vague about how long the

<sup>23</sup> I follow Zheng Chenghai in taking the phrase 人所不能 (what others cannot) as "人所不" (what other do not) (Zheng 1971, p. 391).

lifespan of the Perfected Person becomes; however, the connection between “virtue” and realizing this state provides some clarification.

This “virtue” (*de* 德), which enables one to become perfected, diverges from Confucius’s moral virtue (*de*) because for Heshanggong it represents yet another type of *qi*, a concrete substance that inhabits and body and the cosmos. In fact, virtue is “original *qi*” (*yuanqi* 元氣) (chp. 51) and equates to the cosmic principle of the “One” (chp. 39). This means the famous chapter 42 line “The Way generates the One” could be rephrased as “The Way generates virtue” or “The Way generates original *qi*.” Another way to describe this original *qi* of virtue is the yang *qi* dispensed by Heaven that provides the basis for all life and activity. Therefore, to cultivate virtue is to transform one’s natural endowment of original *qi*, that yang *qi* from Heaven, developing it to the point where it equals the original pure cosmic substance. Thus, we can posit that the Perfect Person’s achievement of “virtue” equates with the transcendent state of the Way’s *ziran*.

Still, this reading remains speculative, so to determine the meaning of Perfected Person we must look elsewhere to flesh out the Han version of this concept relevant to Heshanggong. In the *Huangdi Neijing* 帝經, another text dated vaguely to Han dynasty, it says:

I have heard that the ancient Perfected Person upholds Heaven and Earth, grasps yin and yang, breathes essential *qi*, singularly secures spirit, and his flesh is like a single substance. Thus he can live longer than Heaven and Earth, existing without end. This is his Way of life. (Ren 1986, p. 9)

Supposing that Heshanggong’s Perfected Person resembles the one so evocatively depicted by the *Neijing*, it means he idealizes a supreme human who, by attaining the state of perfect *ziran* equal to the Way, completely transcends the realm of the yin-yang order.

The yin-yang order identified with *ziran* is the imperfect *ziran* that “is” the immanent world, the world of transformation, of cause and effect, a framework in which to grow and then die. But true *ziran* floats beyond change, a state dependent on nothing, and thus beyond life and death. Although Heshanggong never confirms that transformations of yin and yang have no bearing on his “Perfect Person,” he does describe the Way, and thus the pure state of *ziran*, in such terms. “The Way moves all throughout Heaven and Earth. There is nothing it does not enter. Residing in Yang, it does not burn; dwelling in Yin, it does not rot. There is nothing it does not penetrate, yet it is never imperiled” (chp. 25). Combined with our previous knowledge that the nature of the Way is *ziran*, this passage only further confirms that Heshanggong considers the state of *ziran* to be independent and unaffected by any external existence. The Way as *ziran* is self-so, and thus yin and yang do not trouble it; form itself does not impede the Way wherever it exists in the world. It exceeds all things, residing “outside” the realm of change.

It is also worth noting the similarity between the Way that has “nothing it does not penetrate” and the transcendent human who after realizing the Way’s *ziran* “enters and exits where there are no openings.” We might tentatively conclude that subsequent to “attaining the Way’s *ziran*” a human becomes a transcendent Perfected Person, comparable to that presented in the *Neijing* passage, who is no longer affected by any external things and hence is “never imperiled” and cannot “suffer.”

Heshanggong takes *ziran* in a drastically different direction than the common reading of it as natural, naturalness, spontaneity, or even Nature itself. Though his *ziran* does manifest on the level of the cosmic yin-yang order, something that partially resembles a natural law, it signifies much more than that state which “is.” *Ziran*’s true state is immortality. This violently unnatural attainment remains possible because we have the free will to strive for this higher plane, to become more like the Way through studying and embodying its nature. It is the reality we ideally “ought” to attain. Those who achieve this transcendent state of *ziran* are beyond peril, and the imperfect *ziran* order of yin-yang means nothing to them. Yet, for most people such a lofty goal remains a distant dream, and they can only hope to follow the patterns of the *ziran* order, a circumstance that brings us to the question of how the cosmic authority of *ziran* manifests in worldly society.

## 5. *Ziran* and Society

Scholars like [Needham \(1956\)](#) have suggested Daoists idealize a primitive matriarchal and non-hierarchical society, viewing the “State of Nature” as an egalitarian context where people can be authentic to themselves due to their lack of oppression by any social–political authority. Such a conception logically emerges from Guo Xiang’s reading of *ziran* as total autonomy of the individual in the midst of the collective. In that non-hierarchical cosmos, the Daoist society, which models itself after said cosmos, must stand opposed to civilization and power structures.

Once again, Heshanggong’s notion of *ziran* society, rooted in his transcendent cosmology, diverges significantly.<sup>24</sup> For the commentator, the “natural” state of the world is division and imperfect *ziran*. The differentiated manifest world can only imitate and be contingent on the Way, with humanity being further contingent on Heaven and Earth. In the world, inequality is the order of things, and hierarchy, both in relation to the transcendent origins of creation and within the *ziran* yin-yang order, remains inevitable and inescapable.

This unequal world results from the *ziran* nature of the Way and the imperfect freedom it allots creation. Yet, this portion of *ziran* freedom imbues humans with free will, with the potential to increase disparity and sink farther away from the total wholeness of the Way’s pure self-so-ness. Of course, as Heshanggong optimistically asserts, we can also choose *ziran* and work to bring its transcendent state more fully into the world, that mundane lower manifestation of *ziran*, even if we never attain the complete *ziran* of the Perfected Person. One might actually say that *ziran* is both the cause and solution to the problems of the world. The spontaneous of division and allocation of *ziran* freedom given to things opens up space for evil, but it is the state of *ziran* that enables the possibility of improvement and provides the goal.

Now, when speaking of *ziran* in society, the factors of implicit hierarchy and the potential for change, in regard to both the ruler and policy, remain key. Let us first consider the structure of society. As asserted above, because of the hierarchical nature of the worldly *ziran* order, Heshanggong accepts as given distinctions between the upper (yang) and lower (yin) segments of the population, between the ruler (yang) and the ministers (yin), and the ruler (yang) and the people (yin). Egalitarian society cannot logically exist in his model, let alone be identified with *ziran*. Furthermore, because the commentator’s world is intrinsically hierarchical, no hard division exists between humanity and “nature” or “artificial” society and authenticity. Both sides belong to a common *ziran* order rooted in power differential.<sup>25</sup> There is no way to “return” to unbounded nature or primitive life: hierarchy is accepted and civilization is not rejected as contra *ziran*.

For Heshanggong, the givenness of hierarchical society follows from the internal logic of transcendent cosmos, but it also relates to his historical context. Living in the Han dynasty, Heshanggong addresses the needs of the period in which he wrote, and thus the political issues he seeks to resolve are those faced by a massive empire and not primordial villages. As a result, the commentator reads the chapter 81 passage “Make the state small and the people few” metaphorically, explaining, “Although the Sage regulates a large state, it seems small . . . ” Heshanggong’s ideal society

<sup>24</sup> The contrasting ideals of a hierarchical or an egalitarian society could perhaps be explained by variations between different Daoist lineages. This is somewhat comparable to what Mark Csikszentmihalyi sees as two basic interpretive stances concerning *Daodejing* cosmology: either “the text is anthropocentric and hierarchical or cosmocentric and non-hierarchical” ([Csikszentmihalyi 2015](#), p. 63). The author believes that these two sides could be generally categorized according to Meng Wentong’s 蒙文通 division of Huang-Lao and Lao-Zhuang forms of Daoism ([Meng 1987](#), p. 250). However, although Heshanggong does emphasize hierarchy, we cannot say that his placing of humanity in the process of the development of things should be considered anthropocentric. In fact, the commentator’s view is actually closer to the Confucian anthropocosmic vision promoted by [Tu \(1989\)](#), where humanity and the cosmos create the world together as co-creators.

<sup>25</sup> It is well known that Liu Xiaogan has heavily criticized translating *ziran* as “Nature,” and instead promotes the following, “Thus, we can say that *ziran* suggests the idealistic natural order of civilized societies and the world. Thus, for narrative convenience we might use *civilized naturalness* or a *natural civilized state* as English stand-ins for *ziran*” ([Liu 2015](#), p. 82). Liu does not consider civilization opposed to *ziran*, suggesting the most civilized society is the *ziran* society, that is, the society that models the Way.

is a large state or even empire, and in any large state or society there must be divisions of labor and variations of power: “deeds involve the divisions of ruler and minister, superior and subordinate” (chp. 70), “When the superior acts, the subordinates must follow” (chp. 2). Heshanggong presumes hierarchy because within his political world no other option exists.

Speaking as an imperial resident who assumes hierarchical order, the commentator unsurprisingly envisions the need for a ruling monarch.<sup>26</sup> In line with the *Daodejing*, he terms this ideal ruler the Sage (*shengren* 聖人), and because humans possess free will, this Sage has the capacity and in fact the responsibility to transform society.<sup>27</sup> To properly achieve a good society, the Sage must strive to concretize the transcendent *ziran* state as far as it may be possible for one remaining in society. Thus, unlike the Perfected Person, the Sage works with imperfect *ziran* states within the *ziran* yin-yang order.<sup>28</sup>

Evidently not transcendent, the Sage still represents a type of ideal. For an edifying description of this worldly paragon, and his compatriot the Worthy (*xian* 賢), we again turn to the *Huangdi Neijing*, previously so vital for comprehending the nature of the Perfected Person. Describing both these figures, it says:

[The Sage] rests on the harmony of Heaven and Earth, follows the patterns of the eight winds. He adapts to the wishes of the worldly common people, has no anger in his heart, and does not wish to leave the world. He wears robes and emblems but does not wish the people to see him do so. He does not exhaust his form with external affairs nor is troubled by internal ponderings, simply taking stillness as his work and self-contentment as his reward. His form does not decay and his essential spirit does not disburse, being able to live to one hundred . . . [The Worthy] models the principles of Heaven and Earth, imitates the sun and moon, clarifies the order of the stars, classifies what accords and discords with yin and yang, and divides the four seasons. He follows the ancient method of according with the Way, and can enhance his lifespan. (Ren 1986, p. 9)

The Sage “does not exhaust his form with external affairs,” and in this way embodies part of the basic nature of transcendent *ziran*, not being overly disturbed by anything peripheral to his self. Yet, the Sage, moreover, maintains a this-worldly focus as he “adapts to the wishes of the worldly common people,” a notion much like Heshanggong’s statement “what the hundred clans consider good, the Sage likewise considers good” (chp. 49). The Sage, as ruler, must consider the needs of the people, which explains why he cannot be completely *ziran* and independent of any external considerations. In this context, although the Sage has achieved a significant measure of *ziran*, when compared with the average person, he cannot escape death and only lives to about a hundred. The *Neijing* conveys this worldly version of *ziran* as embodied by the Sage and the Worthy, who are both ideal types of rulers. In this role, they employ methods like following “*ziran*” by “taking stillness as [their] work and self-contentment as [their] reward.” This political model reminds of what one finds in Heshanggong.

<sup>26</sup> Heshanggong is quite far from depicting a type of anarchism or even proto-anarchism, like many have suggested for the Daoist political model (Yamaga [1957] 1992; Vivancos 1963; Ames 1983; Rapp 2012).

<sup>27</sup> This interpretation closely resembles Michael LaFargue’s depiction of the ideal Daoist society. He says, “Thus, the ‘naturalness’ (*ziran*) of the society which he ‘helps along’ does not represent society as it would function if it had no ruler at all. It is what we would perhaps think of as a rather ‘romantic’ notion of naturalness, a state both in accord with the spontaneous impulse of the community, but also in accord with some human being’s notion of an ideal society” (LaFargue 2001, p. 52). The key message here is that the “naturalness” of society must seek an ideal ruler, as it cannot function spontaneously and completely without direction. This type of “naturalness” needs human intervention. Overall, this view resembles that of Heshanggong’s *ziran* society, though without such a strong sense of transcendence.

<sup>28</sup> In this world of partial *ziran*, humanity, and especially the Sage ruler, stands apart from all other things, for in chapter 42 humanity is included within the “Three” that generate the myriad things. The commentator says, “Heaven, Earth, and humanity together generated the myriad things. Heaven put them in motion, Earth transformed them, and humanity raised and nourished them.” This makes humanity a co-creator with Heaven and Earth. The notion of co-creator is often reserved as a Confucian concept, and one emphasized by Confucians like Tu (1989, p. 70), because sounds much too “artificial” and hence contra Daoist *ziran*. Still, Heshanggong quite explicitly suggests this type of reading, as the myriad things only come to completion through the husbandry of humanity, and in particular the Sage.

Heshanggong's worldview assumes hierarchy and a single authoritative ruler at the top. However, because the state of *ziran* presents as authority, the commentator emphasizes the importance of said ruler operating in *ziran* ways. This brings us to the question of government policy and *ziran*. We may recall that for the commentator, desire is the opposite of *ziran*. Thus if those with power can remove their selfish desires, they can establish a relationship with the people resembling that between the Way and the myriad things, a *ziran* relationship that involves no oppression or manipulation.

We observe this general principle in chapter 77 when Heshanggong says:

*The Way of Heaven diminishes the excessive and augments the deficient.*

The Way of Heaven diminishes the excessive and augments the modest. It always considers central harmony best.

*The way of humanity is not like this.*

The way of humanity stands opposed to the Way of Heaven.

*It diminishes the deficient to increase the excessive.*

Ordinary worldly people take from the poor to give to the rich and seize from the weak to enhance the strong.

From the cosmological perspective, once there is yin and yang there is difference and hierarchy, but at the ultimate level the *ziran* order of yin-yang returns to the central harmony of the One. Here, also, Heshanggong highlights that "The way of humanity stands opposed to the Way of Heaven." This signifies that because humans have free will (as imperfect *ziran*), our natural state involves seeking the fulfillment our selfish desires, which results in "taking from the poor to give to the rich, and seizing from the weak to enhance the strong." We might say that this type of "way of humanity" resembles Hobbes' "State of Nature," the war of all against all, which is the opposite of Heshanggong's ideal of the "State of *ziran*," that is, the Way of Heaven. The *ziran* of the Way of Heaven is the utterly desireless and selfless. This is the contrast of is-ought.

Furthermore, the chapter 77 comments confirm that although humans must exist with the yin-yang order and cannot escape superior and subordinate relationships, those in the positions of authority have the responsibility to limit what they themselves possess and give to others. In this sense, *ziran* as non-desire has an active manifestation: generosity. This resembles what Chen (2014) suggests with the term "restricting the lord to enhance the people" (*qujun shenming* 屈君伸民) as a depiction of Daoist political theory.

The removal of selfish desires on the path to greater *ziran* involves many policy decisions that can be summarized by the term non-engagement (*wushi* 無事).<sup>29</sup> Heshanggong gives this notion pride of place by situating it in the same chapter 1 comment that defines the constant Way as the "Way of *ziran* longevity." There he exhorts the ruler to use "non-engagement to pacify the people." This essence of Heshanggong's political philosophy manifests in multivalent forms that require some unpacking.

For one, the ruler must diminish his oppression of the people and increase their measure of *ziran* by relying on the Way of Heaven instead of law and punishment. He also must avoid conscripting the people as his personal labor force or living extravagantly at their expense. Heshanggong provides a lengthy account of this in chapter 57:

*Using non-engagement one attains the empire.*

Using non-engagement and non-action one attains mastery of the empire.

*How do I know it is so? Because of this:*

<sup>29</sup> The *Huainanzi* also promotes "non-engagement" (*wushi*) which it describes as follows, "When a sagely ruler is in power, he is boundless and formless, quiet and voiceless. The officials are as if devoid of tasks (*wushi*); the court is as if devoid of people. There are no scholars in seclusion, no people in exile, none doing forced labor, and none wrongfully mutilated" (Liu 2010, p. 801).

“This” means ‘the present’. Laozi is saying, “How do I know the intent of Heaven is thus? I know by observing the present.”

*When the empire has many taboos, the people are poor.*

“Empire” refers to ‘the ruler’. “Taboos” mean ‘prohibitions’. If orders are manifold, then treachery is born. If prohibitions are numerous, then subordinates are deceitful. There is shared danger and thus there is poverty.

He later continues:

*“I abide in non-action and the people transform themselves.”*

The Sage says, “I cultivate the Way and serve Heaven. There is nothing I change or create, and the people transform themselves.”

*“I love stillness and the people are upright of themselves.”*

The Sage says, “I love stillness, and so without decrees or discipline the people become loyal and upright of themselves.”

*“I am non-engaged and the people are prosperous on their own.”*

I do not engage in conscripting corvée laborers or soldiers, allowing the people to work in peace. Thus, all are prosperous on their own.

*“I am desireless and the people are naturally unadorned.”*

I am constantly desireless, rejecting flowery designs in favor of plain clothing. Thus, the people follow me in possessing unadorned simple substance.

*“I am without emotion and the people are pure of themselves.”*

The Sage says, “I cultivate the Way by preserving perfection and extinguishing the six emotions, and so the people follow me and are pure.”

The commentary on this chapter demonstrates the multifaceted conception of this *ziran* policy. We will break it down slowly. To begin with, it offers a negative example: the non-*ziran* ruler who takes advantage of his position to oppress the people and uses his authoritarian rules to harm the people. This type of extreme power imbalance makes it impossible for the people to maintain their own portion of *ziran*, to exist on their own terms and in their own way be self-so. This oppressive situation then pushes them to become proactively less *ziran* as their desire to survive stimulates greater selfishness and shamelessness. By contrast, the *ziran* ruler is non-active, still, non-engaged, and desireless, so as to minimize the pressure and restrictions they impose on those below.

The non-engaged ruler operates “without decrees or discipline.” Avoidance of oppressive rules has a practical benefit, but logically this governmental approach emerges from modeling the *ziran* Way that does “not speak and [does] not instruct.” In many instances, Heshanggong interprets the original text’s mention of “speaking” and “instructing,” for both the Way and the ruler who strives to be *ziran*, to mean never issuing commands or proclamations that others must follow. Such a restriction on the employment of power offers yet again a different form of “diminishing the excessive” or “non-engagement.” If those who have power do not simply issue commands aimed at realizing their selfish desires, the distinction between superior and subordinate becomes less explicit and society manifests a great portion of “central harmony.”

Other forms of “non-engagement” are quite similar to this. For example, the policy behind the statement “I do not engage in conscripting corvée laborers or soldiers” subverts hierarchical dominance. If the ruler does not command those below to work for the realization of his desires, they will never feel the crush of hierarchy. Furthermore, by not bending the people to his will, the ruler allows his subjects, who would have been mostly farmers, to work their own land and become “prosperous on their own.” If we consider this from the perspective of a transcendent *ziran*, the ruler embodies the authoritative *ziran* relationship the Way has with things, and thereby allows people to become more

*ziran* themselves. When not occupied by corvée projects, they are more independent, self-sustaining, and self-so.

If those in positions of superior wealth “reject flowery designs in favor of plain clothing,” the division between rich and poor likewise diminishes. Heshanggong particularly distains the notion *wen* 文—translated above as “design” and that also signifies writing, classical texts, and culture—because it magnifies the existence of hierarchy and desire. He contrasts it directly with *ziran* (chp. 48). Still, he does not oppose civilization generally, merely expressing a preference for a civilization based on the ideal of simplicity and plainness. Of course, this critique contains an economic aspect as well. For nobles to afford clothing with “flowery designs,” they will need to tax the people more heavily, an activity that constrains their subordinates’ state of *ziran*. Thus rejecting *wen* belongs to the *ziran* governmental policy of “non-engagement.”

Lastly, according with the *ziran* yin-yang order of Heaven and Earth represents yet another form of ruling with “non-engagement,” as following this greater authority that determines patterns of change and cycles of life prevents the ruler from simply following his “authentic” selfish desires and impulses. Heshanggong articulates this ideal quite plainly. As formerly mentioned, he reads chapter 8 as an elucidation of the nature of water being something which nearly reflects that of the Way. Relying on this interpretive stance he takes the passage “In acting, it excels at seasonality” to mean, “In summer it melts and in winter it congeals. It acts on schedule, never missing Heaven’s seasons.” Unmistakably the topic of this comment is water, but its function as example and metaphor aims to convey how one, especially a ruler, should harmonize with the *ziran* order unfolding through the cycles of yin and yang manifest in seasons.

This represents a common sentiment found in other Han works, like the Mawangdui Huang-Lao manuscripts, which urge the ruler to correlate his actions with the proper season (Mawangdui Hanmu boshu zhengli xiaozu 1974, p. 27). It also resembles the level of *ziran* rulership of the *Neijing* Worthy, someone who “classifies what accords and discords with yin and yang, and divides the four seasons.” To be thus situates one far from the total freedom promised by transcendent *ziran*, yet a person can achieve a greater self-so-ness by according with the cosmic order that limits regular humans and so evade the disruptive effects of opposing the Way.

All of these different manifestations of “non-engagement” in government policy originate from the authoritative power of the non-oppressive *ziran* nature of the Way. In this sense, such a governmental approach posits a *ziran* ideal that the ruler must strive to achieve. It does not happen spontaneously. As Heshanggong says:

*Thus, he supports the naturalness (ziran) of the myriad things,*

*He teaches the people to return to their roots and fruits in hope of supporting the naturalness of the myriad things’ true natures.*

*But does not dare act.*

*The Sage in his actions follows along, not daring to create or act for fear of separating from the root. (chp. 64)*

When the *ziran* Sage follows the Way, he augments the portion of *ziran* within the myriad things. He is not “acting,” but still makes the conscious choice to align with the Way and increase *ziran* instead of “naturally” pursuing selfish desires for frivolous external objects. But what does it mean for things constrained by the order of Earth, Heaven, and the Way to have their *ziran* enhanced? In this context this generally means greater harmony, but there is also a more concrete result.

When Heshanggong comments on the chapter 17 line “But the hundred clans all say, ‘I am naturally so (*ziran*),’” he explains, “The hundred clans do not know [the influence] of their ruler’s pure and abundant virtue, but instead think they themselves are naturally just so (*jizi dangran* 己自當然).” Here Heshanggong expands the term *ziran* by dividing and elaborating on the *zi* and *ran* to offer, perhaps, the most technical early definition of the term, and one which especially highlights the tension between its “is” and “ought” aspects. The people consider that they “themselves *are* naturally

just so," but do not realize that their "natural" and "spontaneous" state only exists because of the authoritative Sage's subtle influences. Without the ruler endlessly striving for the transcendent *ziran* ideal, as he "ought," the people could never attain their own blissfully ignorant form of *ziran* that appears to occur spontaneously without effort.

Of course, this low form of *ziran* diverges greatly from its supreme manifestation, though it still reflects the core quality of being unperturbed by external things. The people are not imposed upon by the ruler or troubled by anything that might exist if they lacked the protection of the Sage. And while their *ziran* remains impure by virtue of needing the Sage, in the context of normal human life this form of *ziran* allows the people to partially transcend social constraints so they can be self-so in the midst of the hierarchy-imbued cosmos.

At the level of society, *ziran* plays both the role of authority for the true and most effective ruler who models the Way, and the authentic if ignorant state of the people who can live their lives unencumbered by any explicitly oppressive social hierarchy. Put another way, because the ideal of the transcendent *ziran* can be sought and at least partial attained by a sagely ruler, the people can become more *ziran* themselves. Still, both superior and subordinate are not truly free, truly *ziran*, because they are trapped within the cosmic and social *ziran* yin-yang orders that require them to function within pre-established boundaries, boundaries that if crossed will "spontaneously" punish them. This is why true *ziran* remains transcendent, and the Perfect Person alone realizes this fundamental nature of the Way.

## 6. Conclusions

In this article the author has highlighted a somewhat unexpected reading of *ziran*, one of the two conceptual keystones of Daoist philosophy, that reframes the early tradition's entire landscape of cosmology, individual existence, and society. Like other understandings of Daoism, this system, found within Heshanggong's *Commentary on the Daodejing*, grounds everything in its cosmology, which in this case articulates "natural" *ziran* as a transcendent form of authority.

This interpretation does no radical violence to the text, but emerges from a particular exegesis of the line "the Way emulates *ziran*." This remains a difficult passage with no unassailably "correct" meaning, for it does not fit the pattern of the immediately preceding phrases where humanity, Earth, and Heaven all emulate some "thing." Depending on how one understands the term *ziran* here, it can easily mean the Way emulates itself or even all that is. In this case, taking *ziran* as a transcendent quality of the Way and not something to emulate is one reasonable approach in line with the overall text.

This interpretive move confirms transcendence in the *Daodejing*, something likewise seen in the commentator's discussions of the individual and society. Most shocking, though, is his identifying *ziran* with the state of immortality itself. In Heshanggong's Daoism, *ziran* does not ultimately represent what "is," but something we "ought" to strive for, even if it means radically transforming our authentic "natural" bodies. Furthermore, transcendent *ziran* infuses Daoist social-political notions with hierarchy, even while promoting non-oppressive *ziran* rulership.

Heshanggong's alternative standpoint reminds that the more common modern reading of *ziran* as spontaneous "authenticity," based on that of Guo Xiang, cannot definitively represent primordial Daoist philosophy, and that we must accept the status of its radical other. The *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi* offer copious space for interpretation, and these rich works do not readily reveal "historical" accurate meanings. While Heshanggong's *ziran* chafes harshly against that of Guo Xiang, both present powerful visions of Daoism. The advantage of accepting the "authority" of Heshanggong comes from his continuity with later religious forms of Daoism, exactly the reason Creel rejected his views. However, having explained the reasonableness of this reading we hopefully have shown that transcendence *can* be found in the original text or at least in an earlier strand of the tradition. For now, we can say Guo and Heshanggong epitomize two important authoritative and authentic extremes of Daoism and its key concept of *ziran*.

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