DAOIST HUMILITY: HOW ANCIENT CHINESE WISDOM AND MODERN PSYCHOLOGY ARE TELLING US TO BE NATURAL BY GOING AGAINST THE FLOW

by

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Indebted and Dedicated to

赵秀莹

My Teachers & Readers
MAIH FLAIH Friends
The Callous Daoboys
BBJRE/Triumvirate
Birkenstock x 13
Ashley & Kyle
Teo's & Lau's
D & L Yoder
Mima & Pipa
Dom & Dot
The Globe
C, G, L, H
KJ & DS
BRAD
TUTE
Yoshi
Xikai
STM

太初有道

凡所成

无不以他而成

道成肉身

住在人间

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ABSTRACT

The virtue of humility has a long and varied history. Beginning as a notion of solidarity of the poor in the Old Testament, it became a highly praised personal virtue in Christendom, only to be challenged by the Enlightenment as self-deprecation or self-deception. Contemporary psychology has kept the inward self-focus of Medieval conceptions of the virtue, but redefined it with a "twin-dimensional" account (accurate self-assessment, other focus) that is conceptually weak and practically confusing. The ancient Chinese philosophical poem, the Daodejing, presents an approach to life that may help to rehabilitate this virtue. For the Daodejing, any effort or ambition pushed too far becomes counterproductive. It therefore enjoins us to embrace lowliness and identify with socially-undesirable groups and outcomes. In this way, we can forestall vanity and self-destructive ambition. There is interesting evidence from psychological studies over the past century suggesting that the human mind indeed only has limited capacities for cognitive control, and that prescribing symptoms--i.e., telling people to ironically intend the very mental outcomes they are trying to avoid and control--is often more productive than trying to directly control outcomes. Therefore, I propose that a conception of humility as the tendency to voluntarily choose to accept unwanted outcomes and situations when necessary is more practical and realistic than one that focuses on accurate and limited self-focus.

INTRODUCTION

I. The General Problem: The Paradox of Humility

Humility in some form is present in the ethical expectations of most cultures. Indeed, most of us face the pressure to be humble on a daily basis. Willingness to defer credit for one's accomplishment to "the team," hesitancy in accepting praise, and care not to sound arrogant when we do claim our successes, are all things that are more or less expected if we do not want to appear arrogant or cocky to our peers at work, home, and play. Yet, at least since the philosophical Enlightenment of the 18th and 19th centuries in Europe, there has been a wide-spread ambivalence about the value of such a virtue. As Roland Barth (2014) notes, as early as the Protestant Reformation, humility was called into question as a problematic call to self-loathing and blind subservience. Defined in this way, humility clashes with widely accepted modern values of individual freedom, equality, and self-determination. In modern Western (and increasingly, global) culture, many have come to view humility, inwardly, as a form of low-self esteem and, outwardly, as excessive obeisance or deferral of credit. It thus comes as no surprise that many contemporary psychologists have redefined humility as "an accurate assessment of one's characteristics…and a 'forgetting of the self'" (Tangney, 2000, p. 411; cf. Chancellor & Lyubomirsky, 2013).

Psychologists and other modern theorists, then, do not see humility as a virtue to be discarded entirely, but rather to be defined correctly. Nevertheless, humility as conceived by both traditional and modern approaches can be hard to define and measure, and thus, cultivate and practice. Psychologist Everett Worthington (2007) calls humility the "quiet virtue;" since it involves a willingness to avoid excessive self-attention and to reduce one's ego, both awareness and praxis of humility often occur unexpectedly rather than yielding themselves straightforwardly to definition and practice. Thus, Tangney points out, "to the degree that a key component of humility is a 'forgetting of the self,' self-reflection and self-report of one's

level of humility may be oxymoronic" (p. 415, 2000). She also notes that the pervasiveness of self-serving cognitive biases means that accurate self-perception is probably quite rare. This makes the virtue especially resistant to traditional forms of empirical data-collection, such as self-reporting (Davis et al., 2010, 2011). Psychologists such as Tangney (2000), Worthington (2007), and Chancellor and Lyubomirsky (2013) have noted that while progress has been made over the past decades, there is still much ambiguity about how to define, measure, and cultivate this virtue.

In part, this ambiguity is due to the way contemporary definitions of humility place emphasis on how much credit and attention one ought to pay oneself instead of selves. This gives rise to a degree of internal contradiction in the definition of humility. An accurate perception of oneself and a forgetting of oneself are mutually exclusive acts. While it is understandable that modern psychologists include self-forgetting in their definitions of humility in order to mitigate excessive self-focus, neither of these dimensions inherently result in humble behaviour. Thus, pairing them results in a virtue-construct that is both conceptually confusing and unable to provide a foundation for humble behaviour.

As conceptions of humility in the Western world developed from an ethic of solidarity with the poor to one of refusing to strive for recognition and power inappropriately, the foundations were laid for a paradox of humility: how can I strive to grow in an honourable virtue whose nature is to resist striving for honour or credit?[1] Seeking to avoid self-debasement, contemporary psychologists' attempts to redefine humility have not moved

[1] Slingerland (2000), following work by Nivison (1997) on the concept of virtue or excellence (德, *de*) in Confucian thought, introduces the "paradox of *wuwei*" as a paradigm for understanding not only early Chinese philosophy but all ethical projects of self-cultivation. The general problem runs along the following lines: attempts at attaining virtuous states or healthy ways of being depend upon practice of the virtue in question, which in turn presupposes a certain proficiency in said virtue to be already present in the practitioner. Slingerland analyses the ancient Chinese ethical/spiritual ideal of 無為, *wuwei* ('not-doing; effortless, non-deliberative action') and finds a shared problematic that different ancient Chinese thinkers sought to answer in different ways: "how is it possible to *try* not to try? That is, how can a program of spiritual striving result in a state that lies beyond striving?" (p. 298). We will explore ways in which historical and contemporary understandings of humility face similar paradoxes in Chapter One; understandings of the Daoist ideal of *wuwei* as it relates to humility in Chapter Two; and a possible way to understand the paradox of humility as virtuous, not vicious, in Chapter Three, Section III.B, below.

away from the self-focused nature of earlier accounts, and thus, contradictions remain. For contemporary experts to define humility as accurate self-assessment coupled with other-focus leaves us with the confusing definition of humility as the ability to monitor ourselves while simultaneously trying to reduce our self-attention. In this paper I will argue that the only way to coherently define a virtue of self-humbling and ego-renunciation is to move away from self-assessment as the core of the virtue and to focus on one's behaviour. A proper understanding of one's place in reality, indeed a true humbling of oneself, is the result of willingly taking humble actions, not their prerequisite.

II. Statement of the Problem: The Paradox of Self-Focus

As discussed, contemporary psychologists largely understand humility as consisting in the 'twin dimensions' of accurate self-assessment and other-focus. This definition suffers from a paradox of self-focus: humility is conceived of both as a type of attention given to the self and as an absence of focus on the self. More significantly, neither self-assessment nor other-focus, whether combined or taken on their own, inherently involves humble behaviour. That is, a person can exhibit both 'dimensions' without being willing to identify with the outcast, take on menial tasks, avoid striving for prestige and power, or otherwise engage in any form of behaviour that could meaningfully be described as humble. In fact, it seems that making humility about questions of how and how much one focuses on oneself ironically distracts one from the very practices that would make one humble. I believe a Daoist "realist" understanding of humility can overcome these difficulties without falling prey to a conceptual vicious paradox or an ethic of self-debasement. Based in the ancient Chinese philosophical poem, the *Daodejing*, this humility is defined as willingness to forego social distinction and to accept undesirable conditions for the sake of one's own and others' well-being when the situation demands it (cf. *Laozi* Ch. 2, 7, 22, 72, 81, etc.) Modern research in cognitive

psychology lends support to the notion that deliberately associating with mental states that are considered personally or socially undesirable can break the hold of various types of fixation and distress (Shoham-Salomon & Rosenthal, 1987). Furthermore, research on ironic cognitive processes shows that such distress is often increased by trying harder to achieve one's goals (Wegner, 2009). I argue that this evidence supports a Daoist conceptual foundation of humility which holds that all human success is conditional, and that pursuing prestige often leads to destructive fixations on finite and artificial goods. Daoist humility solves the difficulties of other definitions of humility because it does not depend primarily on an ethic of the self- or other-focus, but rather on realistic behaviour that takes into account the limits of human cognition as well as the efficacy of relinquishing control of outcomes.

III. Significance of the Problem for Philosophical Psychology

A. Praxis

The significance of defining humility along Daoist lines is twofold. Primarily, it lies in reorienting the conceptual landscape surrounding this virtue so that we can cultivate it more readily, and so that its application is more fruitful, than in moralistic and self-assessment-based conceptions of the virtue. By defining humility as the willingness to accept unflattering situations and embrace menial, counterintuitive tasks, the ambiguities of monitoring how much credit or attention one ought to attribute to oneself as opposed to others are no longer obstacles to cultivating this virtue. Particularly, it removes the emphasis on how a situation or an activity reflects back on one's self-worth or self-image, and rather focuses on how that situation may affect one's life goals and the wellbeing of others. The method of humility becomes not a form of self-assessment or reduction of self-attention (or even an increase in other-focus), but rather a form of situational realism—accepting that uncomfortable and unflattering situations may be the most realistic way of attaining well-

being for oneself and others. The cultivation of humility is thus liberated from self-assessment to become an active openness to discovering where fixations on success and prestige have become counterproductive and then finding which counterintuitive, unselfconscious alternatives might replace them.

B. Research

Secondarily, conceiving of humility in terms of how it relates to situational outcomes (interrupting counterproductive obsessions) may offer a helpful approach to empirical measures of the virtue. Rather than the aforementioned unreliable self-reports as well as the difficulties involved in current personality judgment measurements,[2] questionnaires involving scenarios in which participants are simply asked how frequently they would adopt the unflattering, counterintuitive, or unpretentious option may be much less prone to self-centred exaggeration. In other words, asking participants how frequently they accept unwanted situations may not elicit the type of report bias common in questionnaires in which subjects directly rate their own humility levels, and may thus offer an alternative, reliable measure of humility. Furthermore, humility as a willingness to engage in menial and unpretentious behaviour is also much more concrete and hence observable—say in laboratory settings such as competitive team games involving delegation of positions of power—than humility as self-assessment and other-focus.

IV. Plan of Research

A. Methodology

My methodology involves a combination of cognitive and philosophical psychology with comparative philosophy. Psychology provides the framing question of how to define the

[2] Cf. Chapter One, Section III.C.2 below.

virtue of humility in the terms that are both practical and measurable. It also provides evidence in the form of empirical studies of human behaviour and cognitive processes. Comparative philosophy provides the concepts with which to articulate the importance of a realist, rather than moralist, approach to humility and self-renunciation. I find in Daoist philosophy, based on the ancient Chinese text of the *Daodejing* (and, to some extent, the *Zhuangzi*) and developed by modern comparative philosophers and Sinologists, an approach to humility that can overcome contemporary challenges in understanding the virtue. Daoist philosophy furthermore provides a conceptual framework that brings to light how modern psychological research provides empirical support for a Daoist approach to humility and clarifies what it might mean for practice and further research.

In terms of argument flow, I first briefly survey a few key Western and Chinese moments in the history of conceptions of humility. This is followed by a close reading of the Daodejing through the lens of several significant philosophical commentators in order to lay out the content of the text as it applies to a realist ethic of humility. I then examine contemporary psychological literature on ironic processes and paradoxical interventions for evidence that supports this Daoist ethic of humility.

B. Definitions

Dao – "way" or "The Way" - a Chinese term denoting both simply "a path" and "the way of life, teaching, and discourse of a master or school of thought." In Ancient Chinese philosophy, it also came to denote the ineffable pattern, form, or source of all reality, which especially in Daoist philosophy is non-assertive and therefore especially to be found in the lowly or humble side of all conceptual dichotomies.

Daodejing (DDJ) – The original classic of Daoist thought, likely composed sometime in the 5th-3rd centuries BCE in ancient China. It consists of 81 chapters, mostly in verse, which extol, often mysteriously or mystically, the importance of embracing lowliness in order to accord with *Dao* and to avoid self-destructive arrogance, violence, authoritarianism, and moralism.

Daoism – the complex sum of philosophical, religious, and social movements originating in ancient and medieval China which take inspiration from the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*

texts, and in some way or other conceive of *Dao* (lit. "way," or "the Way") as the guiding concept of reality. In this paper, Daoism will be used to refer to the philosophical thought of the *Daodejing*, the *Zhuangzi*, and the commentaries thereon--ancient and modern--which we will consider here.

Humility – The virtue of being humble. Defined variously in various times and places, I argue that humility is best understood as a character trait defined by the willingness to identify with the socially lowly and adopt counterintuitive and unflattering actions when confronted with situations in which effort and self-assertion prove counterproductive.

Ironic Process Theory – A theory put forth by Daniel Wegner according to which the human mind has both a cognitive control/operating process which brings about desired mental states, as well as an 'ironic' monitoring process which seeks out undesired states, in order that they might be avoided. Under high loads of mental stress or cognitive load, the ironic process takes over, so that attempts to avoid undesired states ironically bring them about (as when an attempt to avoid an anxiety-inducing thought increases its intensity).

Other-focus – The degree to which one's attention is focused on other people, often connected to an active concern for the wellbeing of others.

Paradoxical Intention Therapy – A psychiatric method expounded by Victor Frankl which seeks to address neuroses and mental obsessions by prescribing symptoms, i.e., asking patients to envision, intend, or seek out the very neurotic symptoms (such as a fear of heights) they are seeking to avoid or overcome.

Paradoxical Intervention – (Near synonymous with *Paradoxical Therapy*) A term encompassing a broad range of methods used by therapists, counselors, and individuals, that make use of paradox Such methods frequently involve reframing a problematic behavior or condition as something to be desired or intended, with the hope of either triggering client rebellion at the suggestion of keeping their symptom, or of making an unconscious, automatic process the focus of conscious intentional effort, thereby breaking its compulsive hold on behaviour.

Paradoxical Therapy – (Near synonymous with *Paradoxical Intervention*) Any therapeutic strategy (including paradoxical intention therapy) in which some type of paradoxical or counterintuitive strategy is employed. This may include both paradoxes of prescription, such as telling phobic patients to deliberately seek out the objects of their fear, and paradoxes of conceptualization, in which a phobic patient is taught to see their unwanted fear as a healthy and desirable part of themselves.

Realism, Realist(ic) - The term "realism" as a theoretical approach generally has two different meanings. In contemporary metaphysics and philosophy of science, the term refers to an approach which sees its description of reality as truly reflecting the nature of reality rather than merely a subjective, morally or pragmatically useful conception of reality. In political and moral theory, on the other hand, the realist is someone who takes into account the difficulty in maintaining moral or spiritual ideals in the face of 'real life' complexities. Daoist philosophical texts as I understand them contain both of these approaches in a somewhat mystical, yet practical, manner. Thus for the *Daodejing*, the *nature of reality is both such that*

moral ideals cannot fully describe it, and that we can nevertheless align ourselves with it behaviourally (largely by reducing our striving for control and prestige) such that we minimize injury, discord, and inequity. Daoist realism may thus be amoral but it is not immoral; it may prioritize 'know-how' behaviour over systematic rationalization, but it is not irrational.

Self-assessment – The practice of assessing one's personality and character traits, particularly to gain an accurate picture of one's strengths and weaknesses as they may be defined by one's own beliefs and/or the attitudes of one's society. Self-assessment thus tends to involve an evaluative aspect which distinguishes between helpful and harmful aspects of oneself.

Self-debasement – Using one's actions or thoughts to harm oneself or portray oneself as worthless. Self-debasement need not reflect one's actual opinion or attitude towards oneself. One might privately or publicly denigrate oneself due to moral injunctions to lower one's arrogance. Different traditions have different approaches towards what constitutes a healthy practice of self-denial; I use this term to connote any self-directed behaviour that is purely harmful and has no moral or personal benefit.

Social Distinction – Personal prestige and aggrandizement based on the belief that a person or person's attributes deserve exceptional merit and attention in relation to others and society at large. Based on social consensus regarding what is valuable, creditable, and worth recognition. May be self- or other-attributed.

Virtue - For the purposes of this paper, "virtue" refers to any conception of an ethical character trait or state (courage, love, generosity), as well as to a moral value or standard more broadly ('good,' 'evil,' 'gossip is bad,' 'thou shalt not kill,' 'seek only to maximize pleasure,' etc.) While many contemporary commentators find the Western traditions of virtue ethics to be the closest parallels to classical Chinese (especially Confucian and Daoist) ethics,[3] the scope of ethical discourse in this paper is not limited to virtue ethics. If my argument is successful, it should be helpful for a broad range of ethical theories that conceive of humility as a moral or practical good.

The *Zhuangzi* – Traditionally thought of as the "second" Daoist classic (5th-3rd) century BC, though its core chapters may precede those of the *Daodejing*. Zhuangzi himself was likely a historical figure and possible author of the "inner" (first seven) chapters of the work that bears his name. This work, especially the inner chapters, emphasize the futility of social and cognitive dichotomies and evaluations, and extol a way of life that is flexible, not preferring one circumstance or position to the next, and allowing the undifferentiated, limitless forces of Spirit and the Dao of Heaven to replace delimiting conceptual thought.

C. Chapter Summary

In Chapter 1, I give a brief overview of pre-modern and modern accounts of the virtue of humility, as well as some of the attempts that have been made in the past decade to study humility empirically. This sets the stage for illustrating the difficulties inherent in the ways

[3] Cf. Wong (2021), Van Norden (2007, 2002), Slingerland (2014, Module 3 & 6; 2001)

humility has been defined in the past and present at the end of the chapter. Chapter 2 then goes into an analysis of the thought of the *Daodejing* as it relates to humility, showing how it avoids the problems of self-focus with an ethic in which humility is primarily a willingness to embrace devalued things and situations in one's behaviour. In Chapter 3, I outline the theories and research behind ironic process theory and paradoxical therapies in modern psychology. I then draw out the similarities between these cognitive insights and the Daodejing, to show how they lend credence to its ethic while it casts light on their relevance for the virtue of humility. Finally, Chapter 4 considers potential objections to my approach to a Daoist concept of humility before offering some concluding suggestions for practice and research.

D. Conclusion

A Daoist Ethic of Humility successfully overcomes the paradox of self-focus inherent in previous accounts of the virtue. Moreover, modern psychological research offers evidence that the Daoist approach of becoming willing to embrace counterintuitive and formerly undesired situations is a realistic way to pre-empt arrogance, self-abasement, and cognitive overload. At the same time, it is important to remember that this evidence is only suggestive and open to further findings. Furthermore, Daoist approaches to humility are not incompatible with, and may need to be supplemented by, non-Daoist ethical frameworks.

Chapter One:

The History of Humility and its Modern Challenges

The way that understandings of humility have arisen and changed over time has influenced the paradoxes faced by modern practitioners trying to promote the virtue.[1] In this chapter we will look at conceptual overviews and empirical studies by contemporary psychologists to show that they evince a shared, and incomplete, approach to humility that may benefit from Daoist insight. First, however, we will seek to gain a cursory understanding of pre-modern developments that influenced modern approaches to humility.[2] Humility emerges in these sources as an inspiring expression of solidarity, which nevertheless sometimes lacked the realist element which Daoism provides.

I. Pre-modern Accounts

In this section, we will look at a few key examples in the development of the virtue of humility in the Judaeo-Christian West. While other traditions have also influenced modern Western ethics, it was the Hebrew and Christian communities that first explicitly extolled those considered 'humble' or low on the social ladder as virtuous in their own right, as we will learn from Klaus Wengst's (1988) account. Later Christian civilization developed humility into a personal virtue. St. Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274), through his stature as perhaps

[1] See introduction, as well as section III of this chapter, for an overview of the paradoxes of Western approaches to humility that this paper seeks to remedy with Daoist philosophy. As we will see, Worthington (2007) may be right that any attempt to define and cultivate humility will include elements of paradox. I contend, however, that there are virtuous as well as vicious paradoxes in defining humility, and that Daoism provides virtuous approaches to ameliorate the vicious paradoxes of Western philosophy and contemporary psychology.

[2] In many ways, the ethics and philosophy of the modern world—the World as it is shaped by industrialization and the European Enlightenment of the 17-18th centuries—differ significantly from those of the pre-modern world and non-modern cultures, most notably in the modern emphasis on the self-determination of the individual. Therefore, the first half of this chapter looks at pre-modern accounts of humility, with a view to how their development has influenced both strengths and weakness of contemporary accounts, while the second half looks at modern ones with a view to where they lack coherence. Since this paper focuses on Western accounts of humility, I spend most of this first section of Chapter One looking at Western pre-modern accounts, and further divide them into Ancient (history up to c. 800 CE) and Medieval (c. 800-1600 CE); but since it uses ancient Daoist philosophy to propose amendments to the current Western conception of humility, I include a brief section on ancient Chinese ethical contexts around the time the Daoist philosophers were active (c. 500-200 BCE).

the most influential thinker of the high Middle Ages, will provide a key example of this development. Furthermore, to understand the context in which philosophical Daoism's account of humility emerged, we will look at how attitudes of humility and deference were treated by two of its contemporaries: Confucianism and Mohism. We see that in both West and East, humility and deference originally developed as expressions of a person's socio-ethical context and people's ability to choose solidarity and harmony above material gain and prestige. However, seeds of paradox are evident. In the West, humility became increasingly concerned with deferring undue credit, which opened the way for the paradox of self-focus.[3] In the East, deference was embedded in a hierarchical system of ritual observance, which, while not inherently rigid or oppressive in theory, in practice often failed to reward the virtuous or provide social stability to inferiors. This was the context of the Daoists' rejection of excessive socio-ethical systematization in favour of a less artificial, more spontaneous stability.

A. Hebrew and Early Christian Background: Humility as Solidarity with the Poor

Klaus Wengst's monograph (1988) provides a unique analysis of how, in the ancient world, Greek and Hebrew terms around humility were originally used in terms of their socio-economic context. In the Old Testament Jewish tradition,[4] he shows how words denoting primarily socio-economically 'humble' positions first come to take on an ethical connotation. Beginning with Hebrew prophets such as Amos and Isaiah, a critique of inequality and

[3] We will explore these paradoxes in Section 3 of this chapter.

[4] Wengst is not primarily concerned with specific eras but with textual traditions. I consult him for his extensive examination of textual sources on humility, both Hebrew and Greek. The "Old Testament-Jewish" tradition, as he calls it, refers to sources within the Hebrew Old Testament, in the first three millennia BCE, that in his view share a positive evaluation of terms associated with humility. See Wengst (1988) Chapter III for details. Wengst's account, moreover, is not exhaustive. He focuses on texts that develop a theme of radical identification of solidarity with the lowly, but opposes them with important attitudes in the very Jewish and Christian voices he quotes that would affirm accepting direction from God and trusted guides as part of the solidarity of humility, opposing humility and authority in a way that pre-moderns would not. (cf. Macaskill, 2018).

exploitation leads to the poor being identified as the righteous, while the rich are identified unequivocally as the unjust. God is seen as being on the side of those in society who are exploited yet refuse to abandon their poverty by taking up their society's exploitative practices. God's promise of justice provides an "alternate public" in which the poor can share one another's load (p. 30). In the Wisdom (e.g. Proverbs) and Apocryphal (e.g. Jesus Sirach) literature, however, humble attitudes towards others begin to be lauded as a prerequisite for even the rich to obtain knowledge and honour.

Moving to the age of the Roman Empire (circa 300 BCE – 300 CE), Wengst's account shows how this Hebrew ethic of humility as solidarity is taken up by many of the New Testament writings, in contrast to much of Greco-Roman antiquity. Christ, for example, offers beleaguered labourers rest under his yoke, which indicated his identification with the poor and exploited in a new community of solidarity (p. 38-40). St. Mary in her Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55) reaffirms this, with an eschatological promise of elevation for the humbled (p. 42). Rather than seeing humiliating situations as inherently good, Paul the Apostle extols humility as voluntarily taking up the burdens of one's fellows in the Church, avoiding advantage at any of their expense (p. 46-53).

According to Wengst, pre-Christian Greco-Roman usage of "humility" and associated terms differs in important ways from those of Hebrew Scriptures. Humility here likewise refers to subservient social status, but its dispositional connotation is obliging and fearful, characterizing the attitude of servants to superiors, and men to gods. In the latter relation it is ostensibly seen as befitting the nobility as well, however, and it is also positively associated with the condescending mildness of rulers to subjects, even freedom from conceit or modesty in the noble. Thus, Wengst concludes that 'humility' as a term never loses connotations of fear and condescension in the Greek imperial context (p. 15, 50). Interestingly, Paul the Apostle, according to Wengst, follows the Greeks in associating manual labour and shame

with humiliation, while sublimating it, as discussed above. That some humble attitudes, perhaps not connoted by terms such as 'humble' per se, did have positive valences in ancient Greek culture is suggested by Torrance (2013) when he notes that "metanoia," the Greek word which Jewish and Christian authors writing in Greek adopted to mean repentance to God, is also extolled in non-Christian Greek writings as a means to amend vice and ignorance (p. 60-63).

Wengst's tracing of a tradition of humility as solidarity in the Judaeo-Christian Scriptures provides a useful paradigm for examining humility in other traditions, as well as an important point of potential contact with Daoist thought. Rather than seeing humility primarily as a question of self-monitoring, Wengst finds in it an act of solidarity with those whose situations are deemed socially undesirable. Indeed, Hebrew Prophets and New Testament Epistles invoke impending judgment in no soft terms on the exploitative rich, while the faithful are called to avoid partiality and give to the poor so as to avoid the fall for which powerful exploiters are setting themselves up. As we shall see, pre-emptive identification with lowliness is key to Daoist thought,[5] and, I will argue, part of any robust definition of humility.

B. Aquinas' Medieval Account

To get a glimpse of medieval developments in humility, we will take a look at St. Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* (*ST*), a pinnacle of theological and philosophical thought in the Middle Ages. For Aquinas, humility was regarded one of a "twofold virtue:"

[5] As we shall see in Chapter Two, The Daodejing points out that strong desires for political power and social prestige lead naturally to avarice, exploitation, and disappointment. The Daodejing calls upon leaders to lessen social discord by lessening desire for the material markers of social distinction. While the Daodejing does not share the emphasis on a community of solidarity with the Hebraic tradition, it does point out the day-to-day, natural counter-productivity of avarice and prestige in a way the Hebraic tradition perhaps does not, thus allowing for mutual enrichment. (Cf. e.g. DDJ Ch. 3 & Ch. 77).

> "Wherefore a twofold virtue is necessary with regard to the difficult good: one, to temper and restrain the mind, lest it tend to high things immoderately; and this belongs to the virtue of humility: and another to strengthen the mind against despair, and urge it on to the pursuit of great things according to right reason; and this is magnanimity. Therefore it is evident that humility is a virtue" (*ST,* 3.161.1).

Humility in Aquinas' account incorporates what has become one of humility's most familiar defining features: the refusal of taking credit presumptuously. We can see here, moreover, a general Aristotelian conception of virtue as a mean between extremes, which has influenced contemporary twin-dimensional accounts as well. In Aquinas, however, humility is not required to do all the work of avoiding vicious polarities. Humility resists temptations to arrogance, as opposed to despair—that is done by the (now forgotten) virtue of magnanimity. Thus, a possible way to pre-empt the conceptual paradox in contemporary accounts of humility would be to see it as one of two 'twin virtues' instead of a composite of twin dimensions. This would allow the conceptual core of humility to remain clear and cohesive, while also providing protection against self-debasement by also extolling humility's twin, magnanimity. We will briefly look at an attempt to develop a modern account using Aquinas' model in Richards (1988) work on humility in Section II of this chapter.

Aquinas account also points towards a slow development away from humility as a focus on socio-economic solidarity in a community of devotion to God and towards a preoccupation with one's individual relationship with God and one's neighbour in terms of deference, obedience, and credit-taking.[6] Unfortunately, in understanding medieval ethics as

[6] Cf. *ST* 3.161.3: "humility...properly regards the reverence whereby man is subject to God. Wherefore every man, in respect of that which is his own, ought to subject himself to every neighbor, in respect of that which the latter has of God's: but humility does not require a man to subject what he has of God's to that which may seem to be God's in another....[or] to subject that which he has of his own to that which his neighbor has of man's: otherwise each one would have to esteem himself a greater sinner than anyone else…. Nevertheless a man may

self-debasing, modern redefinitions have, if anything, intensified the self-focus of humility rather than retrieving the focus on solidarity and socio-economic contexts of ancient Judaeo-Christian (and Chinese) sources, which were (to some degree at least) still present in Aquinas' monastic sensibilities.

C. Brief Overview of Ancient Chinese Ethics of Humility (non-Daoist)

Before moving on to modern accounts, we will take a brief look at ways in which an ethic of humility shaped the intellectual culture in which Daoist philosophy arose in ancient China. The "Hundred Schools" of classical Chinese philosophy were formed as itinerant literati, seeking employment at the courts of the rulers of a fractured civilization, developed ideas about how to restore socio-political unity, ritual coherence, and ethical stability to the feudal fiefdoms of China's Warring States period of the 5-3rd centuries BCE (Slingerland 2014, 1.1-1.4). "The crucial question for all of them," writes Angus C. Graham (1989), "is not the Western philosopher's 'What is the truth?' but 'Where is the Way?', the way to order the state and conduct personal life" (p. 3). In this milieu, a significant example of what one might call humility is that demanded by Providence, or "Heaven," of the Emperor himself. In ancient China, ascendant dynasties began to justify their conquests by maintaining that the previous ruler had lost the "Mandate of Heaven" to care for the land and its people. The deferential humility expected by rulers of their subjects in China's hierarchical political philosophy was thus premised on a prior deference of the ruler to the needs of the people as her/his very raison d'etre.[7]

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esteem his neighbor to have some good which he lacks himself, or himself to have some evil which another has not: by reason of which, he may subject himself to him with humility."

[7] Cf. Graham's (1989, p. 29 & Appendix A) insistence that the goal of Chinese political philosophy is spontaneous action in maximum awareness. The ruler is supposed to be so in tune with his people as to naturally desire nothing more than their prosperity – this in many ways is the premise of Chinese statecraft. There is a parallel here to Wengst's (1988) insistence that for the radical Hebraic & Christian traditions of solidarity with the lowly, true authority comes 'from below.'

For Confucius, more than perhaps any other thinker of the Hundred Schools, the sincerity of the reverence subjects and officials express towards their rulers is of utmost importance. It is why he stresses genuine reverence for one's parents as the virtue *par excellence*. Not only is filiality the sphere in which human sentiment first sprouts, but also the litmus test of a person's sincerity: "filial people are said to be those who provide for their parents. This is something even the dogs and horses receive. If there is only provision and no reverence, how is there any difference?" (Analects 2.7). Confucius here has little interest in making displays of servility, of deferring merit or credit merely for the purposes of lowering one's self-estimation. Rather reverence is important here because it is evidence of one of the foundations of Confucius' thought: deference/reciprocity—*shu* (恕), or as Graham (1989) calls it, "likening-to-oneself" (p. 20). Graham cites later thinkers who give more extensive definitions of *shu* than Confucius himself:[8]

> What you do not yourself desire do not do to others, what you dislike in others reject in yourself, what you desire in others seek in yourself, this is likening-to-oneself...Being unable to serve your lord / Yet expecting obedience from a servant / is failure to liken-to-oneself. *Shizi and Xunzi* in Ibid.

While there is no explicit term for "humility" among Confucius' cardinal virtues, this definition of and emphasis on deference (*shu*) reveals that the voluntary humbling of oneself to one's superiors in Confucian ritual morality was to be performed not out of self-deprecation, but from a sincere concern for others' wellbeing, especially that of one's inferiors.[9] In a sense, *shu* parallels a central aspect of Wengst's (1988) account of Hebrew

[8] Confucius' golden rule ("What you do not yourself desire do not do to others") is mentioned repeatedly in the Analects (cf. e.g. Analects 12.2 and 15.24 in Graham, p. 20). Confucius gives what is perhaps his quintessential definition of *shu* in Analects 6.30 "Now the man of perfect virtue, wishing to be established himself, seeks also to establish others; wishing to be enlarged himself, he seeks also to enlarge others. To be able to judge of others by what is nigh in ourselves - this may be called the art of virtue" (trans. Legge).

[9] Ivanhoe (1990, p. 27-30) in fact infers from the Analects that *shu* is primarily a gracious consideration for those of lower station or less experience than oneself, based on the spirit, rather than the letter, of classical Chinese ritual morality.

humility traditions—seeing in one's own desires a solidarity with the needs of others. Confucius' fervour for ceaseless cultivation of hierarchical social ritual is really a desire to foster *genuine* care and concern for the wellbeing both of one's superiors and inferiors and one's entire social sphere.

Nevertheless, there were certainly intellectual reactions in ancient China that saw Confucius' *shu* as too parochial, and hence counter-productive, when faced with the injustices caused by human preference for those closest to oneself. Mozi and the more utilitarian tradition which sprang from him advocated "impartial caring" as a corrective.[10] Mozi in particular was interested in appointing ministers to office based on their competence rather than family or social background. His "impartiality" was explicitly defined against Confucian filial piety. Mozi complained that a Confucian deference was based on the vagaries and self-centredness of human emotion, rather than on the intellectual and moral capacity to care for the needy based on actual need. Important here, however, is that Mozi agrees with Confucius that humility is less about refusing undue credit or presumption (though there is some of the latter in Confucius), and more about being willing to assume the proper attitude toward one's fellow citizens. Where they (significantly) differ is on whether fostering an inner sincerity through ritual, or an egalitarian society through well-thought-out argument and well-executed legislation, will bring about such an attitude.[11]

From the few important thinkers we have surveyed, it is clear that there is an emphasis on social context in both Western and Chinese pre-modern sources. In the ancient Hebraic and early Christian texts, humility is defined as taking the side of the poor and lowly as opposed to the rich and powerful, and explicitly connected with a community of solidarity in which favouritism is forbidden. In ancient China, Confucius defined *shu*, of deference, as an authentic reverence based on empathy; in other words, while he upheld a hierarchical

[10] Confucius and Mozi are both likely earlier than the Daodejing as we have it today, and together provide intellectual context for its thought. Cf. Graham, 1989, p. 33 f. & p. 215 f.
[11] For more on Mozi, see also Slingerland (2015).

understanding of the public order, he maintained that respect and care both for one's superiors and inferiors ought to flow from the humble recognition that one's own needs and desires reflect those of others as well. Mozi did not emphasize sincerity of emotion, yet his view that the wellbeing of one's polity as a whole mandated egalitarian care for all (within a hierarchical political order) showed that humility for him was still connected to an awareness of social context. Finally, while Aquinas' definition of humility as refusing undue credit and presumptuous aspiration is perhaps the most self-focused of all the accounts surveyed, his explanation that humility is carried out through a detailed awareness of what is divine as opposed to human in one's own psyche in relation to that of others shows that there was still importance given to social context in his thought. We will now see that, in post-enlightenment thought, very little attention is paid to the relative prestige of social relations,[12] even when humility comes to be defined as involving an attenuation of self-focus in favour of other-focus in contemporary psychological accounts.

II. Modern Accounts: Accurate Self-assessment and Limited Self-attention (Other-focus)

A significant shift away from humility defined by social relations occurs in the shift from the ancient world to modernity. This is due in many ways to the ideological and social changes brought about by the Protestant Reformation and the European philosophical and scientific Enlightenment (and to some extent preceding medieval developments up to and including the Renaissance). These took place between the 15th and 18th centuries, but their intellectual and social fallout has continued into the present. These movements sought to replace what they saw as excessive self-debasement in medieval ethics with an ethos of self-

[12] In some ways, it is precisely social relations that enable the existence of a virtue of humility in a Daoist sense at all. If there were no people, achievements, or positions regarded as better than others, there would be no need to "know honour, but keep to the role of the disgraced…[so that] the constant virtue will be sufficient" (DDJ Ch. 28, trans. D.C. Lau, 1963). It may be just such a society without the opportunity for humility that the DDJ envisions, but it is written to address behaviour in a context where such a society does not yet exist. Cf. Chapter Two below.

assertion, individual freedom, and autonomy. As a result, ancient ethics centered on one's role in society or ontological status in the cosmos, as well as conceptions of humility as resisting credit, were increasingly replaced with an ethics of self-liberation and equality (cf. Bordo, 1987).

This shift away from social relations reinforced, and was mutually reinforced by, a shift away from resisting credit and towards appropriate self-understanding in attempts to redefine humility. Barth (2014) notes that some Enlightenment philosophers went so far as to discard humility as a virtue altogether, or even to call it outright unethical. He also discusses how the virtue of humility is a good example of the change in moral sensibilities from the pre- to the post-Enlightenment world. Where the ancient Greek world knew hubris as a vice against the gods but did not see humility as a human virtue (p. 104, 110), Christianity soon extolled humility as hubris' opposite and the epitome of Christ-like godliness (p. 106, 110-111). In the wake of the Reformation and the Enlightenment, however, "humility increasingly became synonymous with a menial attitude and blind obedience towards authorities. Humility thus became incompatible with the self-understanding of modern human beings" (p. 106). Barth goes on to explore contemporary responses to these developments, such as Charles Taylor and Alasdair McIntyre's critiques of the Enlightenment's ethic of autonomy as disconnecting us from any 'frame of reference' that could allow for a healthy ethical sensibility (p. 107).

Many contemporary philosophers and psychologists, however, still want to affirm humility as a helpful ethic so long as it is rid of self-debasing aspects. While psychological research on humility is a young field, a few areas of consensus are emerging in cognitive, empirical, and philosophical psychology. Scholars are defining humility (both as character trait or state) as encompassing the following "twin dimensions," one personal, the other interpersonal: 1) a view of self that is accurate and hence resists both "narcissism and self-

loathing" and 2) a high other-focus, or an attenuation of preoccupation with how one is perceived (Chancellor & Lyubomirsky, 2013).[13] They acknowledge other dimensions as well, usually including awe at transcendence as well as awareness of one's finitude and connectedness; often, though, these end up falling under one of the primary two.[14]

In this section, I will survey a few accounts of humility from recent psychology, including some attempts to create scales for measuring trait and state humility empirically. The empirical study of humility in particular is still developing; attempts at creating widely-adopted, empirically-verified means to both to measure and cultivate humility are ongoing and inconclusive. The survey in this section will show some of the strengths and tentative findings in the field. It will also prepare us to examine, in the subsequent section, some of the contradictions inherent in this contemporary self-focus-based approach to humility that hamper its measurement and application.

A. Richards (1988) Modern Thomistic Account: Humility and Dignity

Unlike the other contemporary accounts we will be examining, Norvin Richards (1988) follows Aquinas in using a dual-construct, twin virtue approach rather than a single-construct, twin dimension approach to address the need to attenuate both narcissism and self-loathing. Like contemporary accounts, however, he sees accurate self-perception as essential to humility, in the specific sense that "[humility] involves having an accurate sense of oneself,

[13] Cf. Nadelhoffer and Wright, "The Twin Dimensions of the Virtue of Humility: Low Self-Focus and High Other-Focus" (2008), as well as the responses to their paper collected in the same anthology.

[14] Another trend in humility studies falls under the burgeoning field of virtue epistemology, and concerns itself with those the epistemic traits and capacities of agents and communities which are collected under the name 'intellectual humility' (IH). Broadly speaking, IH also concerns itself with accuracy, only here it is specifically an awareness of one's epistemic limitations, as well as an appreciation for one's cognitive faculties based on their capacity for knowledge, rather how that capacity affects how one is perceived. While Daoist approaches to living well certainly address the hubris that results from human intellectual capacities, I believe they go beyond that to advocate a humble way of living in one's actions and relationships. Therefore, my argument will focus primarily on humility as an ethical virtue, or a personality characteristic that can be cultivated. See Turri, Alfano, and Greco (2019) for a relevant overview of virtue epistemological theory, and Tanesini (2018) for a well-reasoned conceptual account of IH.

sufficiently firm to resist pressures...to think too much of oneself' (p. 254, emphasis added). Rather than Aquinas' 'magnanimity,' Richards labels the resistance of "spurious pressures to lower one's self-esteem" as the virtue of dignity (ibid). While the dual-virtue approach avoids the twin-dimension's paradox of self-monitoring, it still evinces the general difficulty of self-assessment-based accounts. Richards notes:

> doesn't [my] account commit us to calling humble the truly accomplished person who is (therefore) entirely full of himself? ... Perhaps the splendid can be humble, but, it seems, only when they underestimate themselves, not when they appreciate their splendor. By way of reply: anyone who truly was "full of himself" and "putting on airs" would be exaggerating, since no accomplishment calls for one to do that. Indeed, those are the expressions we use to describe people who do go too far. (p. 257)

Where pre-modern versions of humility have become viewed as essentially self-deprecating,[15] Richards' modern version seems here to just have reversed the problem; it does not explain how humility is valuable for the "truly accomplished person." In the excerpt above, Richards (admittedly coherent) answer to this self-raised objection still leaves one feeling that something essential to the practice of humility has been lost somewhere between the Middle Ages and today. In agreeing with the modern view that accurate appraisal of one's achievements and limitations is at the heart of humility, the virtue is robbed of its unique element of self-yielding. Surely, humility does involve getting an accurate sense of one's place in the world, as it were. But more than this, it involves the specific awareness that one's true status involves union with those on the bottom rungs of the social ladder. Put practically, it involves acting on the intuition that it is often precisely in renouncing our (or our society's) sense of what is worth achieving, that we gain any measure of true success. Medieval

[15] See Mendus (1993) review of Richards, in which she argues that despite some formal similarity, an insurmountable gap still divides modern self-affirmers like Richards from the self-debasing nature of medieval accounts of humility.

accounts, it seems to me, were able to hold onto this unique power of embracing surrender. However, in refocusing humility from solidarity with the lowly to resisting undue credit for oneself, the Middle Ages opened the virtue to the critique of being self-debasing. Unfortunately, in reacting to and attenuating the danger of self-deprecation, contemporary accounts have not quite managed to return to the unique sense of identification with lowliness as being—in the right context—a good in itself, which, I will argue in later chapters, forms the real basis of humility and its praxis.

B. The Current Consensus: "accurate assessment...and...'forgetting of the self'"

In 1995, Nancy Snow wrote an influential article that exemplifies the shift from twin-virtue to twin-dimensional accounts. Written to compensate for neglect of humility amongst the "resurgence of interest in the virtues," her definition set the tone for the twin-dimensional characterization of humility that followed. It consists of twin dimensions of personal and existential humility:

> To be humbled in the narrow sense is to be appropriately pained by...the awareness of personal deficiencies...Proper existential humility requires that your affective reaction to the cognizance of human limitations…be appropriately commensurate with the seriousness of that knowledge. (p. 207, 209)

The characterization of humility's second dimension has largely moved from an awareness of the general human condition to an emphasis on other-focus, but the concern to moderate self-awareness with an attention to one's place in the world at large is similar in Snow and later accounts. While her account is twin-dimensional, it is one of the last to see ethical humility as primarily focused on limitations. Given, she says, that "we generally value...self knowledge...[and by extension] justified self-esteem...We should value humility, knowing and being concerned about limitations, as another analogous...form of self-knowledge" (p.

211). It is also valuable because it can "allow the...concern about your limitations to have a realistic influence on your attitudes and behaviour," including fostering other virtues "such as compassion…and the ability to ask forgiveness when appropriate, and checking vices, including improper pride, boastfulness [etc.]," (p. 210-211).

Where Snow addressed a gap in the *conceptual* literature, Tangney's oft-cited overview, "Humility: Theoretical Perspectives, Empirical Findings and Directions for Future Research," was foundational in suggesting connections between humility and *empirical* study. Tangney notes a preliminary consensus which sees humility as "characterized by an accurate assessment of one's characteristics, an ability to acknowledge limitations, and a 'forgetting of the self'" (p. 411), thus indicating the beginnings of the twin-dimensional approach. Turning to potential measures of humility, Tangney is one of the first to suggest what would come to be known as a 'paradox of self-reporting:'

> To the degree that a key component of humility is a "forgetting of the self," self-reflection and self-report of one's level of humility may be oxymoronic. What do we make of a person who views him- or herself as someone with "unusually high humility"? As Halling et al. (1994) point out, "One can reflect on one's own experience of fear, isolation, or self-rejection, but the attention during the experience of humility is directed toward others" (p. 121).

This introduced a scepticism about self-reports that has influenced subsequent attempts to develop humility scales, as we shall see. Here we also begin to see the difficulty of a self-assessment-centred concept of humility for empirical measurement. If conceived of as a sweet spot between narcissism and self-loathing, humility leaves awfully little room for the preferred[16] measuring tool of empirical psychology, self-reporting.

[16] Cf. Chancellor and Lyubomirsky (2013), p. 828.

In the second half of her overview, Tangney focuses on "relevant findings from related literature" (p. 416). She begins by noting that based on "the pervasiveness of 'self-enhancement biases'…humility may be…relatively rare" (Ibid). Nevertheless, psychological findings suggest several benefits of being humble:

> People who are immodest (relative to how others rate them) are more inclined toward physical aggression than are their more modest peers.... People who were successfully primed to experience humility...were slower to retaliate in response to provocation on a laboratory task.... Clinicians have long noted the links between excessive self-focus and a broad range of psychological symptoms, including anxiety, depression, social phobias, and… [possibly] coronary heart disease. (p. 416.)

It is suggestive that most potential humility benefits Tangney suggests involve reduced attention to self.

A decade after Tangney's overview, Chancellor and Lyubomirsky (C & L, 2013) outline the fledgling field of humility studies that has slowly begun to gain traction. C & L begin with a survey of the challenges measuring humility continues to pose. "Like other socially desirable traits," they state, "humility is suspect when self-reported," and yet, "humble individuals (who show low self-focus and are relatively less competitive) must nonetheless provide...accurate self-assessments" (p. 820). Ironically, a trait conceived of as involving accurate self-assessment is proving hard to measure through self-reports. More reliable, in the authors' opinion, are personality judgments based on other's observations; "stress tests" observing people in humility-challenging situations; and assessing state humility, which can elucidate psychological variables at play in instantiations of humility over time. Despite proposing *five* 'hallmarks' of humility, C & L acknowledge the twin-dimensional nature of most contemporary constructs, recognizing that "conceptualizations of humility straddle two broad domains – emphasizing personal or relational qualities [i.e.]

accurate self knowledge [or] relating to others," and organize their hallmarks under these two dimensions.[17] In closing, the authors recommend utilizing "multiple informants" and/or "delineating the relevant components of humility" to be rated (and if needed even minimizing use of the term 'humility' itself!) when attempting to measure it (p. 828).

C. Attempts at Measuring Humility: The Relational Humility Scale (RHS)

A prolific body of empirical work on humility is emerging from a group of researchers who, in the face of measurement challenges, have defined humility as a personality judgment. They follow Davis, Worthington, et al.'s (2010) framework, which posits a personality judgment model of twin-dimension humility to facilitate informant rating (other-rating) of a target subject:

> Relational humility [is] defined as an observer's judgment that a target person (a) is interpersonally other-oriented rather than self-focused, marked by a lack of superiority; and (b) has an accurate view of self—not too inflated or too low.... [P]eople might judge humility by focusing on the target person's...emotions, as well as...his or her behavior.... This subjective judgment—including distortions caused by relationship factors, such as characteristics of the judge, the target, or the information available to the judge...*is* the construct of interest. (Davis, Hook et. al., 2011, p. 226-227)

This model leaves room for the measurement not to reflect an absolute reality but still to avoid the paradox of trying to self-report humility. However, because this measurement does not currently integrate self-reports, it may not yet add up to a character trait measurement. This also means that the "modesty effect"—the idea, proposed by Tangney, that "the less

[17] Personal/dimension 1 hallmarks: "a secure, accepting identity, freedom from distortion, openness to new information;" relational/dimension 2 hallmarks: "other-focus, and egalitarian beliefs" (p. 823).

humble one is, the more one is likely to over-report one's humility, and vice-versa" (Davis et al. 2011, p. 225)—remains empirically unsubstantiated.

Using personality judgments, Davis et al. (2011) developed their Relational Humility Scale (RHS), narrowed it, and tested it for content, construct, and discriminant validity. The result is the three factor RHS comprising questions to prompt personality judgments of "Global Humility, Superiority, and Accurate View of Self factors" (p. 228). In its trial run, Davis et al. used the RHS to test whether being rated high in humility would predict more "positive relationship characteristics" with one's raters during situations of conflict; the RHS substantiated this hypothesis. In a final test, the RHS predicted forgiveness towards a humbly-rated person slightly more reliably than the most common humility personality trait self-report scale (Honesty-Humility on the HEXACO-PI-100) did.

In a follow up to Davis et al. (2011), Davis, Worthington, et al. (2013) used the RHS to assess trait humility, specifically it's usefulness for monitoring and repairing social bonds. This study thus starts where the previous one left off: "the primary strategy of assessing trait humility, using consensus of multiple raters and longitudinal methods, had not been employed. We sought to address these concerns" (p. 73). Their results support the relational value of humility over time:

> As predicted, when romantic partners who had recently been hurt in their relationships perceived their partners as more humble, this was associated with greater forgiveness at subsequent time-points... trait humility predicted acceptance and status in forming groups…. (p. 73)

Additionally, the study provided some preliminary evidence to the effect that "Trait humility was negatively related to…negative emotion within close relationships…and neuroticism … in general" (p. 72 & 73). Finally, while the results provided suggestive support of

measurement factors—multiple raters, longitudinal studies, using challenging situations to elicit useful humility measurements, the definition of humility used by the RHS—the authors call for further empirical confirmation.

Finally, Davis, McElroy, et al. (2017) developed a measure of state humility, called the experiences of humility scale (EHS) to complement the RHS. While assenting to the general twin-dimensional construct, the authors insightfully describe *state* humility as a "hypoegoic [self-forgetting] state in which one is relatively free of the need to rely on self-enhancement strategies to satisfy needs for approval" (p. 5). The EHS consists of 12 questions in four factors, two of which assess dimension 1 ("awareness of Selfishness/Egotism") while the other two assess dimension 2 ("Self-transcendence/Other-focus"). Testing for construct validity and predictive accuracy produced mixed results; EHS scores did correlate with meaning-in-life measurements, but the primers and prompts the authors used did not clearly elicit state humility (as opposed to other states or traits such as self-forgetfulness and religiosity) in all the tests.

In terms of cultivating humility, perhaps even less empirical work has been done, but at least one study (Lavelock et al. 2014) has found potential evidence of the effectiveness of a humility-workbook. Due to the individual nature of workbook intervention, the authors used a self-report humility scale that has not been tested for construct validity. While participants who filled out the workbook over a given period of time did show increased self-reported scores in humility and related virtues compared with control group(s), the question remains whether a true increase occured or whether participants were merely more primed to see themselves as humble after completing a humility workbook.

In this section, we have overviewed the development of the contemporary field of humility studies. Overall, the definition has moved away from a medieval account in which

humility is one of two twin virtues, focused on resisting presumptuous pressures towards greatness, towards a multi-faceted construct that involves some form of self-assessment (Richards, 1988; Snow, 1995). Primarily, contemporary accounts define humility as a combination of the twin dimensions of "an accurate assessment of one's characteristics, [and] a 'forgetting of the self,'" also known as "other-focus" (Tangney, 2000, p. 411; Chancellor and Lyubomirsky, 2013). In terms of empirical work, Davis et al. (2010, 2011, 2013) have introduced the framework of personality judgments—subjective evaluations based on the perception of one participant by another—into humility studies, and have used it in their Relational Humility Scale (RHS) to measure social benefits correlated with being rated as humble by one's peers in a laboratory setting. Finally, Davis et al. (2017) have developed the EHS questionnaire to measure state humility, and Lavelock et al. (2014) have introduced the use of a workbook intervention to try to cultivate humility, both with positive but inconclusive results. In sum, empirical research on humility is a fledgling field, with measures of trait and state humility yet to iron out conceptual difficulties and find widespread application and repeated validation. Nevertheless, initial results suggest a correlation between twin-dimensional humility and forgiveness, meaning in life, and relational well-being (Davis et al. 2011, 2013, 2017; C&L, 2013; Tangney, 2000).

III. Problems with Humility: The Paradox of Self-monitoring

As we have begun to see, humility has a long and varied history. And while people of various ages have found various ways to define and apply it, a certain paradox has remained at the heart of the "quiet virtue" (Worthington, 2007). This is to be expected – at some level, humility always involves the notion that, when the situation demands it, identifying with lowliness rather than prestige is paradoxically a good thing. Whether this paradox is vicious or productive, however, depends on how one understands humility. In medieval and

especially in modern times, we have seen that humility developed a focus on the self, or perhaps the ego—that part of the self which accepts and refuses credit, which sees the worth of its deeds and attributes as relative to those of others or of society at large. Even the contemporary consensus that humility involves a dimension of other-focus involves a monitoring of the self to ascertain whether one (or someone else, in the case of a personality judgment scale) is focusing too much on oneself. In contemporary self-focused accounts, the paradox of humility involves a tension between self-monitoring on the one hand and refraining from self-focus on the other. In this section, I will argue that this paradox is at least partly vicious, and more importantly, obscures actual attempts to be humble. First, however, I will briefly give a plausible account of how classical definitions of humility gave way to a popular understanding of humility that is unhelpful at best, unhealthy at worst.

A. How the Humble Fell: From Self-restraint to Self-deception and Self-debasement

As humility developed from a Hebraic and early Christian ethic of solidarity with the poor to one of the cardinal virtues of the High Middle ages, the paradox of humility ostensibly—and understandably—hinged on the fact that a virtue, the nature of which was to resist prestige and striving, was becoming prestigious and the object of much striving. Recall Aquinas' definition of humility: "to temper and restrain the mind, lest it tend to high things immoderately" (*ST,* 3.161.1). The paradox is that humility itself is a "high thing," one of the virtues Aquinas—and many others throughout history[18]—recommends us to 'tend to.'

Of course, the Thomist will rightly argue that it is not striving for high things per se which humility restrains, but only "immoderate" striving, "tending to" high things inappropriate to ones' life circumstances. There is a beauty, moreover, in the fact that humility here consists solely in the restraint of other things. It cannot be practiced except,

[18] Many spiritual and therapeutic traditions depend on such a paradox, whether it be the Buddhist desire to be released from desire, or, as we shall see, the advice of the *Daodejing*—and much contemporary psychology—to get ourselves to desire and experience precisely those things we desire not to experience.

passively or by proxy, i.e. by actively reducing one's striving for inappropriate ends. This is an ingenious way to avoid vicious paradox; the person who is humble can never boast of having attained the skill of practicing humility (cf. Worthington, 2007). It would be misplaced to be proud of something attained by accident. Or at least, it is unlikely one will be proud of one's humility if by humility we mean precisely the practice of restraining things such as arrogant thoughts and deeds.

However, this ostensibly virtuous paradox of humility as a virtue that can only be sought after indirectly, by restraint, may unfortunately have become twisted into the modern notion that in order to be virtuous, we must do ourselves some type of injury. What follows is a plausible account of the paradox of popular conceptions of humility. Such conceptions can be divided into two fundamentally vicious paradoxes, resulting from the sentiment that humility, taken as a call to moral excellence, is something beyond the common decency we use to get through the day. Namely, we think that in order to be humble, we must believe that, or act as though, we are worse in some way than our ordinary reason or experience tells us about ourselves. We therefore engage in a type of 'virtuous' deception. In the first paradox ('self-deception'), this deception takes the form of disingenuous self-talk to the following effect: 'Even though it seems like I deserve credit for such and such a character trait or achievement, I really don't. I really don't. *I really don't!*' In the second paradox ('self-debasement,' or 'deceiving others'), the deception is towards others: 'I may be more virtuous and excellent than you but let me kowtow to *give you the impression* that you are more virtuous than myself.' In other words, we often see humility (as well as deference/*shu* in the Chinese tradition) as *essentially* a type of ego-therapy, in which the mind or self is taught to be less presumptuous and immoderate by acting as if it were less worthy of praise than it thinks it is. The resultant problem is both that, rather than detachment from ego, humility is now oft seen as call to self-loathing, and that, rather than a release from being self-conscious,

it becomes self-scrutiny and self-deception. Whether or not this account of popular misconceptions of humility is an accurate one bears further substantiating, but it is suggestive of why contemporary researchers report a continued impression of humility as either self-deprecating (Chancellor & Lyubomirsky, 2013) or difficult to cultivate (Worthington, 2007). It can, therefore, only help to introduce accounts of humility that are not primarily concerned with either moral systems, or with notions of self-assessment, other-focus, or the amount of credit and recognition one deserves.

B. Problems in Contemporary Psychology: Self-focus and Measurement

Contemporary psychology, has, as mentioned, attempted to forego problems of self-debasement by positing humility as a composite of accurate self-assessment and a healthy consideration of others, or other focus. In doing so, however, they have invited a new potential for paradox into the discussion of humility: how is it that to be humble is both to assess oneself and to focus on others? Indeed, these two dimensions are so formally opposed that it is both no surprise that theorists agree that humility must be a complex construct, and quite a surprise that no one to my knowledge has raised the issue of the apparent definitional contradiction between these two elements. For the remainder of this chapter, I will briefly argue that the twin-dimension account of humility is problematic both conceptually and practically. Conceptually, it give no reason as to why or how the two dimensions should be related as part of the same construct rather than as virtues of their own, as well as to what about their combination would issue in inherently humble behaviour. Practically, because it remains so focussed on abstractions of self and other, it eludes attempts at both measurement and cultivation.

1. Conceptual Difficulties: Reducing self-attention while increasing self-awareness

Since philosophical and empirical psychologists define humility as consisting of two states/acts that are mutually exclusive—one cannot assess oneself while focusing on others[19]—one would expect them to explain exactly why they are part of one virtue construct and how to harmonize them. Since, to my knowledge, such explanations are absent from the literature, I have assumed that they intend both dimensions to be characteristic states or acts of the same person over time, who may then be called humble. It is of course possible to assess oneself at one moment in time and then focus on others the next, and neither of these practices are ethically opposed to the other. However, the question remains as to why these two dimensions are part of the same construct, and how to balance them in practice. Are they the opposite ends of a single spectrum? If so, what is that spectrum? If not, do they share some other form of conceptual unity that binds them together in one construct? Finally, and perhaps, most importantly, neither self-assessment nor other-focus *necessarily* involve practices traditionally defined as humble—such as self-yielding, renouncing credit, and doing menial tasks—so what is it that makes them the components of a construct called humility? Again, no clear explanation is given in the literature I have surveyed.

Perhaps psychologists feel that one dimension by definition provides a reason for why it should be paired with the other dimension in a construct called humility. It is true that the two dimensions moderate each other, so that one is not either blindly focusing on others while being ignorant of one's strengths and liabilities or honestly assessing oneself but never becoming aware of the needs of others. Yet it is hard to see why this should mean that self-assessment is somehow part of the same virtue as other-focus, and not simply a separate virtue that it is helpful to cultivate to mitigate excessive other-focus, and vice versa, as in the

[19] unlike, say, focusing on others and having an experience of awe or self-transcendence at the same time (dimension 2 + Snow's existential humility), or accurately perceiving one's desire for undue credit even as one unselfishly restrains it (dimension 1 + Aquinas' humility).

older twin-virtue approach. If psychologists do insist on combining them in a single construct, however, the relationship between them becomes problematic. It would be difficult to argue that someone who regularly resists undue credit and strives for due credit is exhibiting one trait in both actions. Similarly, it is paradoxical to tell someone to be more humble by both focusing on others and assessing themselves more.

Moreover, it is unclear whether combining self-assessment and other-focus is sufficient to produce inherently humble behaviour. Taken alone, neither dimension necessarily does so. As Snow (1995, p. 211) points out, accurate self-knowledge is virtuous because it is a form of knowledge, which is a good in and of itself. It need not issue in modest or contrite behaviour. One can, in theory, be well aware of one's weaknesses and one's strengths without taking an active concern in the fate of those less fortunate than oneself, or taking a 'back seat' to others when necessary, or sacrificing one's position for others—i.e., humbling oneself in any meaningful way. The only part of self-assessment that is inherently humble is the willingness to examine and accept the negative aspects of oneself, but unless this were to necessarily issue in humble behaviour, it is not enough to make self-assessment by itself a definition of humility.[20] Other-focus, on the other hand, may be more inherently correlated with concrete behaviour, in that, unlike self-assessment, it is hardly a good in itself if it is defined as merely being aware of others and not as taking an active interest on their behalf. But to the extent that it is conceived of as an active concern for others, it is very nearly synonymous with altruism. While it may imply self-sacrifice, it is not concerned with being willing to associate with persons or responsibilities considered lowly or menial; indeed, as research cited by Tangney (2000) and Chancellor & Lyubomirsky (2013) shows, other-focus is often a socially

[20] Furthermore, self-awareness without a positive content or orientation may only lead to greater anxiety. Tangney (2002) and C & L (2013) cite extensive evidence to the effect that self-preference, worrying about outcomes, and attaching self-concepts too tightly to concrete circumstances is correlated with dissatisfaction, anxiety, and poor social skills.

desirable trait. (Humility is also often socially desirable, but it inherently involves socially undesirable—humble—states in a way that altruism does not.)

Neither self-assessment nor other focus, then, is sufficient to define the virtue of humility on its own. Taken together, however, they do not fare much better. One could, hypothetically, honestly assess one's strengths and one's faults in order to be better able to then go focus on meeting the needs of a group of one's colleagues, all in an attempt to impress a group of powerful, sexist, racist media moguls so that they might welcome one into their oppressive circles of influence. None of this would mean that one's self-assessment had not been rigorously honest or that one had not been of service to said colleagues in a truly considerate way. Of course, any virtue is liable to abuse; but that does not mean every virtue is liable to any type of abuse. If humility is to mean anything, it must surely involve abhorrence at doing things that would bring one prestige in the eyes of oppressors or ingratiate one with structures of arrogance and exploitation. Contemporary researchers are right to say that humility can and has meant many different things, but it is my contention that some form of virtuous acceptance of states that could be called "humble"—that is, socially lowly, unprivileged, weak, modest, or menial—must remain part of humility's definition if we want to retain it as a unique virtue in its own right. I grant that self-assessment does involve accepting one's weaknesses, but that alone does not guarantee humble behaviour beyond the act of assessment itself. Therefore twin-dimensional accounts fail to adequately provide a definition of the term "humility."

In sum, the two 'dimensions' of accurate self-assessment and healthy other-focus neither show adequate rationale for being grouped as the two halves of a single virtue, nor, if we insist on doing so, show adequate rationale as to why that virtue should be given the title of humility, since they do not necessitate humble behaviour either separately or taken

together. As we will now see, these difficulties may also be hampering contemporary measurement and cultivation of humility.

2. Applied Difficulties: Measuring and Cultivating

The lack of internal cohesion in the twin-dimensional account of humility appears to be a primary reason that it is hard to ascertain whether contemporary studies accurately measure the entire construct (Davis et al. 2011, Davis et al. 2013, Davis et al. 2017). In the initial work defining the RHS, the three factors that comprised the final scale, "Global Humility, Superiority, and Accurate View of Self factors" (Davis et al., 2011, p. 228), are conceptually quite distinct unless one already believes them to be united in single construct; the scale ends up providing a measurement of humility only in a somewhat circular manner. This may be why, in the follow up study which attempted to use the RHS to measure trait humility over time, and despite substantial results, the authors remain unsure of humility's definition, the influence of socio-cultural factors, relational bias, and whether humility truly is more accurately measured by other-reports and when it is challenged (Davis et al. 2013, p. 74-75). Indeed, results suggesting that people rated high in other-focus and self-knowledge and low in 'superiority' will be easier to forgive and get along with—perhaps the one common finding in the initial applications of the RHS—might well be accused of suggesting the obvious. It would be surprising if a participant rating one person higher than another in *any* desirable trait would not predict a relational preference for, and hence more forgiveness of, that person. The difficulty, here, seems to be a lack of knowledge of what to test for based on a loose and excessively personality or self-focused construct. The researchers rarely test to see what those rated as humble are likely to *do* in social situations; they primarily test for what others are likely to do to them (forgive them, see them as agreeable, etc.), or how others are likely to

perceive them. If the core nature of humility was defined in terms that predicted specific behaviours, these behaviours could be tested for in future studies.

Furthermore, while Davis et al.'s use of personality judgments provides the advantage of observing a target's concrete "emotions and behaviour," as opposed to more vague notions about one's character traits produced by self-reports, the existing studies have primarily used these judgments to prompt subjects to form an idea of a target's 'level of humility.' (Davis et al. 2011, p. 226-227; Davis et al, 2013). In other words, while personality judgments have the potential of straightforwardly prompting a subject to rate the humble behaviour of their peers in repeated test situations—both informing us of the nature of such behaviour, and, based on consistency, of the extent to which a given person can be said to be characterised by such behaviour—the researchers I have consulted seek instead to use personality judgments merely as a way to try to get at the inner self, the subjective inner states, of the targets. This, however, merely leaves us with abstract, even circular, humility measures that do not provide any novel information either about how humble a person might be, or what humility might look like in practice.

This state of affairs is even more pronounced in Davis et al.'s (2017) attempt to measure state humility by developing the EHS, as well as in Lavelock et al.'s (2014) attempt to develop and test a humility intervention workbook. In the former case, though the authors' definition of state, as opposed to trait, humility[21] is in fact likely more in line with a Daoist approach that seeks to minimize concern for social approval, the need to fit this definition into the twin-dimensional model and express it in terms of self-focus undermined attempts to even reach construct validity. For example, in targets primed towards existential humility by thinking of a meaningful experience, the EHS only evinced lower scores in "Awareness of

[21] "a hypoegoic [self-forgetting] state in which one is relatively free of the need to rely on self-enhancement strategies to satisfy needs for approval or self-gratification" (p. 5).

Selfishness/Egotism" but not in "Self-transcendence/Other-focus" (Davis et al., 2017). It is quite plausible that an intensely personal, positive experience would take one's focus off of personal weaknesses, meaning that the EHS picked up neither increased other-focus nor accurate self-assessment per se. The other EHS test successfully predicted only a relation between states of humility and "meaning in life," as well as between the "self-transcendence/other-focus" dimension of humility and subjects with high marks on "intrinsic religiosity" scales (ibid). These correlations suffer from the same problem as mentioned above with regards to the RHS, in that one would expect "meaning in life" and "self-transcendence" to be correlated broadly with any number of positively-valuated states. Lavelock et al.'s (2014) humility workbook faces a similar fate; being completely focused on inducing subjects into states in which they see humility as desirable, it did not conclusively ascertain whether improvement was real or merely the result of priming and biased self-reporting.

In sum, the state of affairs in humility research is both promising and conceptually quite muddled. It is promising because researchers have, despite a history of modern controversy over the virtue and a lack of clear definition, so far noted only positive correlations and potential mental and social health benefits (e.g. lack of self-obsession and of being self-conscious; increased forgivable-ness and agreeableness) in their investigations of humility. It is muddled, because for many decades, if not centuries, defining what it means to be humble has become an increasingly complex, intellectual enterprise absorbed with inner subjective states, making it very hard to define, study, and practice the virtue. Humility is thus in danger of moving ever further away from those who could benefit from its message of solidarity and its subtle power the most—the lowly, whom the modern world presents with the false dichotomy between either being more loud and self-asserting or shutting up and falling in line, as well as the powerful trapped in their own indulgence and corruption, whom the modern

world presents with the false dichotomy between either publically grovelling in insincere shame or continuing on in their exploitative achievements.[22] Perhaps, however, there are ways of defining humility—of lowering oneself—that involve very little reflection on questions of one's merit and self-worth, or that of others, at all. In fact, perhaps true humility involves something much more akin to problem solving; the recognition that reality is often counterintuitive to our own assumptions and dispositions, even counter-disposed to our best efforts at controlling it.

[22] Cf. Davis et al. 2017: "For example, with forgiveness, the ideal recipient of an intervention is often in a great deal of pain due to unforgiving emotions and consequently is ready to work on forgiving. In contrast, with humility, those who need the intervention the most (i.e., individuals with personality disorders such as narcissism) may want it the least, and those who want it the most may have the least room for improvement because they already have achieved high levels of humility. ...Thus, we suspect that if researchers are ever to translate the science of humility into a thriving applied program, then studies may need to target individuals with average levels of dispositional humility who yet struggle to practice state humility in specific contexts (e.g., employees interacting with difficult customers or leaders about to navigate a major transition)." P. 5

Chapter Two:

Humility in the Daodejing (DDJ)

In this chapter, I will explore the ancient Chinese text, the *Daodejing* (DDJ) to show that it offers an approach towards humility that provides helpful correctives to contemporary psychological accounts. In Section I, I will explore key tenets of the text as they relate to humility. In Section II, I will develop an account of Daoist humility applicable to modern life and psychology and then briefly discuss how it provides avenues of support for the marginalized as well as how it is applicable to a wide variety of ethical frameworks. Throughout, I will attempt to show that a Daoist approach defines humility as a counterintuitive, yet sincere and realistic, willingness to lower oneself, to intend the opposite of that which constitutes social prestige when doing so would reduce oppression and increase peace and simplicity.

I. The Text: "Dao" and the *Daodejing*

The DDJ was compiled at some point during China's Warring States period (400-200's BCE); scholars are unsure whether it reached its present form before or after the Zhuangzi—the Warring States text that posthumously was labelled Daoist and grouped with the DDJ—was compiled in the 4th - 2nd centuries BCE.[1] There is little debate that the DDJ's purported author, Laozi, is a mythical figure; though there may be one or more historical figures from which his story is derived, it is unlikely that they were responsible for compiling the DDJ.[2] It's authorship thus remains mysterious, and it is possible that it is a compilation emerging out of various agrarian or hermit-style communities of scholars who had dropped or

[1] Cf. Graham, 1989, p. 170-173, 218-219

[2] Nevertheless, "Laozi" is often employed as a moniker for the author(s)/compiler(s) of the text, or eponymously for the text itself, both of which practices I will employ in this paper.

been kicked out of government positions (Slingerland, 2014, 3.1).[3] This explains its unique approach to the political unrest of its time. Like many of the texts from this period, it seems to be written to the rulers of the many competing states and fiefdoms of the period in order to persuade them that its mode of governance will ameliorate the violence and chaos of their realm. Unlike most of its contemporaries, however, it explicitly deconstructs attempts to use moral discourse and education in the arts and classics of the time to cultivate virtuous political leaders.[4] Rather, it sees human-made distinctions, and the tendency to value one side of any such distinction over the other, as the eventual cause of social discord (Ziporyn, 2003).

The received versions of the text consist of 81 brief stanzas, or 'chapters,' which use terse, aphoristic language and even rhyme to convey a vision of a politically and culturally subversive 'Way' (道, *dao*) and its 'Virtue' (德, *de*, also 'charisma' or 'potency').[5] The DDJ employs poetic language in order to illustrate the ineffable, non-coercive nature of reality and its relationship with the sadly oft-coercive nature of human concepts, norms, and ideals (Graham, 1989, p. 218). There is much debate about the meaning of *Dao* in the text. The term *dao* itself (previously often Latinised as "tao") is both the Chinese word for a way or path, and the 'way' or practical teaching of a learned person or school of thought. In Chinese philosophical and cosmological texts from the Warring States onward, the term also took on a cosmological significance. It began to refer to the Way of Heaven expressed in the lives of the mythical sage-emperors and the teachings of wise scholars, which, if cultivated by the

[3] For many of the Daoist ideas in this paper, I take my queue from Edward Slingerland's introductory course on ancient Chinese thought and modern cognitive science, which he teaches at the University of British Columbia as well as in a MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) format. The lectures are publicly available at www.youtube.com/user/chinesethought. I will cite individual lectures by reference to the module and lecture number (e.g. "3.4" means module 3, lecture 4). See "References" below for further bibliographical information.

[4] At least in the versions of the text that dominated translations in the 20th century. Archaeological findings in the mid 1900's made public ancient versions of the text that call into question to what extent its earliest versions opposed the ethical theory of other schools of thought, or sought to compete with, rather than complement, them (cf. Slingerland, 2014, 3.8 and footnote #21 below).

[5] Hence the received title, 道德經, *Daodejing* (*jing* simply meaning 'classic,' or revered text).

common people and especially the rulers of China's various states, would bring about unification, harmony, and prosperity (Slingerland, 2014; Graham, 1989).

Nowhere is the term accorded greater importance or metaphysical priority than in Laozi. At the same time, as insisted upon in the famous first line of the DDJ— "*Dao* (teaching, way) that can be *dao*'ed (taught, followed, instantiated) is not constant *Dao*"—no other classical text is more apophatically cautious in defining or claiming to have explained it. Many modern scholars have argued that '*Dao'* in the DDJ does not refer to any reified metaphysical source, but rather to the "non-coherent sum of all possible orders" (Hall 1997, p. 199) or to a type of non-coercive "guiding discourse" (Hansen 2000, p. 3-6, 26-28). Others, such as Slingerland (2014) and Van Norden (2020) point to passages such as DDJ Chapter 25 to show that, while *Dao* in the DDJ is beyond language and comprehension, it is still understood to be the constant source of all things.[6] I lean towards this second interpretation, but believe my account of Daoist humility is compatible with either bent.[7]

A. The Interdependence of Opposites: Avoiding Attachment

The basic 'ethic' of the text is one of pre-empting the destruction caused by attachment to social distinctions and values. Chapter 2 of the DDJ begins by noting that all conceptual distinctions are mutually dependent: "When the people of the Earth all know beauty as beauty, / There arises (the recognition of) ugliness.… Difficult and easy complement each other…High and low set measure to each other…Back and front follow

[6] The first half of Chapter 25 reads: "There was Something undefined and yet complete in itself, / Born before Heaven-and-Earth. / Silent and boundless, / Standing alone without change, / Yet pervading all without fail, /It may be regarded as the Mother of the world. / I do not know its name; / I style it 'Tao'" (Trans Wu, 1961).
[7] In terms of stylization, I follow Rainey (2014) who omits the definite article ('the') when writing about *Dao* in order both to be more faithful to classical Chinese, which has no such articles, and to avoid excessive reification of *Dao* as a definite concept. Unlike her, however, I capitalize *Dao* to emphasize the unique ontological connotations of the term within Daoism, as well as its significance as a term denoting a fundamental teaching in most texts of classical Chinese philosophy.

each other" (trans. Lin, 1948; Wu, 2006).[8] Chapter 2 concludes that in light of this insight, sages avoid all claims to power or recognition for their accomplishments:

> Therefore, the Sage…denies nothing to the teeming things. / He rears them, but lays no claim to them. / He accomplishes his task, but does not dwell upon it. / And yet it is just because he does not dwell on it / That nobody can ever take it away from him. (Ch. 2, trans. Wu, 2006)

What is at play here is the recognition that excessive striving for social values leads to a collapse into their opposite, as when aggrandizing one's reputation leaves one open to scandal, or accumulating material goods makes one a target for thieves. We will explore the way the text develops these ideas shortly. What this means in terms of humility is that it is not practiced out of an awareness of one's relative merit, whether it be in terms of self-knowledge or social status, but for the benefits that result from subverting social conditioning. This is where we begin to see a difference of emphasis between Daoist humility and other accounts, both ancient and modern. Where many ancient sources, such as the Old Testament and even Confucius, saw subversion of degraded social expectations as a possible result of being humble, for the DDJ, this subversion is the very activity of humility. And where contemporary psychology sees personal gains such as agreeableness and forgiveability (Tangney, 2000; Lavelock et al., 2014) as possible benefits of practicing humility, for the DDJ, personal benefits such as freedom from obsessiveness are the very purpose around which an ethic of humility is developed.

[8] Due to the difficulties of translation, especially of such a terse, rich text, and to the multivalence of meanings that the chapters of the DDJ afford, I employ several different translations, depending on (which of the hundreds of versions I am familiar with) I find comparatively accurate, aesthetic, and useful in a given context. I indicate whose translation I am using by "trans." followed by the authors' name(s) at the end of a DDJ quotation. At times I also modify the translation(s) I quote, indicated by "adapted from (authors' names)," or give my own translation, indicated by "own trans." The translation I employ are all available at https://terebess.hu/english/tao/_index.html along with links to different Chinese versions of the ancient text, and the common *Wangbi* edition of the Chinese text is available at https://ctext.org/dao-de-jing.

1. *Dao* as Model of Anonymous Generosity

For the DDJ the essential nature of reality is seen as non-deliberative or non-coercive, that is, not the product of deliberate scheming or self-serving ends. The beautiful description of the 'metaphysical humility,' as it were, of *Dao* in Chapter 34 is worth quoting at length:

> The Great [D]ao is universal like a flood. / How can it be turned to the right or to the left? / All creatures depend on it, / And it denies nothing to anyone. / It does its work, But it makes no claims for itself. / Constantly without desire, It clothes and feeds all, / But it does not lord it over them: / Thus, it may be called "the Little." / All things return to it as to their home, / But it does not lord it over them: / Thus, it may be called "the Great." / It is just because it does not wish to be great / That its greatness is fully realised. (trans. Lin, 1948)

It may seem tautologous or platitudinous to modern ears to say that natural processes are not sustained for personal gain. But for Laozi, this is full of profound significance. It is *precisely* because reality—apart from intervention from persons seeking private gain—functions without any wish for recognition, that it functions at all. Every process and phenomena is sustained by many other processes and causes, just as every human endeavour is sustained by some motive; but if we go far enough back, we realize that at some point, the source of everything is "just so," existing spontaneously with no further reason or motive or desire than it's own dynamic existence:

> There was something undefined and yet complete in itself / born before heaven-and-Earth...pervading all without fail, / It may be regarded as the Mother of the world / I do not know its name; I style it *Dao*… [Humanity] follows Earth. / Earth follows Heaven, / Heaven follows *Dao* / *Dao* follows *being so of itself*. (Ch. 25, adapted from Wu, 2006, emphasis added).

At the end of all the causality in nature and motivation in society that we can discern, or "name," rationally, there is the *so if itself,* existence for its own sake. If we are to take this spontaneity as our *Dao*, our guide, we will realize that much of our motivation is dependent on a desire for social recognition which is alien to the goodness of natural processes in and of themselves.

Corresponding to this vision of the spontaneous, undemanding nature of reality is Laozi's emphasis on the fleeting nature of finite phenomena:

> Only simple and quiet words will ripen of themselves / For a whirlwind does not last a whole morning, / Nor does a sudden shower last a whole day / Who is their author? Heaven-and-Earth! Even Heaven-and-Earth cannot make such violent things last long; How much truer is it of the rash endeavors of men. (Ch. 23, trans. Wu, 2006).

The most violent of natural processes are the most ephemeral; their very forcefulness makes them unsustainable over long periods of time. Excessive passion is similar, according to Laozi. Rash and violent means are as unsustainable as ends predicated merely on social and political values. Here already we see a hint that for the DDJ, humility is no moralizing obsession with one's merits and demerits. Rather, it is simply a realization that success and power are fleeting and unsustainable; far better to be simple and content where possible:

> The storing up of too much goods will entail a heavy loss…there is no calamity like knowing what is enough. / There is no evil like covetousness. / Only the one who is contented with contentment shall be always content. (Ch. 44, 46, adapted from Wu, 2006 & Lin, 1948).

2. The obsessive pursuit of one relative value tends to collapse into its opposite.

The central insight in the DDJ, both following from and informing its observations of nature and society, is its notion of reversal or return (反, *fan*), the collapse of values into their opposites. Any personal ambition or social value, if pursued too avidly, becomes

counterproductive, to the point where

> Bad fortune is what good fortune leans on, / Good fortune is what bad fortune hides in. / Who knows the ultimate end of this process? / Is there no norm of right? / Yet what is normal soon becomes abnormal, / And what is auspicious soon becomes ominous. (Ch. 58, trans. Wu, 2006).

Rather than an absolute moral or epistemic skepticism, the tone throughout these passages, as Graham (1989) notes, is a cautionary one aimed at giving practical guidance for maintaining tranquility:

> "Keep on beating and sharpening a sword, / And the edge cannot be preserved for long. / Fill your house with gold and jade, / And it can no longer be guarded…. It is in the nature of a military weapon to turn against its wielder." (DDJ, Ch. 2, 30, trans. Wu, 2006).

It is the very valuing of material goods and power as better than poverty and weakness that leads to them being coveted and quickly lost. In this way, the more one seeks to preserve and increase a social good such as power, prestige, or wealth, the more one hastens and increases the disappointment when these boons revert back into burdens through conflict, change, and death.

3. Therefore, the sage rests content in the lower side of any given value dichotomy, thereby pre-empting self-destruction.

Laozi's answer to this human predicament is, in a sense, simple. The Daoist sage embraces the lower, weaker side of conceptual dichotomies and social values in order to pre-empt the disappointment and destruction arising from obsession with worldly goods:

> "Know the male / But keep to the role of the female …Know the white / But keep to the role of the sullied …Know honour / But keep to the role of the disgraced …Then the constant virtue will be sufficient… (Ch. 28, trans. Wu, 2006)

> To see the small is to have insight. / To hold on to weakness is to be strong…He who knows does not speak. / He who speaks does not know. (Ch. 56, trans. D.C. Lau, 1963).

For Laozi, a complete inversion of habitual patterns of thought and desire is necessary to pre-empt the greed and war he sees in Warring States China. He seems to be using his poetic imagery to demonstrate an inversion of familiar patterns of thought, to break the tendency in his readers' minds to view strength, assertion, and conceptual clarity as unqualified goods and to put unquestioned trust in the human capacities of making ethical and epistemic judgments (Graham compares his thought to Derrida's deconstruction[9]). But this subversion is not merely therapeutic. Vague as its imagery may be, the text extols the lower side of social dichotomies as truly better and more natural, closer to *Dao*. This is the closest the DDJ comes to a moral stance. Yet this emphasis on embracing the weaker side of all dichotomies is in turn not meant to cut us off from the satisfaction of what is natural in conventional values. As Ziporyn (2003) points out, Laozi "seems to recommend a freedom from the desire and knowledge of explicit values as a means by which, paradoxically, to attain them spontaneously in their true, nonpurposive...forms" (p. 11).

There is then a type of moral imperative in the DDJ—namely, value the opposite of what society tells you to value—with its own vision of the good—namely, thereby to attain the spontaneous satisfaction of existence. Far from an impractical idealism, for Laozi, an inversion of social goods is only way of life that avoids despair and allows holistic contentment to flourish:

> Favor and disgrace cause one dismay; Prize calamities as your own bodily self.…Those who receive a favor from above / Are dismayed when they receive it, / And dismayed when they lose it. (Ch. 13, adapted from Lin, ??, & Wu, 1961).

[9] Graham, 1989, p. 228.

> As for your name [reputation] and your [bodily self], which is the dearer? / As for your bodily self and your wealth, which is the more to be prized? …an excessive love for anything will cost you dear in the end…. To know when you have enough is to be immune from disgrace. / to know when to stop is to be preserved from perils. (Ch. 44 trans. Wu)

One's survival is clearly dearer than, and the very condition of, one's fame and fortune. As the DDJ says in Chapter 12, the desires of the eye—insatiable, innumerable, and socially conditioned—are to be subordinated to the desires of the belly—the basic, simple provisions one needs to survive and thrive. Laozi is no advocate of denigration of bodily existence or even of lowering self-esteem. When he tells us to value the unvalued, to prize calamity as one's bodily self, it is in the context of receiving "favour and disgrace"—i.e., of receiving and losing the artificial desires of the eye. If we can see misfortune as a natural part of life, the changing tides of favour and disgrace can do little to sway our well-being, and our "bodily self" will have a better chance of living out its days in peace and contentment. Laozi's humility is not moralistic, but self- (and other-) preservationist. Moreover, the vagueness of the text's imperatives undercuts any definitive moral codification. It stands rather as a reminder that assuming the unassuming position may vary in every situation.

The ethical framework of the DDJ, then, such as it is, is one of a subversion of conventional values. These Laozi sees as inherently tending towards strength and self-assertion; as things grow they assert their identity "against a downward pull" (Graham 1989, p. 229) of inertia. However, this self-assertion, when valued for its own sake, invariably leads to disappointment when things turn brittle and die, or when we get caught up in over-exertion in the direction of what is a finite movement (cf. DDJ Ch. 76). Laozi is therefore not completely at odds with traditional morality – he shares with Confucius or Aristotle a concern to moderate human selfishness' destructive excesses. Unlike them, however, his remedy

involves not only moral restraint – that is, sacrificing one's own desires for the sake of others – but also an inversion of social goods – that is, explicitly seeking anonymity and valuing those things which society deems practically lesser: darkness, stillness, weakness, femininity, smallness, etc. Confucius and Aristotle advocate a constant effort to establish social goods such as family, state, and personal position; that is, in Laozi's view, they identify, in a morally-conditioned way, with the natural tendency towards self-assertion. Laozi, on the other hand, never identifies with this tendency, at least not directly. His strategy – even when discussing how to overcome an opponent if necessary – is always to pre-empt the eventual exhaustion and destruction of the upward drive by identifying with the downward state of stillness, emptiness, and weakness that is the beginning and end of all finite things. The Laozian sage does not extol or cultivate family, state, or personal position but rather seeks to reduce desire, prestige, and distinction. The reason this reduction might still be called an ethical framework is that it does serve a good; Laozi thinks it is precisely by anonymity and reduction that destruction and exploitation can be avoided and family, state, and person flourish in contentment, harmonious relationships, and material simplicity and abundance. Laozi is not a meta-ethical, but only an ethical relativist; as Slinglerand (2014, 3.7, 3.9) points out, there is a specific vision of the good life inherent in the text. Or, as Graham (1989) intimates, 'good and bad' [as opposed to moral concepts of good and moral evil] are not among the opposites Laozi deconstructs; it is unequivocally better to follow the anonymous, generous way of *Dao* than to identify with the 'upward' tendencies towards power and prestige (p. 231): "it is when things have grown strong that they grow old; this is against *Dao*…the movement of *Dao* consists in reversal [反, *fan*]; the use of *Dao* consists in weakness" (DDJ Ch. 30, 40, adapted from Wu, 2006). We will further discuss the importance of an ethical framework for avoiding abuses of Daoist insights at the end of this Chapter, in Section II, B, 3.

II. A Daoist Approach to Humility

I will now develop an account of humility based on the interpretation of the *Daodejing* given above. My overriding concern is to show that Daoist humility is realistic; that is, it is based in an understanding that, given the nature of reality as well as the counterproductivity of excessive striving for social recognition, to act humbly is more productive and natural, and less destructive and fruitless than not to act humbly. Unlike contemporary twin-dimensional accounts of humility, Daoist humility is primarily grounded in one's behaviour—specifically, one's willingness to act in ways considered non-prestigious and refrain from practices of greed and vanity—and not in one's self-assessment or other-focus per se. Therefore, Part A of this section will focus on what it means to act humbly on a Daoist account, and why it is realistic. Part B will then focus on how this account of Daoist humility can also incorporate the strengths of twin-dimensional accounts and address ethical concerns. Here, I will first show that in addition to practically benefitting others and oneself, Daoist humility does involve accurate self-assessment, but it is a self-assessment with a specific content: realizing that all persons and their achievements have no intrinsic superiority to any other persons. I will then briefly discuss how an ethic of Daoist humility benefits the marginalized and enables them to subvert structures of exploitation, and how it may be incorporated in different ethical frameworks while informing and reforming them. It should be noted that the account of humility I am presenting in this section is not to be taken as a definitive statement on the authorial intent of the DDJ, but rather as a helpful account of humility informed by the insights of one of the most important texts of Chinese philosophy and ancient thought.

A. Daoist Humility as Practical Realism.

In Chapter One, I proposed that today's most common understanding of humility consists in how we view ourselves and our relation to others, popularly conceived of in terms of the level of credit it is right for us to claim relative to the credit we ought to deflect onto others. In this chapter, I am attempting to show that being humble is actually about how we relate to persons and situations, how we concretely act or behave. While it speaks much of weakness and preference for the lesser-valued side of things, the DDJ does not contain Chinese terms that transliterate directly into "humble" or "humility." How, then, does the text speak of humility?

In Chapter 67 of the DDJ, there is an interesting passage in which Laozi outlines his three cardinal virtues, as it were:

> I have Three Treasures, which I hold fast and watch over closely. The first is Mercy. The second is Frugality. The third is Not Daring to [put myself] First in the World. Because I am merciful, therefore I can be brave. Because I am frugal, therefore I can be generous. Because I dare not be first, therefore I can be the chief of all vessels. (Adapted from Wu, 2006).

Laozi's gives his first two 'treasures' common names of non-assertive virtues, "mercy" (慈, *ci*, also forbearance, mercifulness) and "frugality" (儉, *jian*). In true Daoist fashion, he extolls them as enabling him to embody—counterintuitively—the true form of two 'opposite' or assertive virtues (forbearance enables him to be brave, perhaps better translated 'bold' or 'daring;' frugality enables him to be generous, or lavish and liberal). The third treasure, however, is not given a name, but stated as a negation: "not daring to put myself first." Ostensibly, it is also the 'treasure' which best describes the ethos of the entire text. What it enables, furthermore, is much vaguer than boldness or lavish generosity: becoming the "chief of all vessels." the term 'vessel' could also be translated 'instrument' or 'tool' and has

connotations with military, agricultural and sacrificial implements; it is a word denoting utility (cf. Graham, 1989, p. 362-3, 477). Thus the positive counterpart of 'not daring to be first,' for Laozi, is not simply 'getting ahead' but rather, following Dao in being truly useful to the world in self-yielding, just as the door, the wheel, and the bowl are all made useful only by their negative spaces (DDJ Ch. 11). Using a single virtue term, at least Confucian ritual virtue such as deference (*shu*), would likely have sounded too moralising, too caught up in showing obeisance to social norms to capture what the text is getting at. But more significantly, I think the name Laozi gives his 'third treasure' is the most literal succinct description he could give of his ethos of humility; rightly fearing the danger of grasping at positions of honour. Here, in this short noun-clause, is the heart of realist humility: "not daring to put myself first under Heaven.[10]" Trying to be first is self-defeating; we should be wary of it. "If [one] wants to be brave without first being merciful, generous without first being frugal, a leader without first wishing to follow," Chapter 67 goes on to say, "[one is] only courting death" (trans. Wu, 2006).

At its core, Daoist realist humility involves voluntarily embracing positions of anonymity, and situations in which one will have neither coercive power nor receive credit for one's actions. It is not primarily an acceptance of one's faults (honesty) nor the attempt to let them go (contrition), nor is it deferring acknowledgement one's merits (modesty), nor is it simply the choice to focus on the needs of others (charity, empathy), though these are closely

[10] This is made all the more emphatic because the emperor in ancient China was given the title "son of Heaven," and the ideal of rulership was to absorb neighbouring states until all 'under heaven' was harmonized in one's own realm (Slingerland 2014, Module 1; cf. Graham, 1989, Introduction). It was thus considered a benevolent or natural political ideal to pronounce one's goal as trying to unify all under heaven (whether as a ruler or as an advisor to a ruler). Considering that the DDJ is addressed to rulers, Laozi not daring to put himself first under heaven stands as a strong warning against the counterproductive self-importance and coercion that often attend ideals even of benevolent dominion. In this context, it is makes sense that mercy, or forbearance, is Laozi's first 'treasure,' and the one that Chapter 67 discusses most. As political text, the DDJ is unique in ancient China in its commendation of treating the bad with goodness even as one would treat the good (Ch. 49). Confucius, for example, was much more 'measured;' requiring corrective or deterring forms of justice as a response to evil (cf. Analects 14:34). Laozi is radical in his assumption that reducing punishments and laws, indeed less government, is more effective (cf. Graham, 1989, Ch. 4). Thus, while I do think his 'third treasure' is the one most reflected in the other chapters of the DDJ with their emphasis on avoiding prestige and embracing the lower side of social values, it is fitting that, as a treatise to a ruler, the DDJ should list mercy as its 'first' treasure.

related to it. Rather, humility is an unpretentious way of acting, a willingness to embrace situations and positions that are considered undesirable and humiliating. It is the habit of doing things that are looked down upon by powerful and value-defining parts of society. The act of humility is not the refusal of credit per se, but rather an act that does not incur credit in the first place (while also not serving self-interest beyond meeting basic material needs). It is not focussing on others per se, but rather doing things that others would not want to do, as well as reducing the constraints one places on others through one's actions. It is not assessing oneself, coming to an honest appraisal of strengths and weaknesses, per se, but rather refusing to play only to one's strengths and accepting situations in which one's weakness predominates.

The reason for this emphasis on humility as non-self-aggrandizing *behaviour*, as willingness to act in certain ways, lies in my designation of Daoist humility as 'realist.' While the DDJ's language portrays sages as those who truly have no desire for self-aggrandizement or prestige, it also consistently emphasizes that embracing weakness and lowliness brings positive outcomes that arrogance and coercion would destroy. This is part of the constructive paradox of Daoist humility: embracing lowliness leads to true honour; embracing weakness leads to true strength and endurance:

> Bowed down then preserved; / Bent then straight; / Hollow then full; / Worn then new; / A little then benefited; / A lot then perplexed. / Therefore Sages embrace the One and are a model for the empire. / Do not show themselves, and so are conspicuous; / Do not consider themselves right, and so are illustrious; / Do not brag, and so have merit; / Do not boast, and so endure. / It is because they do not contend that no one in the empire is in a position to contend with them. / The way the ancients had it, 'Bowed down then preserved,' is no empty saying. / Truly it enables one to be preserved to the end. (Ch. 22, adapted from Lau, 1963)

In the DDJ, the true form of any conceivable good—particularly those involving holistic self-(& community-)preservation—is only attained when one is not concerned with attaining anything considered prestigious or good.

The above passage is characteristic of the DDJ in that it describes things sages do *not* do. The DDJ sees action and business as examples of things society excessively values, and frequently extols not-doing (無為, *wuwei,* lit. 'without deliberate behaviour') as that which truly gets things done (cf. Ch. 3748, 57, 63, among others).[11] The reason I frame Daoist humility in terms of acting in certain ways is to emphasize its practicality, its connection to real outcomes. Descriptions of humility, such as the modern twin-dimension approach, centred on appraising oneself and refusing undue credit or self-focus may avoid being self-deprecating, but they remain focused one's attitudes towards self and others. Therefore, they miss the fact that being humble is a way of avoiding problems and attaining serenity which one otherwise could not avoid and attain. The honour and success one gains as a result of not trying to be honourable and accomplished are uniquely impervious to letting one down, since one is not attached to them in the first place. "Sage[s] complete their work, but set no store by it," is a frequent DDJ refrain, as in Chapter 2, which also states: "Sages deny nothing to the teeming things / rear them, but lay no claim to them… accomplish their task, but do not dwell upon it. / And yet it is just because they do not dwell on it / That nobody can ever take it away from them." (Ch. 2, adapted from Wu, 2006; cf. Ch. 77, 81).

[11] Slingerland's insightful book on *wuwei*, *Trying not to try: The Art and Science of Spontaneity* (2014), provides an insightful and in-depth analysis of the ways this concept was used throughout Hundred Schools thought, along with an accessible account. His chosen translation is "effortless action," to emphasize the spontaneous efficacy to which many Chinese thinkers aspired. His account certainly influences my own in this paper.
I suspect the German *machen*, 'to make something go according to one's purpose,' provides a good correlate to understand the Chinese 為, *wei*; *wuwei,* might then be better rendered *nicht-machen*, i.e. 'not making things go according to one's purpose,' than *nicht-tun* (not doing, or "non-action," as the Chinese term is often rendered in English, though 'doing' may still be closer to *wei* than 'action').

Humility is thus not merely self-assessment or other-focus, but a counterintuitive assessment of one's entire world. "The Sage," Chapter 49 reads,

> "has no set heart. / Ordinary people's hearts / Become the Sage's heart. / People who are good I treat well. / People who are not good I also treat well…[I am] faithful to the faithful [and] also faithful to the unfaithful…for the sake of the world, [the Sage] keeps his heart in its nebulous state." (Adapted from Addiss and Lombardo, 2007 & Wu, 2006).

Humble persons in these passages are not people who consciously resist credit, accept weakness, or focus on others as opposed to themselves, but whose very notion of self and of happiness is not tied up with personal accomplishment or discrimination based on value-judgments. Identifying with the needs of the world, another common DDJ theme, is something the Sage does as spontaneously and unself-consciously as Heaven-and-earth and *Dao* give life, order, provision, and existence to all things (Ch. 7, 34).

It is in this sense that humility is inactive; it is spontaneous action completely devoid of any intention of attaining credit, and it is deliberately refraining from seeking to control outcomes or assert one's self-worth wherever possible.[12] This type of non-assertiveness, the DDJ maintains, protects us from becoming the target of envy and violence, allowing us to

[12] One might say that as a character trait, humility is characterized by spontaneity and passivity, accepting lowliness and weakness without calculation of means towards ends, while as a state or act, humility refers not to self-scrutiny or attention given to others, but to how one's behavior evinces the willingness to do things considered by self or others to be menial or unglamorous. This does not preclude valuing the human person or taking actions for their wellbeing. Instead, it removes the need to gauge relative personal worthiness in favour of a practical consideration of outcomes that will maximize benefit; the sage may indeed be shrewd or pragmatic, but only to address specific situations; and usually, Laozi maintains, this pragmatism takes the form of a reduction of those of our actions which allow injustice to flourish, since harmony must be allowed to grow within others spontaneously.
It is interesting to note that Slingerland (2014, 1.5) sees not-doing/*wuwei* as the shared goal of many schools of thought in Warring States China, and Graham (1989, p. 29, Appendix A) sees Warring States thought sharing the presupposition that if one can gain sufficient awareness of one's situation and all involved, one will spontaneously behave in the correct or ideal manner. While Daoism is unique in its belief that awareness involves relativizing evaluative distinctions, it shares with many other ancient Chinese philosophies a belief that there is a positive spontaneity latent in human behaviour that must be trained and/or emancipated from poor conditioning. Contemporary Dual Systems theories of cognition provide some suggestion that rational, conscious cognition can inform and train automatic, intuitive cognition to produce virtuous agents (Samuelson & Church, 2015).

live out our lives in relative safety (cf. Ch. 7, 44, 59). It also provides us with the joy of seeing other people and creatures cared for, precisely because we are not concerned with who is due the credit for their care, but rather see one another's joy as our own. In sum, humility in the Daodejing involves embracing those things which one see as undesirable when the situation calls for it, when doing so would liberate oneself and others from the distinctions one's society makes between low- and high-class values; and this, in turn, often means *not* doing things, e.g. not displaying one's behaviour so it is lauded by others. [13]

B. The Conceptual Framework of a Daoist Praxis of Humility

While the DDJ subverts conventional values, by now it should be clear that there is a pattern of thought in the text that itself can be described as meta-ethical and laid out, to some extent, in theoretical terms. It is not my intent to categorize the DDJ into existing ethical frameworks; as we will see, it may be said to have attributes of deontological, utilitarian, and virtue ethical theories without fitting neatly into any. Rather, in Part 1 of this section, I will

[13] From Wengst's (1988) account, we can see that in the inception of Judaeo-Christian (and what became "Western") approaches to humility that arose out of communities of solidarity, there was a similar behavioural—as opposed to the modern self-reflective—focus. While humility in the Scriptures may be reflexive, it is a verb ("humble yourselves," cf. Macaskill 2018, p. 245), and remains connected to supporting the lowest members of one's community, pre-empting negative outcomes, and obtaining good ones (Cf. Wengst, 1988; Daniel 10:12; Deuteronomy 8:2; 2 Kings 22:19; Proverbs 22:4, 29:23). Wengst stresses that in the famous hymn to Christ's humility in Philippians 2:6-11 ("he emptied himself and took the form of a man and became obedient unto death"), Christ's is portrayed as identifying completely with human lowliness, which resulted in God raising him to a place of preeminent authority (Wengst p. 52). This is very reminiscent of the Laozian sages who "do not display themselves / and therefore shine…Do not praise themselves / and therefore succeed…Do not control / and therefore no one under heave can contend with them" (Ch. 22, trans. Addiss & Lombard, 2007). The difference I want to draw out in my account of Daoist humility is the DDJ's realist element. Where Biblical humility has its own realism, it is expressed in terms of the reward given by God; "humble yourself in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up" (James 4:10, 1 Peter 5:6). Ultimately, different conceptual accounts of the nature of reality that makes humility a practical virtue can be given, whether it is God understood as the Biblical Word that holds all in being, Laozi's Dao, or others. However, as I tried to show in Chapter One, the Biblical account has come to be understood as a moralism in which humility is a command imposed by a deity demanding worship, who then arbitrarily (that is, apart from the nature of the world he makes) gives supernatural rewards to the humbled. The DDJ is useful precisely because no such reading is plausible here. Its insight into of the interdependence of conceptual opposites and the futility of social distinctions give a compelling account of how it is that humility is the best course of action in light of the dynamics of social life and natural as well as metaphysical processes.

use the DDJ to correct the twin-dimensional accounts of humility discussed in Chapter One, especially in terms of what the content of humble self-assessment is on a Daoist account. In Part 2 of this section, I will then suggest how the principles of the DDJ can make humility empowering, rather than oppressive, for the marginalized. Finally, in Part 3, I will briefly discuss how the DDJ presents a specific vision of *Dao* as consistently beneficial, not harmful, to living things, implying the need for an ethical vision of the good life to prevent Daoist humility from being abused as a pragmatic tool for selfish purposes.

1. The Daoist Content of Self-assessment: Unity in Weakness.

The DDJ does not speak of evaluating oneself in terms of honestly assessing one's strengths and weaknesses. Its approach to self-assessment is rather a type of holism, as in the previously quoted passage from Chapter 49: "The Sage has no set heart. / Ordinary people's hearts / Become the Sage's heart" (trans. Addiss & Lombardo, 2007). The text frequently speaks of "embracing the one" (Ch. 22) and "attaining the one (Ch. 39)" in a reference to the mystical, self-realizing outcome of transcending social distinctions by humble rulers who refer to themselves as "little" and "helpless" (Ch. 39) and "do not assert themselves and therefore stand out" (Ch. 22). Humility in the DDJ thus involves an ability see a unity amongst the differing classes, groups, and individuals that make up one's environment.

Moreover, this unity is one in which achievements are relativized by the realization that, if and when pushed to their extreme, they revert to nonbeing, to obsolescence or normalcy. Self-assessment in the DDJ thus involves less an awareness of one's characteristics and one's need to focus on others than a relativization of one's strengths and of the idea that the needs of others are distinct from my own. In other words, everything conceptualized as a personal "strength" or "self" is dependent on there being contrastive states one can conceptualize as "weakness" or "other." Hence, while recognizing real differences between persons and between abilities, humble persons see these differences as conditioned upon a

unity that is prior to evaluation. Any valuation of strength over weakness or of self as distinct from other is in danger of seeing these concepts as intrinsic, separate realities rather than temporary and at times arbitrary contrasts. Instead, the DDJ reminds us, our unity is essentially one of weakness and passivity—no finite thing or creature comes into being simply through the power of its own volition, neither is any of us in complete control of anything until we pass away. As DDJ Chapter 40 says, "all things are born of presence; presence is born of absence" (own translation). When we recognize faults, we may indeed assess ourselves and ask how we can change before they get out of hand, for "difficult things…can only be tackled when they are easy…big things…can only be achieved by attending to their small beginnings" (Ch. 63, Wu 2006). But the conclusion of this self-assessment is not merely an accurate picture of the self, but rather an increased realization of the pre-existing unity of oneself with all things in stillness and harmony. Self-assessment is only incidental; what is foundational is an awareness that no matter what happens, one's own self and the selves of all other things share a unity that pride and oppression can only ever temporarily mar. There is a type of optimism in the text which, when looking at the mixture of violence and assertion with serenity and stillness in the world, accepts violence as the conditional variable and serenity as the unconditional. But this optimism is meant to be practical by freeing us from anxious preoccupation with how much other-focus is enough or exactly what the standards are by which to judge whether one's self-assessment has been honest or probing enough.

It is interesting here to note that, even in passages such as Chapter 22 that use the reflexive pronoun *zi* (自), meaning "(one)self / (them)selves," in phrases such as "[sages] do not display themselves / and therefore shine…Do not praise themselves / and therefore succeed (Ch 22. Trans. Addiss & Lombard, 2007), there is very little hint of self-reflection. The emphasis is on reflexive action (or non-action); sages do not put themselves in positions

where they will be displayed, they do not act in such a way as to obtain credit. The most interesting use of *zi* here is the passages in which sages *buzijian* (不自見), 'do not display themselves' or 'make a show of themselves,' literally "do not manifest themselves" (cf. DDJ Ch. 22, 72. The word 見, *xian*, here means 'to appear, to become visible; to make evident').[14] Humble people do not focus on comparing the relative worth of different selves in order to make a show of themselves. Thus, they do not appear to the world as a self to be asserted over against the world or 'the other.' Such assertion may be inevitable for a while in the natural processes that distinguish one life form or one object from another, but they have no ultimate value.[15]

Such humility enables others to flourish, but not necessarily because one puts the honour of others before oneself, as in other accounts of humility. The DDJ emphasizes that under the leadership of sages, people think the good in their community happened spontaneously (Ch. 17) and that sages reduce distinctions of honour and knowledge so that there will be less greed and contention (Ch. 18-19), not that the sage eschews honours in order to publically bestow it on others. That would perhaps only ensnare them in their own misguided pursuits. Laozi is concerned with putting himself last; he trusts that this will enable others to flourish of their own accord, without his extensive manipulation. The willingness of sages to choose the unvalued reduces the pressure on those around them to chase social wants and goods. The freedom of people embracing things society has deemed

[14] Thanks to Edward Slingerland (2022, personal communication) for correcting my translation of 見, *xian*, in these passages.

[15] The full passage in Chapter 72 reads, "sages know themselves but do not manifest themselves; love themselves but do not treasure themselves." The word "love" (愛, *ai*) in ancient Chinese meant primarily active care for well-being, while the word "treasure" or "view as precious" (貴, *gui*) was used for material goods or positions of prestige and high worth. Self-care, in the DDJ, is practical and not tied up with how much social credit one attributes to oneself. Moreover, Chapter 71 shows that the type of self-knowledge the DDJ is interested in is not simply self-scrutinizing one's merits and demerits, but rather realizing that one's knowledge itself is tied up in faulty discriminations and ignorance: "knowledge of ignorance is noble. Ignorant knowledge is sickness…Sages are sick of their sickness, and so are not sick" (own translation). This also means that there is no distinction in Daoist humility between internal self-assessment and external behaviour—we are humble persons in so far as our thoughts, actions, behaviours, views of self and other, etc., all exhibit willingness to embrace unflattering situations and have not thought for socioeconomic credit-seeking.

lowly is contagious, and it reduces the amount of competition and pressure engendered by those people. The realization that differences of strength and influence are relative while unity in finitude and weakness is foundational is all the humble person needs as the theoretical basis for their humility. It is the root and content of their self-assessment, and it leads naturally to harmonious action with and for others.

2. Daoist Humility for the Humbled and Marginalized

An important question when discussing how humility unites us to and helps us benefit one another is the question of what humility means for those who are marginalized and oppressed in society. As evinced by Chapter One's survey of the development of humility, contemporary scholars are wary of approaches to humility which lend themselves to abuse by the powerful as a way to demand that those they oppress show contentment and docility towards their condition. While we have seen that the DDJ is thoroughly opposed to leaders embracing coercion and commends them for putting themselves behind those they lead, the question remains whether it encourages followers to act similarly and thereby accept oppression.

The answer will reframe the question to some extent. On a certain simplistic political reading, the text seems to be recommending a policy of anonymity and passivity as a way to avoid the attention of tyrants, competitors, and thieves, and thus to outlast social instability (cf. Graham, 1989, p. 218). As renowned translator Burton Watson (2007) puts it, "Addressing the ruler…the Taoists counseled him…to adopt a policy of inaction, or laissez-faire. Speaking to ordinary men and women of these troubled times, the Taoists instructed them how to survive by crouching low and keeping out of the line of fire" (p. xxv). Viewed as a cautionary text, the DDJ evinces a type of humble realism in which the lowly are provided with a way to view power and prestige as void and worthless, and thus to avoid the danger of trying to contend for them. In other words, it seems more interested in keeping

small states and persons safe through anonymity, acceptance, and a subversion of conventional values, than through advising them to rise up and challenge their oppressors overtly.

Since the DDJ is so interested in subverting its readers' evaluative frameworks, and is mostly addressed to rulers, one may ask whether the authors, when speaking to those who find themselves in situations of subjugation and shame to begin with, would counsel them to subvert *their* reality by rising up, practicing self-assertion, and seeking power and reparation. While such a reading is suggestive, I don't think it is fully warranted. As Graham (1989) points out, for the DDJ, "all human effort is against a downward pull" (p. 229). Therefore, there is a certain inevitability to the DDJ's transvaluation of values that is not context specific, for if the lowly start to value coercion and self-assertion, they will end up only playing into the false distinctions that lead to self-reinforcing cycles of greed, vanity, and disappointment. Wengst (1989) makes a similar point in his reading of the Old Testament's exaltation of humility as a virtue of resilience:

> There is no question that [the oppressed] can have every reason for anger…but they are not to [be] drawn in to the same injustice [as the oppressors]…Hope in God…allows alternatives to be developed…. So the possibility of sharing arises as opposed to lending against interest…. In rejecting outright the practices of the powerful, in fearlessly establishing…an alternative public, these poor and lowly show their righteousness, and … are at the same time humble. (p. 24, 30).

Similarly, the DDJ seems to see coercive methods as counterproductive, and would likely warn against becoming obsessed with obtaining the glory and power of one's oppressors. Certainly, it emphasizes that inequality and lack of provision for basic needs are bad states of affairs and does not absolutely forbid self-defence or seeking basic freedoms and recognition

for one's community. However, the danger of setting store in prestige and in our desires for importance and power apply to all, and the DDJ would likely warn that violent resistance is likely to be counterproductive and distract from gentle, and hence enduring, resilience and solidarity.

Such a cautionary reading, however, does not do the subversive nature of the text full justice. The DDJ was written with grander goals in mind—no less than the other "Hundred Schools" of Warring States China, it seeks the true Way to enable natural harmony for all under heaven (DDJ Ch. 13, 48-49, 78). Uniquely, however, it believes the only way that harmony will emerge naturally is through a transvaluation of social goods—subverting systems of injustice by embracing the very values they reject and thereby allowing communities of solidarity and simplicity to form spontaneously. While the text would likely not encourage communities of the marginalized to subversively value their own social aggrandizement, it does imply that cooperating with social injustice is contrary to the free sustenance of all things by *Dao*:

> The court is corrupt, / The fields are overgrown with weeds, / The granaries are empty; / Yet there are those dressed in fineries, / With swords at their sides, / Filled with food and drink, / And possessed of too much wealth. / This is known as taking the lead in robbery. / Far indeed is this from the way [*Dao*]. (53, trans. D.C. Lau, 1963)

Does a coherent account of Daoist humility tell the oppressed to stay oppressed? No, because in fact that would be an identification with the will to power or oppressors, with the overly rigid stratification of society. To acquiesce to this injustice rather than removing oneself from it and resisting it when possible would be contributing to the excesses of injustice and stratification. The DDJ calls solely for *voluntary* lowliness and renunciation. Accepting anonymity or humiliation merely because it is foisted upon one is not truly "acting without action" (Ch. 63), or "Knowing honour / But keeping to the role of the disgraced" (Ch. 28) any

more than actively foisting humiliation on others. Such resignation is merely being party to the idea of successful isolated selves lording it over less-successful isolated selves. The humble person, remember, does not see the self as something that can be meaningfully described or treated as more or less valuable than another self. Thus, she refuses to acknowledge such treatment and to live in a way that perpetuates it. Deliberately choosing to be lowly involves both standing up against oppression, and, even if this stance fails to visibly bring about social justice, resting content in one's unity with all other creatures in mutual weakness and dependence upon spontaneous forces, rather than resigning oneself to socially acceptable positions or to despair.

At the same time, as we see in the previous block quote, the DDJ has harsh things to say about social injustice; one of the strongest readings of the text is as an attempt to persuade authoritarian rulers (the only type known to ancient China according to Graham, 1989, p. 299-303) not to settle for it. The reduction of social goods and values is a paradoxical method of reducing social disparity and injustice; it is by definition exclusive of oppressing others for personal gain. The best type of rulers inspires harmony without their influence even being noticed by their people; the worst is the one people fear and despise (Ch. 17). Sage rulers treat war, even in self-defence, as something to be mourned; the best armies and weapons are those never used (Ch. 30, 80). They lead "bottom" up by placing themselves last in order to enable others rather than directing them towards a predetermined goal, other than a simpler society. To the extent that they administrate anything, it is done privately and to satisfy basic public needs. To the extent that they restrict anything, it is social valuation and differentiation of some goals and practices as better than others: "The sage rules / by emptying hearts [or minds] and filling bellies / By weakening ambitions [or wills] and strengthening bones" (Ch. 3, trans. Addiss & Lombardo, 2007). As discussed at the end of the previous section, the text's preference for the lowly, the female, the infant, and the

dishonourable, is meant to help us get away from the very values that give exploitation and oppression their raison d'etre. Chapter 77 express this beautifully:

> The Tao (way) of Heaven, / Is it not like the bending of a bow? / The top comes down and the bottom-end goes up…It is the way of Heaven to take away from those that have too much / And give to those that have not enough. / Not so with man's way: / He takes from those that have not / And gives it as tribute to those that have too much. / Who can have enough and to spare to give to the entire world? / Only the man of Tao. / Therefore the Sage acts, but does not possess, / Accomplishes but lays claim to no credit, / Because he has no wish to seem superior. (trans. Lin, 1948)

Dao is not a neutral concept in the sense of a justification of the arbitrariness of the distribution of privilege in the world. For Laozi, the fact that all things wax and wane, grow and decay is not an indication that unequal distribution is warranted, but rather that those we seek to suppress will eventually flourish, so we should join nature in providing for the needy and refusing to act for the sake of accumulating credit. Here we see the beginning of an answer to the question of whether there is a more extensive moral framework undergirding humility in the DDJ, and if not, whether we need one to prevent abuse of its insights.

3. The Ethical Convictions Behind Realist Humility

The fact that the DDJ provides insight into how to use positions of lowliness to one's advantage raises the question of whether the DDJ places ethical constraints on the purposes to which its insights may be applied. As Graham (1989) puts it, "in preferring to be submissive the sage does not cease to be oriented towards strength, for he recognises that surviving by yielding to a rising power is the road to victory over it when its climax is past" (p. 229). Does

the subversion of normative value structures in the text point to a Machiavellian scheme for using others' power against them for one's own political ends?

It certainly has been read this way. Relatively soon after being compiled, the text was appropriated in the writings of the Legalists, the most totalitarian among the "Hundred Schools of thought," who saw a strict system of governmental laws and punishments and narrowly-specialized bureaucrats as the only way to strengthen the state (Graham 1989, p. 285-292; Slingerland, 2014 3.9, 7.7). For them, the impartiality of *Dao* in passages such as Chapter 5, "Heaven and Earth are not benevolent: / The ten thousand things are straw dogs to them. / Sages are not benevolent: people are straw dogs to them" was an indication that Laozi's insights were tools of social manipulation for the power and survival of the state (trans. adapted from Addiss & Lombardo, 2007). While vast bureaucracies may seem like a far cry from the primitivism and quietism of the text, the reading was further justified by the fact that in the Legalist schema, the emperor himself would function primarily as a passive overseer; the quiet 'hub' of the system, the ideal embodiment, so it was thought, of the ethic of 無為, *wuwei*—"not-doing so nothing is left undone" (DDJ Ch. 37, 48, own trans.).

Nor is an instrumental reading merely an ancient phenomenon; Rainey (2014), in her introduction to reading Daoist classics, is very sceptical of the "pop Daoism" that is quite rampant in modern approaches to the text. Whether it is the *Dao* of Winnie the Pooh or of new age meditation, the *Dao* of golf or of financial management, there is always a danger in the poetic ambiguity of the DDJ of being misappropriated simply as a means to whatever financial or self-serving end the latest bestseller is interested in promulgating.[16] This is not to say that the text can't legitimately be read as having a wide application or that any area of life is too flippant to benefit from it, only to note that its wide application raises the question of whether there are any limits to be placed on the ends to which it is applied.

[16] Slingerland (2014, 3.9) maintains that its insights have even been used as military strategy, in corporate takeovers, and as a strategy for getting a date.

Such limits do in fact exist; it is very hard to read the text as a whole and still see humility as a subversive tool for military power or financial success. As Slingerland (2014, 3.7) notes, the text appears to be advocating a specific vision of primitive, simple communal life as the good that the Sage-ruler's humility enables. He points to chapter 80, which encourages the Sage-rulers to develop a state in which

> "boats and carriages, weapons and armour there may still be, but there are no occasions for using or displaying them…[The people] are contented with their food, pleased with their clothing, satisfied with their houses, and inured to their simple ways of living. Though there may be another country in the neighborhood so close that…the crowing of cocks…can be heard, yet there is no traffic between them" (trans. Wu, 2006, p. 179).

Slingerland's point is that the techniques of transvaluation and humility in the text are not simply instrumental; if used authentically, they lead you to a specific place, a certain type of life. Feigning humility to acquire the very material goods one pretends to renounce is easily detected, and not sustainable; in the end, one either realizes the true serenity found in simplicity and anonymity, or one ends up exposed or exhausted in the same way as all who strive for self-assertion. Graham (1989) agrees that the survive-by-staying-low strategy of the text is only effective when it involves relinquishing private ends:

> Might one say that the sage is simply using submission as a means to conquer…? No, for that would imply analysis and calculation of means to end. The sage...gravitates towards his survival with the spontaneity of natural process; he simply settles in a direction towards both the preceding submission and later conquest...if the sage in his perfect unselfishness is no longer distinguishing himself from heaven and earth is he not in some sense participating in their immortality…?" (p. 230)

This means that approaches to humility that end up in mere self-loathing or subservience to one's oppressors have settled for a problematic instrumental view of the text as well. Sages

only prefer the undesirable and lowly because they see these states as natural means to their own wellbeing and conducive to the good of their community, and not because lowliness ingratiates them with those in power or functions as a tool of self-flagellation.

Nor is the text as amenable to a straightforward reading of *Dao* as a completely amoral concept as Legalists and self-help gurus might like. While the text opens by emphasizing the apophatic nature of *Dao* ("*Dao* which can be taught is not constant *Dao*," Ch. 1, own trans.), its closing chapters contain strong statements indicating that *Dao* is not a morally neutral term, that it is partial to the weak and to wellbeing, not destruction. As we read in Chapter 77, "It is the way [*Dao*] of Heaven to take away from those that have too much / And give to those that have not enough" (trans. Lin, 1948). This ethical-cum-metaphysical concern rings through the closing words of the DDJ:

> True words are not fine-sounding; / Fine-sounding words are not true. /A good man does not argue; / he who argues is not a good man….The Sage does not accumulate (for himself). / He lives for other people, / And grows richer himself; / He gives to other people, / And has greater abundance. / The Tao of Heaven / Blesses, but does not harm. / The Way of the Sage / Accomplishes, but does not contend. (Ch. 81, trans. Lin)

The text as we have it today[17] may critique accepted understandings of Confucian virtues such as benevolence (仁) with their connotations of preference for family, social obligation, and ritual, and subvert human tendencies to overvalue strength and prestige, but that does not mean it is not concerned with virtue at all.[18] On the contrary, its subversion of the tendency

[17] Cf. footnote #21 below.

[18] Even in the ancient versions that have less explicit denigrations of Confucian virtues, the text does not extol them (cf. footnote #21 below); but it does, as mentioned in the previous section, extol its own set of three 'cardinal virtues,' first among which is mercy (慈, *ci*). The difference between Daost *ci* (mercy) and the highest Confucian virtue of 仁, *ren* (benevolence) is telling. The DDJ's seeming dismissal of the term benevolence is likely a slight at the partiality of Confucian morality, which was not only bound up in social hierarchies of reciprocal duty and respect, but also explicitly taught that morality starts by prioritizing one's own family (Graham, 1989). Contrast this with descriptions of the Daoist virtue and the mercifulness of Heaven in DDJ

for human values to provide avenues for the strong to lord it over the weak is itself a moral concern that sees simplicity of desires and of civilization as better ways to live than opulence and inequality of material goods.[19]

It is important, however, to be circumspect in trying to set up moral a framework from the text. The DDJ, as Ziporyn (2003) explains, presents "a wholesale critique of knowledge and valuation, which are seen as inextricably related" (p. 9). This means that the realism of the text is an acknowledgement of the failure or insincerity of most attempts to implement widespread ethical schemes and hierarchies. The solution the text advocates, according to Ziporyn, does not involve substituting an enlightened morality for unenlightened ones; rather,

> The text as we have it now...seems to recommend a freedom from the desire and knowledge of explicit values as a means by which, paradoxically, to attain them spontaneously in their true, nonpurposive, stomach forms, maintaining the relation of both sides of the value contrast by exalting the prevalued/disvalued side of each apparent value dichotomy" (p. 11).

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chapters 79 and 67: "the virtuous tends to his duties; the virtueless knows only to levy duties upon the people. The Way of Heaven has no private affections (親, *qin*, the word for preference for those nearest oneself), / But always accords with the good…for Heaven will come to the rescue of the merciful, and protect him with *its* Mercy" (trans. Wu, 2006). Daoist mercy, unlike Confucian benevolence, is a type of forbearance that, like Heaven's Dao, knows no favourites, and expects no respect or service in return for its own, but rests assured in the provision of Dao. In its own way, this is an amoral meta-ethics; no prescriptions or reciprocal duties or even emotional care for one's kin, but rather a serenity that comes from full trust in *Dao* and renunciation of social goods / egotistical desires. This does not necessarily mean that Daoist approaches to ethics are wholly incompatible with more structured ones; they often serve simply to provide a healthy counterbalance.

[19] In an alternate reading, Graham sees *Dao* not as on the side of the flourishing of all living things in any moral sense, but only in the sense that human efforts to maintain social inequalities are unnatural: "The effect of the reversal might also be described, not as the choice of B [the unvalued] instead of A [the valued], but as a balancing of A and B. Human codes of conduct prefer A, Heaven's Way is to equalise A and B. Here the split between Heaven and Man is fully in the open. At first sight one might take Lao-tzu to say that man is unjust but Heaven just. But the point is rather that man always strives to enlarge A at the expense of B, fighting the natural course of things which reverts to B and so balances A and B. The sage has learned to accord with a Way independent of the will of man, by making presents to Heaven out of his own excess. Elsewhere [DDJ Ch. 5] we are told that the natural course of things is un-[benevolent], cruel, ruthless, treating everything which rises and passes away as like the straw dogs honoured before being used for sacrifice and afterwards thrown away and trampled…. The good man is the one who by adapting himself to the Way has learned both to survive and…reconcile himself to misfortune and death; it is because alone among men he is on the side of the Way that the Way works in his favour." (p. 230-231). There may be a tension between readings that emphasize *Dao* as an amoral equalizing force that balances all things in time and those that emphasize *Dao* as uniquely accessible only by valuing the undervalued for it's own sake. Whether or not *Dao* ought to be conceived of as in any sense as moral, it is abundantly clear that Laozi believes following the spontaneous course of *Dao* would not lead to the political corruption, strife, and inequality that he observes around him; hence the "realist," as opposed to moralizing, nature of the text's solution to conflict and destruction.

This is born out by passages—both in the received versions of the DDJ that undermine Confucian virtues, and archaeological versions that seem to target knowledge more—which indicate that truly ethical or caring relationships between people are enabled only when epistemological and ethical values and systems are not deliberately applied. Chapter 18 states "family relations forgotten: / [the virtues of] Filial piety and affection arise" (trans. Adiss & Lombardo, 2007).[20] In the next chapter, Laozi says "drop benevolence, banish righteousness, / and people will return to filial piety and affection" (Ch. 19, ibid).[21] Not only do these passages indicate that Laozi does believe in harmonious and caring human relationships as opposed to an amoral chaos of all versus all, they further show that the DDJ resists codification due to the fluidity with which it applies moral vocabulary.[22] Formal morality, more often than not, is portrayed in the text as either a sign that spontaneous goodness has been abandoned for social corruption, or as itself a cause of counterproductive social hierarchies that needs to be abandoned if spontaneous harmony is to be regained in society. That Ziporyn (2003) is right that the text sees in the preference of the unvalued not

[20] The translators chose the term "affection" here for the same character (慈, *ci*) which Laozi uses to describe the first of his 'three treasures,' oft translate "mercy." This shows the fluidity of virtues or morals in the text; a word used to describe counterproductive human values in one passage may be used in others to describe the natural good attained when those values are relinquished. Chapter 19 uses filial piety and affection, the same characters used pejoratively in Ch. 18, as natural goods that people will return to if formal virtues are discarded! In Chapter 20, Laozi asks sceptically how much of a difference there is between good (善, *shan*) and evil (惡, *e*), even though in Chapter 79, *Dao* is described as not having favourites (親, *qin*) but abiding with good people (善人, *shanren*). In chapter 38, Laozi uses words for very Confucian virtues, "loyalty and trustworthiness" (忠信, *zhongxin*) to describe that of which ritual ceremony, another Confucian virtue, is only a husk. While perhaps a product of the text being a compilation, this fluidity, in my view, enhances the DDJ's subversively holism.

[21] Slingerland (2014) points out that in the *Guodian* version of the DDJ, unearthed in the late 20th century and arguably much older than other, received versions, Chapter 19 reads, "Cut off **cleverness,** abandon **profit,** and the people will return to being filial and kind" (Ch. 19 in Slingerland, 2014). Here, the specifically Confucian virtues of benevolence and righteousness are no longer targets, and the text overall has a more anti-intellecual than anti-moral ring to it. Some contemporary thinkers (Slingerland, 2014, Graham, 1989) see the Daodejing as advocating a pre-reflective contentment, others (Holloway, 2009) an intuitive awareness that may complement more traditional Confucian education. While there is textual debate around the extent to which the DDJ was written to oppose the ethical and academic institutions of its time, it certainly wants to remove, or at least reform, any programs that culminate in counterproductive intellectual/social rigidity rather than intuitive contentment.

[22] For Slingerland (2014, Module 3 & 6; 2020, personal communication), it is telling that both in the *Daodejing* and the authentic *Zhuangzi*, the exemplars of subversive spontaneity are never engaged in violent or outright immoral activities. Both texts question the distance between perceived values of beauty and ugliness, good and evil; the *Zhuangzi* further explores the relativity of all possible human perspectives, and celebrates the amoral beggar, the invalid, the gnarled tree which the carpenter deems useless. But both are conspicuously absent of any praise for the thief, the murderer, the slanderer, or, for that matter, even the outright hedonist.

merely social subversion, but a return to that which is truly good and natural behind social values, is indicated by Chapter 19 when it concludes "these [abandoning formal knowledge and virtues] are not sufficient in themselves…they should be subordinated / to a Higher principle: / Look at plain silk; hold uncarved wood. / Diminish the egotistical and curb the desires!" (adapted from Adiss & Lombardo, 2007; Wu, 2006).

C. Conclusion

Keeping in mind the constraints of a simple, primitive life that inform Laozi's visions of the good, the text's subversion of morality actually allows its insights to be widely applicable in different moral frameworks. It is not my intention to argue in this paper that we all need to revert to primitive, amoral, agrarian communes. We may well need more explicit and structured moral frameworks to exist and coexist in most contexts we find ourselves in throughout our lives. Nevertheless, I believe the DDJ provides a powerful set of insights which may be applied to a wide variety of ethical frameworks to loosen the grip of counterproductive striving and help us be humble in ways that are less self-deprecating, exhausting, and hypocritical. Daoist humility also opens us to a healthy critique of our existing frameworks when we realize that our values have become mere tools of self-aggrandizement or social ingratiation.[23] Daoist humility is at odds with a vision of materialism, individual wealth, and prestige as the good life. As such, applying Daoist humility is not neutral in terms of visions of the good; it will inform any ethical systems within which it is applied. In terms of modern moral philosophy, these insights apply to

[23] It is commonplace in Chinese history to insist that public servants are Confucian when successful and Daoist when they fail; this hints at the deeper application of Daoist renunciation to Confucian moral effort as two sides of the same conceptual coin. Famed early 20th century Chinese literati Lin Yutang goes so far as to say "Taoism is a deep, fundamental trait of…the Chinese attitude toward life and toward society... It provides the only safe, romantic release from the severe Confucian classic restraint… As more people fail than succeed in this world, and as all who succeed know that they succeed but in a lame and halting manner when they examine themselves in the dark hours of the night, I believe Taoist ideas are more often at work than Confucianism. Even a Confucianist succeeds only when he knows he never really succeeds, that is, by following Taoist wisdom" (Lin, date n/a).

utilitarians, virtue ethicists, and deontologists alike. Applied to utilitarianism, the DDJ might narrow the scope of happiness to be maximized through humility towards simplicity, "wants of the belly not the eye." In a deontologist framework, on the other hand, Daoist humility might widen the scope of the categorical imperative: do not treat *anything* (situations, communities, animals, environments—not just other humans) as a means to an end. And applied to virtue ethics, the Daoist humility might add another dimension to moderation between extremes, namely a warning to check oneself when striving too hard to attain a given virtue becomes counterproductive—a reminder that despite all the helpful practices one can adopt, goodness of character is ultimately something that emerges spontaneously and cannot be forced.

In any case, what the DDJ contributes to ethical discourse is the awareness that any discourse is prone to being a vehicle for counterproductive striving and self-assertion. Daoist humility is not a tradition-specific ethic but a context-specific one. It is the realization that we still see ourselves as isolated egos which have to assert themselves over against other egos, and that this is unfortunate. It is refusing to engage in practices that will make one look good while contributing to social inequality and exploitation, of oneself or others. Finally, it is accepting that the achievements and systems by which we value one person above another are hollow, that providing for one another may not in fact involve trying to attribute more credit to others than to the self, so much as reducing the ways in which our service to one another depends on making some people look better than others. It reminds us to always be realistic about how tied up we are in the values and projects of our society. It also reminds us that doing the *opposite* of what we think would bring us success or credit or desire-fulfillment is often what grants us freedom from our anxieties, and may, counterintuitively, help us reach our goals more effectively than just going with the flow. Just why it may be more effective is the topic of our next chapter.

Chapter Three:

Cognitive Psychology and Daoist Humility

In this chapter, I will explore findings and insights from contemporary psychology which provide evidence to suggest that my account of Daoist humility is in fact realistic. Specifically, I will look at studies indicating that obsessive cognitive control is counterproductive in stressful situations, and that intending the opposite of what one considers effective may be the most effective way to resolve such situations. That is, I will be asking whether the cognitive psychology of ironic processes as well as modern techniques of paradoxical interventions and paradoxical intention therapy provide support for Daoist realist humility and give suggestions for its application and scientific study.[1,2] Throughout this chapter, there are two complementary points I will seek to affirm: 1. Research around ironic processes (IP) and paradoxical interventions and therapies (PT) supports the notion that humility is in fact a realistic virtue that undercuts negative outcomes, and 2. The DDJ is therefore correct (at least in the psychological circumstances relevant to the research) in suggesting that exertion towards fixed outcomes is counterproductive when excessive.

[1] I took the idea of connecting cognitive science, and specifically studies done around ironic processes, with the DDJ from the work of Edward Slingerland (2014, Module 3), much of whose work connects classical Chinese philosophy with contemporary scientific findings. The idea for my argument arose when examining the research and approach suggested by Slingerland's work, though he would likely connect Daoist ethics more strongly to the moral system of virtue ethics. The conclusions I arrive at bear some resemblance to the mindfulness-based behavioural psychotherapy called Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, specifically in its focus on defusing the hold of evaluative and negative verbal thoughts and on moving from "purposeful control of thoughts and feelings" to "willingness to experience the full range of private events, in the service of valued life directions" (V. Batten, 2011, p. 3).

[2] In this paper, I will primarily be looking at evidence for the realist nature of humility as a personal practice or virtue. Some of the work I consult does suggest that ironic processes of mental control are exacerbated as well as open to positive interruption at the interpersonal or social level (Shoham & Rohrbaugh, 1997). While suggestive, this evidence does not amount to a full validation of the DDJ's social insights. In Chapter 4, I will address the fact that more research is needed to substantiate the DDJ's claims about the vanity and relativity of social goods/social conditioning, as well as to explore the wider communal aspects of humility.

I. Daniel Wegner's Ironic Cognitive Processes (IP)

In this section, we will examine Wegner's (1994, 1997) theory of ironic processes—as well as some of the research done to substantiate it—as it relates to Daoist humility. While there is some disagreement as to whether the results confirm Wegner's theory as he articulates it, most of the evidence examined here does suggest that once cognitive stressors reach a tipping point, target-oriented cognitive effort is liable to be counterproductive. In examining the evidence, I provide preliminary pointers as to how it supports the warnings of the DDJ against the counterproductivity of striving for fame and power. An in depth connection to Daoist realist humility will be explored in the last section of this chapter.

A. Theory and Initial Studies

In 1994, Wegner published an influential paper outlining his initial findings in support of the theory that, under high cognitive load, mental processes are often counterproductive. His proposal, which he termed the theory of ironic processes, is that there are two cognitive processes involved when we try to produce (or avoid) mental states: a deliberate "operating process" that seeks desired outcomes, and an "ironic monitoring process" that seeks out signs of an unwanted outcome in order to alert the mind to be able to avoid it (Wegner, 1997). As Wegner describes it in the case of someone who is trying to quit smoking and starts thinking of a smoke,

> when the monitor encounters such thoughts, it brings them into consciousness and restarts the operating process—and the person again tries to think of anything other than a smoke. Over time, the cyclic interplay of the processes moves, in fits and starts, to keep cigarette thoughts out of mind. The irony of the monitor, however, is that in providing the needed search for the failure of mental control, it increases the accessibility of exactly the most undesirable thoughts. In the case of the smoke-ender,

> cigarettes and smoke and tobacco and ashtrays all become highlighted by the monitoring process. As long as the operating process is healthy and unimpaired, this is only a small problem. (ibid., p. 148)

Under situations of high mental pressure or cognitive load, however, the operating process is overwhelmed, and the unwanted mental states highlighted by the monitoring process predominate, resulting in the all-too-familiar human phenomenon of best laid plans backfiring, of our attempts at suppressing thoughts and worries resulting in their increase.[3] Slingerland (2014, 3.6) connects this theory with the DDJ's insight into the futility of obsession with achievement and social prestige. While concern with one's basic livelihood and relationships is natural, it becomes counterproductive when one fixates on one outcome to the point where one is unwilling to take a break or consider alternatives.

Wegner cooperated with other researchers in a series of studies examining when and how cognitive efforts have ironic results. Some experiments focused on motor skills and basic cognitive association tasks, noting for example that subjects primed not to overshoot a hole in a golf putting exercise were, when subjected to a mental load, more likely to overshoot it than those not asked to avoid overshooting (Wegner, 1997, p. 149). Others focused on emotionally valenced tasks, such as suppressing depressive moods, noting that this led to the unintended mood predominating when in a state of mental load (1994, p. 44). The effect of mental load was tested with such methods as being asked to remember a number while performing the task, or drinking alcohol before the task (2009, p. 49). In a 1997 summary of his research on the topic, Wegner sums up his findings:

[3] De la Peña (2009) notes how "Wegner, contends that the operating process is effortful, consciously guided, and usually effective, while the ironic monitoring process is unconscious, less demanding of mental effort, and usually less influential" (p. 3). This provides an interesting link to (the academically very prevalent) dual process theories of cognition (cf. Samuelson & Church, 2015) in the context of the DDJ. Wegner's research supports Laozi's notion that social pressures and excessive cognitive efforts are the occasion for our unconscious "type 1" processes to undermine our conscious "type 2" efforts rather than to cooperate spontaneously. While an in-depth connection between Daoism humility and dual process theory is beyond the scope of this paper, my argument ought to line up well with the extant evidence on the interaction between type 1 and type 2 processes (cf. Slingerland, 2014, Introduction, Module 3, & Module 6).

> Intended thought suppression under mental load creates exaggerated cognitive accessibility of the suppressed thought (Wegner & Erber, 1992), intended concentration under load increases the accessibility of distractors (Wegner, 1997, Zukier & Hagen, 1978), intended mood control under load leads to greater accessibility of thoughts relevant to the unwanted mood, and to self-reports of mood opposite the one intended (Wegner, Erber, & Zanakos, 1993). (p. 149)

The evidence, Wegner believes, supports his thesis fairly persuasively. Certainly, he has amassed an impressive body of data suggesting the reality of cognitive processes that are or become counterproductive in the right (or, perhaps, the wrong) circumstances.

Wegner acknowledges that mental control is generally successful under normal circumstances. It is only "when distractions, stressors, or other mental loads interfere with conscious attempts" at cognitive control that the ironic process slows or interferes with our ability to keep unwanted thoughts out of mind (2009, p. 48). Morever, not all human effort is counterproductive even if cognitive load of some sort is present. Rather, as Wegner found when comparing levels of arousal in those told not to think of sex with those told to concentrate on arousing thoughts, the results of effort to bring about certain cognitive outcomes appears, at times, to be the same as efforts to suppress the same outcome (p. 49). Rather than being counterproductive, attempts at mental control under load are sometimes simply no more effective than alternative efforts. Significant in this regard is that it is often after suppression of unwanted emotions that they return stronger than ever once mental loads or triggers are encountered, as in the case of suppressing depressive thoughts (Wegner 2009, p. 48, 49; cf. Silva et al., 2018, p. 103). This again recalls the DDJ's notion of the return of strength to weakness, and Laozi's warnings not to get haughty when it appears one has achieved control of one's circumstances.

Wegner suggests different avenues to pre-empt ironic outcomes, but largely sees his findings as humbling reminders of our cognitive limits. His first suggestion is to "pick one's fights;" to realize that, based on personal conditions and the seriousness of the situation (e.g. a loved one's death vs. getting a traffic ticket), "Some forms of mental control are just so difficult that most people simply do not have the mental capacity to perform them" (1997, p. 149). On the other hand, most of the time in daily life mental effort is successful, so it may be that with increased training and habituation, certain challenges related to mental load may be successfully mastered. Wegner also notes that paradoxical symptom prescription might be a helpful way to "undo [the mental] control" (ibid) by when we are told to intend the very thing we are trying to suppress:

> Potentially effective strategies include accepting symptoms rather than attempting to control them and disclosing problems rather than keeping them secret. …Current research [indicates] that, under certain conditions, we may be better able to avoid the worst in what we think, do, or say by avoiding the avoiding. Failing that, our best option is to orchestrate our circumstances so as to minimize mental load when mental control is needed. (2009, p. 50)

In the Sections II and III of this chapter, we will examine how the success of therapeutic strategies of accepting and intending the opposite of what one normally does or attempts to do supports the ethic of Daoist humility.

B. Further Evidential Support

The idea that some levels of cognitive distress will produce counterproductive results regardless of our best mental efforts is further substantiated by findings suggesting that ironic processes themselves are predictive of depressive states. Silva et al. (2018) tested Wegner's IP theory by comparing the effects of thought suppression in a group with subclinical

depression symptoms (SG) to those in a nonclinical (asymptomatic) control group (NG). The most significant finding was that suppressing worrisome thoughts was less effective for the SG than the NG. Interestingly, the content of worrisome thoughts did not differ significantly between the two groups, and the presence of pathological worry did not predict the increase in worry during the experiments. Rather, "the SG rated their primary worry as more frequent, harder to bear, and more responsible for dysphoria (when compared to the nonclinical)" (p. 104). It seems therefore that "metacognitive" differences in belief about one's own worrisome thoughts predict how great the cognitive load, and resulting ironic effects of thought suppression, caused by worry will be (ibid.). This is seen also in the final relevant finding of this paper:

> The nonclinical group used a more diverse range of strategies to suppress thoughts (cognitive distraction, behavioral and doing nothing), while … participants with depressed mood more often used thoughts with negative content [as a distraction] than the participants without depressive symptoms. (ibid.)

These findings thus both support and moderate IP theory by suggesting that it is not just induced mental load like a tragedy, deadline, or distraction, but also long-term states of cognitive distress, such as depression and—as in the DDJ—one's negative evaluation of difficulty, that are predictive of ironic outcomes of cognitive control. They also confirm Wenger's (1997, 2009) notion that at times, accepting unwanted states is the best strategy (the NG, more than the SG, were successful at suppressing worrisome thoughts in part just by 'doing nothing'), and that personal differences will dictate the varying levels of cognitive control or paradoxical acceptance of symptoms that will be effective for a given person.

Studies on paradoxical performance done in sport psychology provide further empirical support for IP theory, as well as a connection between IP and the paradoxical

therapies we will examine in section II. De la Peña & his colleagues (2010, 2009, 2008) in particular have used Wegner's framework in athletic research. In a 2009 study, De la Peña tested the difference in results in a laboratory athletic activity between participants who imagined themselves being anxious and those who imagined themselves as relaxed before the activity. As predicted, both performed better than control groups in a low-stress activity. However, De la Peña predicted that, based on Wegnerian IP theory, the anxiety imaging group would outperform the relaxation imaging group in a high stress situation, which did not occur. Nevertheless, the results did support the notion that ironic processes are real and pre-emptable through paradoxical interventions:

> It was predicted that paradoxical-success imagery (PSI) would prevent the potential seditious nature of the ironic monitoring process (Wegner, 1994) from manifesting, while maximizing the benefits of substantiated imagery techniques (e.g., MG-M, CS, kinesthetic, and positive-outcome imagery). This aspect of the hypothesis was supported as the PSI group showed the most improvement following training compared to all groups. p. 27

The results also indicate that performance in high-pressure situations does improve with some type of priming, suggesting that mere effort in those situations is less effective than preparation in dealing with anxiety. This supports the Daoist notion that to be humble involves accepting undesired states before they arise, since "difficult things…can only be tackled when they are easy…big things…can only be achieved by attending to their small beginnings" (DDJ Ch. 63, trans. Wu 2006). De la Peña's finding that imagining oneself as anxious was more effective than relaxation imaging in terms of performance improvement *over time* furthermore supports the notion that humility is effective as a long term strategy of dealing with difficulty. This could be related to Wegner's (2009) notion that unwanted emotions resurface "with unusual intensity" *after* suppression (p. 49). As we will see in

Section II, it also corroborates further evidence that paradoxical intention therapy is uniquely effective in the long term because it undercuts negative feedback loops of anxiety.

C. Questions about Wegner's Theoretical Framework

It is becoming clear that extant evidence has not confirmed Wegner's theory of cognitive processes per se, but only supported his prediction that in practice, high-pressure situations coupled with suppression of unwanted outcomes is often correlated with failures or unintended outcomes of mental control. Shoham & Rohrbaugh (1997) point out that Wegner's

> hypothetical constructs such as 'operating process' and 'monitoring process' do not yield easily to external observation, and the theory may be difficult to refute. Moreover, although manipulations of cognitive load have clear ironic consequences in the laboratory, it is less clear what cognitive load means in real life or how [Wegner's methods of inducing cognitive load] such as counting backwards might translate to the experience of having a psychological symptom. (p. 151)

Shoham & Rohrbaugh are right, of course, that it is by no means straightforward to predict what type of situation will result in what type of mental load or ironic consequence, just as there is no universal method of identifying which values and situations are lowly and of how to embrace them given in the DDJ.[4] They prefer, therefore, to focus on "treatment implications" of "the simple observation that ironic mental processes persist precisely

[4] In a 2008 study involving subjects in a golf putting exercise, De la Pena et al. pitted Wegner's ironic process theory (suggesting that instructing a subject not to undershoot the hole would ironically result in undershooting) against the implicit overcompensation thesis, which holds the opposite (instructing not to undershoot will result in above average overshooting the hole). This study confirmed the overcompensation thesis over Wegner's IP theory. Interestingly, while not IP theory per se, overcompensation involves its own form of irony: by telling themselves to avoid a certain type of action, subjects become prone to go *too far in the desired direction*. Overcompensation is thus reminiscent of the DDJ's admonitions in Ch. 9: "Keep on beating and sharpening a sword, / And the edge cannot be preserved for long. / Fill your house with gold and jade, / And it can no longer be guarded" (trans. Wu, 2006). De la Pena et al.'s study provides evidence that attempts at outcome control do open themselves to ironic effects, though the type and function of the cognitive processes involved may vary by situation and are open to further investigation.

because people continue in unsuccessful attempts to exert mental control" (ibid.). They conclude, therefore, that

> Breaking exacerbation cycles will depend less on predicting when ironic processes will occur than on knowing that one is occurring. Once an ironic process has been identified, the crucial questions become (a) what specific solution attempts (e.g., mental control efforts) keep the cycle going and (b) what strategy (for this particular client) will suffice to interrupt it. (ibid.)

These considerations are significant as we turn to paradoxical therapies and their application in a theory of humility. On the one hand, Wegner and the DDJ are surely right to maintain we ought to cultivate willingness to relax our efforts and embrace setbacks in order to *prevent* downward spirals of anxiety and abuses of power. On the other, this is no strict utilitarian science of outcome control, and much of the cultivation itself will probably involve identifying and interrupting negative ironic processes in our lives and relationships as we become aware of them.

II. Paradoxical Intention Therapies and Paradoxical Interventions (PT)

In this section, we will look at paradoxical therapies (PT) employed by psychologists to undercut negative psychological feedback loops which function similar to ironic processes. In these methods, patients are told paradoxically to either seek out or intend the very phobic or obsessive symptoms they are trying to avoid, or to reframe and accept their conditions as natural and positive. PT have found widespread application among therapists, and we will look at studies which suggest that they are at least as effective in the short term, and perhaps more so in the long term, than non-paradoxical methods. These findings suggest that humility as the willingness to pause one's goal-oriented striving and embrace counterintuitive,

vulnerable states of being is indeed a realistic and effective way to subvert one's harmful obsessions.

A. Victor Frankl: Negative Feedback Loops and Paradoxical Symptom Prescription

While some (Bjornestad & Mims, 2017) have suggested that Adler was the first psychologist to employ paradoxical interventions clinically, my research focuses on Victor Frankl's theory of paradoxical intention therapy.[5] Frankl defines paradoxical intention as "a process by which the patient is encouraged to do, or wish to happen, the very things he fears (the former applying to the phobic patient, the latter to the obsessive-compulsive)" (1975, p. 227). In terms recalling ironic processes, Frankl maintains that neuroses result from a negative experience generating attempts to avoid said experience; these attempts, in turn, generate more of the same experience/symptom, resulting in a negative "feedback mechanism" in which attempts to avoid the symptom engender more of it (p. 233). When such ironic efforts are detected, helping patients interrupt these loops in order to achieve "self-detachment" from them becomes the primary goal of the therapist:

> The full-fledged neurosis is not only caused by the primary conditions but also by [a] secondary...feedback mechanism called anticipatory anxiety. Therefore, if we wish to recondition a conditioned reflex, we must unhinge the vicious cycle formed by anticipatory anxiety, and this is the very job done by our paradoxical intention technique. (p. 233)

As Shoham-Salomon & Rosenthal (1987, p. 22) point out, since symptoms are usually experienced as compulsive, paradoxical intention gets patients to try, in triggering situations,

[5] Both Adler and Frankl (both Viennese psychologists) reportedly started work on PT in the 1920's (cf. Bjornestad & Mims, 2017; Frankl, 1975). Zaiser (2005) even suggests paradoxical intention has its roots in ancient Greek practices of philosophical therapy and self-examination, perhaps in the practice Egenter (1956) describes as "stoic praemeditatio, through which one sought inner detachment before a concrete encounter with people or outcomes" (p. 317), which has resonances with the practices of symptom acceptance in the school of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, which we will examine below.

to voluntarily do something compulsive, which they often find impossible, thus averting the symptom. This move subverts ironic processes of mental control right at their source: "by attempting to have the problem, a patient cannot continue [counterproductively] trying to prevent it" (p. 152). Frankl's approach here joins the one common theme in all the different streams I consult in my argument: the importance of de-identification with destructive desire or counterproductive compulsion. By counselling patients to seek out deliberately the objects of their unhealthy obsessions, their shameful behaviour moves from the compulsive to the voluntary level, thus helping to break its hold. By 'humbling' themselves in this way, patients are able to reduce identification with destructive desires and pre-empt further negative outcomes.

In the context of humility, it is important to note that Frankl's method is neither simply the virtue of self-discipline (doing the opposite of what comes *easily* when necessary) nor letting oneself go and doing dangerous, rebellious, or immoral things in an attempt to be paradoxical. The goal of PT is to find one's compulsive phobia or obsession in a given area, and make this involuntary compulsion the subject of one's voluntary intentions in order to break its hold. Frankl (1975) gives examples of patients with agoraphobia (fear of crowds), obsessive fear of choking, and problems stuttering and sweating in public. These patients are not told to stay home, stop eating, or stop attempting to speak in public—that is, they were *not* told to simply do the opposite they wanted achieve, to act as if they had no anxiety. Rather, they were instructed to intend to have a nervous breakdown, choke, stutter, or sweat *even as* they continued to go out, eat, or speak in public. These patients all recorded near complete disappearance of their compulsions after practicing such inward intention, or self talk—e.g. "I'll show everyone in the street how well I can panic and collapse"—repeatedly whenever their phobias began to set in (ibid. p. 231). The paradoxical intention then was not changing their physical effort, but changing the focus of their mental effort. It seems that

when they told themselves to intensify the compulsion, the cognitive effort that was unconsciously maintaining the phobia was interrupted. This means that it would be faulty to apply paradoxical intention and PT's to ethics by proposing that it would be humble for us to simply give in to our urges to be arrogant, presumptuous, coercive, etc., to 'stop resisting' them. It is true that attempts to resist ethical bad habits are often ineffectual; we all know what its like to lose control and say or do things to others that we told ourselves we would never do (again). However, the insight that the method of PT brings to us is not to simply be more vicious, but rather to be willing to accept our vicious tendencies rather than to deny or avoid them.[6] Being humble then involves both accepting that one's compulsions are harmful, but also that they are a part of oneself that does not respond well to cognitive effort in times of stress. The humble person looks to accept her compulsions, vices, and counterproductive attempts at cognitive control and thereby, paradoxically, "to develop a sense of detachment" towards them, even "laughing at [them]" (Frankl in Clasquin-Johnson, 1989, p. 53). What

[6] Speaking from the context of family counselling as opposed to personal neuroses, Bjornestad & Mims (2017) describe how paradoxical intention has in fact been applied by therapists to interpersonal challenges such as frequent arguing with a spouse or yelling at a child. They describe paradoxical interventions as placing clients in a "double-bind" by calling them "to change by remaining unchanged." They divide paradoxical interventions into three types. In "**prescribing** [the symptom]," family members are told to deliberately engage in the behaviour they are trying to change, and perhaps to change its context ('argue in the bathroom rather than the kitchen'). In "**restraining** [from change]," family members are warned not to change negative behaviours ('if you stop yelling at your child, you will lose your intimate connection'). Finally, in "paradoxical **positioning**," the therapist will frame the problem as acceptable or even exaggerate it ('your right, your son is a hopeless case, why not put him up for adoption'). This way, "when the family accepts the paradoxical intervention (e.g., increases, pretends to have, or repositions the symptom), they are clearly able to exert some voluntary control over it. If they are unsuccessful, they actually move closer to their ultimate treatment goal of alleviating the symptom" (ibid.).

Thus to Bjornestad & Mims, the success of PT is often the result of getting clients to defy the therapist ('how dare she say that my son is a hopeless case or that I should keep yelling at him.'). This is very different from Frankl's notion that intending to increase one's abhorred compulsions enables the inner hold of that compulsion (or even of the abhorrence) to be broken spontaneously. Bjornestad & Mims maintain it is imperative that therapists employing paradoxical interventions have an established relationship with the family (member) in order to gauge the danger in potential resistance or compliance with these ironic instructions. What this suggests about PT in relation to ethics is that we should be very circumspect in making paradoxical suggestions to self or other to increase vicious behaviour in hopes to get it to stop or become less dominant. Accepting and paradoxically intending the emotions and situations we fear in order to subvert our reactionary behaviour towards them is humble; engaging in vicious behaviour, even if we truly hope to thereby get rid of it, is not. Suggestions to do more vicious things that are intended to be ironic/paradoxical should only be practiced in the context of support of experienced, trusted others, likely psychological professionals.

Frankl's method of PT reveals about humility is that, when faced with the urge to try harder to resist a vicious urge, the humble act is to find a way to psychologically accept the very part of oneself one does not like even while one continues to outwardly behave in a moral or considerate manner. This may involve consciously exaggerating the vicious urge, doing acts of kindness even if they seem weak or pointless in light of one's ongoing vicious compulsions, trying a new approach to dealing with a problem even if it seems humiliating or unpleasant, or removing oneself from situations in which one knows one is vulnerable to vicious compulsions.[7]

B. Evidential Support

Frankl (1975) offers many anecdotal examples of successful treatment through paradoxical intention, both from his own practice as well as in the practice of many other psychologists published publicly or shared with him personally (cf. p. 227, 229). These stories suggest effectiveness in a wide array of maladies, from claustrophobia to stuttering, depression, agoraphobia, and problems with sexual performance. The accounts often involve clients becoming aware of the irony of their situation and able to laugh at themselves; Frankl regards "humor…as a manifestation of that specifically human quality…the capacity of self-detachment" (p. 228). He recalls a client with chronic nervousness being instructed to be more tense:

> She started by clenching her fists together and shaking her hands as though they were trembling. "That's good," I said, "but try to be more nervous." The humor of the situation became obvious to her and she said, "I really was nervous, but I can't be any longer. It's odd, but the more I try to be tense, the less I'm able to be." (ibid.)

[7] Masicampo et al.'s (2014) research suggests that self-controlled people are often lower in will power (or quicker to ego-depletion) than non-self-controlled people. What they do have is the tendency to recognize situations in which they fall prey to temptation, and the habit of avoiding them (cf. footnote #20 below.)

Such anecdotal evidence is not sufficient confirmation that Frankl's approach is clinically efficacious, but it does illustrate the way in which detaching from one's efforts at cognitive control is made both more effective and easier through methods that actively reframe one's relationship to one's personal goals and cognitive fixations.

Shoham-Salomon & Rosenthal (1987) provide empirical support for PT in the form of a meta-analysis comparing results of 12 surveys done on the success of five different types of paradoxical therapies. The PT's examined varied by positive or negative connotation; in some, therapists had given a paradoxically positive connotation to the symptom ('fear of public speaking is good') or the process underlying it ('you are not sick; you are merely exacerbating your problems ironically by trying to control them') and then either prescribed or prohibited said symptom, while in others, symptoms were prescribed or reframed but left with the negative connotations subjects brought with them. Data from these studies were compared for their short and long-term findings. The findings support the hypothesis that paradoxical therapies are generally similarly effective to other therapies, but "more effective than other treatments when compared a month after termination of treatment and…more effective for clients with more severe symptoms" (p. 26). Moreover, "among the paradoxical interventions, those [in which symptoms] are more positively connoted seem more effective than other treatments. ...in the absence of positive connotation, symptom prescriptions...were less effective than other treatments" (p. 26-27).[8] These results support two general conclusions drawn from my research on IP and PT:[9] 1. Paradoxically intending undesired things is powerful because it undercuts obsessive cycles, not because it 'magically' achieves

[8] It is significant that Shoham-Salomon & Rosenthal credit Frankl with pioneering the approach of providing a positive connotation of the processes underlying symptoms to subjects undergoing PT. From Frankl's own report (1975) it is unclear whether he advocates such explanation being made clear to PT patients in every case, and so whether or not his paradoxical intention consistently falls under positive connotation. But Frankl openly published about PT and reported both subjects successfully applying it to themselves, as well as under the guidance of therapists who suggested its effectiveness to them (p. 229-231). Both Shoham-Salomon & Rosenthal (1987, p. 22, p. 27-28) and Sharp et al. (2004, p. 948) list further empirical work validating Frankl's PT (p. 948), which, as Frankl (1975) himself noted, has found widespread successful application amongst counselors.

[9] Cf. Silva et al., 2018; Wegner, 2009 & 1997; Shoham & Rohrbaugh, 1997; Frankl 1975.

something positive on its own; it is therefore especially effective with long term results or severe neuroses, but not necessarily any better at bringing about immediate goals than other methods. 2. The most powerful function of PT is to bring about change in attitude towards, and acceptance of, the parts of oneself one dislikes. This is why adding a positive connotation to and encouraging acceptance of subjects' symptoms are the common factors in the most effective PT's examined in this article and in the other theoretical frameworks examined in my research as well.[10] Humility, then, is not primarily about forcing oneself to endure hated things, but rather becoming willing to accept states and traits that one has hitherto tried only to avoid by actively identifying with said states or traits in a safe setting. This acceptance paradoxically allows the compulsory, obsessive nature of the hitherto feared state/trait to dissipate. As in the DDJ's valuation of socially undesired states, the goal is to get us to stop fixating on counterproductive attempts at control, and Shoham-Salomon & Rosenthal's study suggest that PT is in fact a realistic way of doing so.

The studies by De la Peña et al. (2010, 2009, 2008) addressed above (Section I.B.) further confirm the effectiveness of PT in the context of using mental practices to pre-empt the effect of anxiety on performance. The fact that athletes who imagined themselves experiencing anxiety before performance not only outperformed the non-imaging control group, but also outperformed positive-imagery group in terms of improvement over time suggests that voluntarily engaging one's debilitating emotions and thoughts is effective not only in interrupting ongoing negative feedback loops, but pre-empting them in the future as well (De la Peña, 2009). Another study by De la Peña & Murray (2007) on the benefits of a paradoxical "pre-performance routine" on a golf chip shot test validated PT methods even more strongly, since "during the pressure phase, only the [anxiety imaging] group performed

[10] In terms of ironic processes, Wegner (2009, 1997) insists that accepting the futility of one's cognitive control is essential; De le Peña's research (2009) shows that accepting that one will feel negative feelings helps improve performance. Acceptance and commitment therapy, which we will examine in Section C. below, further develops the benefits of accepting one's unwanted traits and states.

significantly more accurately than the [control] group during the final shots taken." This suggests that "a paradoxical…pre-performance routine can be beneficial to performing self-paced tasks if nervousness and negative thoughts are interpreted as normal processes" (p. 156). In another study, De la Peña et al. (2010) garnered both further evidence for the effectiveness of paradoxical success imagery in athletes, as well as for suggesting the unique effectiveness of PT for dealing with pre-existing mental challenges. They found that "paradoxical-success imagery may be best suited for individuals with trait anxiety and the propensity to interpret anxiety-related symptoms as debilitative to performance." This aligns with the findings of the studies of Behar et al. (2005) and Silva et al. (2018) that anxiety-prone persons are especially prone to negative mentation about their anxiety. As in the DDJ, PT is concerned with metacognitive content, getting us to voluntarily undergo feelings we normally try to avoid in order to interrupt counterproductive attitudes of aversion towards such feelings.

More interesting data on PT come from Behar et al. (2005), whose study of ironic processes found that worry decreased with repeated exposure, supporting the notion that, "repeated exposure to unwanted mentation facilitates reduction of that mentation due to a reduced emotional response over time" (p. 297). They also indicate that

> if one wants to achieve the effects of habituation for imagery-based worry, an initial period of "mind-clearing" (e.g., through meditation or relaxation) may be necessary. Indeed, past research has shown that a period of relaxation facilitates habituation and extinction of fearful material during subsequent exposure (Borkovec & Sides, 1979). (ibid.)

Exposure/desensitization techniques themselves involve an element of paradox in that one removes oneself from a troublesome state through immersion in it. Frankl (1975) includes

reports about exposure, desensitization, and relaxation techniques being used together with paradoxical intention. Thus, Behar et al.'s results show that relaxation and mind-clearing techniques may be useful companions and precursors to PT.

A further significant finding from Behar et al. (2005) in this respect was that "decrease in worrisome mentation across two consecutive expression periods was more pronounced when the worrisome material was imagery-based rather than thought-based in nature" (p. 1). When subjects visualized worrisome images, they experienced a much greater reduction in the thought about the worrisome topic than when they entertained worrisome verbal thoughts. Their finding "provides support for the notion...that the verbal, thought-based nature of worry may be responsible for its preclusion of emotional processing and therefore, ultimately, for the preclusion of habituation and extinction of anxiety" (p. 297). From the perspective of the DDJ, the evaluative content of our worrisome thoughts is exacerbated by the categorizing power of language (名, *ming*—naming, labelling), driving us deeper into our ironic efforts to avoid shameful and anxious states.[11] Finding ways to attenuate the verbal nature of one's metacognitive attitudes towards one's worries, so that it moves from verbal to imagery-based worry and thus becomes easier to accept as a normal part of life, may be one of the purposes of the use of extensive countercultural imagery in the text (e.g. "Know the male [and] the white / but keep to the role of the female [and] the sullied…then constant virtue will be sufficient" Ch. 28, trans. Wu, 2006). Relativizing the hold of language on one's emotional responses is, at any rate, part of the effective practice of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, which we will examine in the upcoming section.

[11] Graham (1989) describes "the enormous importance of naming and renaming throughout" the DDJ: "dividing out and naming both are guided by and guide desire and dislike" (p. 220). The DDJ's paradoxical imagery and textual juxtapositions serve to destabilize fixed names and categories which can trap us in desires contrary to the way of spontaneity: "On the one hand we have to cut up, name, set the limits within which each person 'knows where to stop' [DDJ Ch. 32, 44]…on the other we have to recognise what seems the diminishing remainder still to be divided as the inexhaustible block out of which they are cut, the 'Unhewn' [DDJ Ch. 28, 32]. …What matters about the dissolution of boundaries when the fixity of naming loses its hold on us is that, in no longer splitting off deciding self from spontaneously changing other, we find ourselves moving on the same course as heaven and earth through their natural cycles." (p. 220-221, 223)

The findings of Behar et al. (2005) show how the strategies of PT proposed by Frankl (1975) and de la Pena et al. (2010, 2009) (intending or visualizing the fixations you are trying to avoid) and those of PT proposed by Wegner (2009) and Shoham & Rohrbaugh (1997) (giving up mental control in situations of load where it is counterproductive)—as well as more traditional therapies such as non-ironic meditation—work together. "Doing nothing," taking a break from one's cognitive control, and relaxing with non-ironic techniques provide cognitive space for subsequent engagement with one's fears and obsessions so that one can change one's ensnaring emotional and cognitive responses to them through habituation (getting used to their presence), paradoxical intention (intending/exaggerating them so that they no longer have control), and acceptance (realizing that one's evaluation of what is desirable and undesirable is not absolute).

C. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Accepting Unwanted States

Before exploring the relationships between IP and PT, and how they support Daoist humility, we will briefly look at how the widely used school of psychotherapy known as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy approaches PT. ACT employs paradox to foster acceptance of negatively evaluated conditions in a way that is reminiscent of Zen Buddhism and so, indirectly, of Daoism (Hayes, 2002).[12] Sharp et al. (2004) describe how ACT's approach, known as 'inherent paradox,' involves

> a functional contradiction between the literal and the functional properties of verbal events and primarily involves verbal constructions regarding events not readily rule-governed. …The most central inherent paradox used in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy is a 'rule' about distressing private events: 'If you aren't willing to have it,

[12] Graham (1989, p. 172) and Slingerland (2014, 6.4, 6.8) share the conclusion that *Chan* (Zen) Buddhism gets much of its characteristic focus on release from distinction-making and conceptual thought from Zhuangzi and Laozi. Cf. also Clasquin-Johnson (1989) for a stimulating attempt at interpreting classic Zen Buddhist paradoxical self-cultivation techniques in the framework of Frankl's paradoxical intention therapy.

> you've got it'…. For example, if a panic disordered client is entirely committed to not having a panic attack, the occurrence of even low anxiety is something about which to get anxious. (p. 947-948)[13]

ACT thus defines the ironic results of verbal categorization in a way reminiscent of the DDJ's critique of linguistic evaluation: "Failing to see the interdependence of the [the value and its concomitant vice], we commit our-selves to the 'good'—we try to attain the fragrance without the stench, severing the relation, thereby killing the flower" (Ziporyn, 2003, p. 10). By using techniques of defusion such as "repeated exposure to inherent paradox," ACT "helps loosen the grip literal language has on a client's thoughts, feeling, or behavior by highlighting the fact that literal language is useful in some contexts, but not all" (Sharp et al., 2004, p. 948). The goal of such defusion is not to make the bad feelings go away, but rather to foster acceptance of them so as to avoid destructive behaviour and negative feedback cycles:

> The individual with a history of agoraphobia may have all manner of thoughts about leaving home and going to new places (e.g. 'I just can't go out today'). Within ACT, this individual would learn not to try to rid herself of this thought and reassure herself of her safety, but instead to see that thought for what it is – the arbitrary and automatic product of her mind's functioning that does not need to be followed as if it were truth. (V. Batten, 2011, p. 3)

[13] Sharp et al. also hold that Frankl's paradoxical intention relies on a "constructed paradox" which "leaves in place a change agenda with which the problem originated…[and relies on] social demands or rules that lead to compliance or resistance, which Acceptance and Commitment Therapy views as a potential source of clinical difficulty" (p. 947). Such an approach however seems more reminiscent of the paradoxical interventions in interpersonal conflict outlined by Bjornestad and Mims (2017), in which the therapist has prescribed a symptom ironically in hopes either of rebellion and hence reduction of symptom occurrence or of an increased sense of control over the symptom in clients. It is likely this type of understanding of PT, which lacks an awareness of symptom prescription as a means to get the client to spontaneously realize the counterproductivity of their obsessive attempts at symptom control and experience freedom from anticipatory anxiety, that Sharp et al. have in mind with their critique of 'constructed paradoxes.' It is thus likely wrong to see a fundamental opposition between ACT, Frankl's PT, and Wegner's IP in terms of subverting negative feedback loops. Indeed, Sharp et al.'s description of the obsessive cognitive attitudes ACT's linguistic paradoxes are meant to destabilize—"having anxiety about anxiety has the effect of precipitating even higher anxiety, providing more anxiety to be anxious about" (Sharp et al., 2004, p. 948)—could have been penned by Frankl himself.

What ACT reveals about PT is that, in Frankl's own words, it is "concerned not so much with the symptom in itself, but with the patient's attitude towards his neurosis and its symptomatic manifestation" (Frankl in Clasquin-Johnson, 1989, p. 53). ACT uses paradoxical statements to bring to light the ironic nature of our attempts at mental control. It "offers radical acceptance as a starting point to a new relationship with symptoms," showing that accepting our weaknesses is a humble act not because it means a lowered appreciation for oneself, but precisely because in this acceptance, we move away from obsessive control towards "willingness to experience the full range of private events, in the service of valued life directions" (V. Batten, 2011, p. 2).

At the same time, ACT does not proffer a sheer linguistic relativism anymore than the DDJ's subversive language offers approval of destructive immoral behaviour.[14] ACT extols uses of language that are accurate to the situation; what it seeks to avoid is behavioural principles being applied too broadly or 'literally.' Like the DDJ, ACT is concerned with the importance of context for helpful verbal categorization ('naming').[15] For example, in the context of parenting practice, Whittingham (2019) states that in ACT,

> reinforcers and punishers are defined solely by their observed effects on behavior, rather than by any inherent properties they may have. For example, chocolate is not inherently reinforcing…[e.g.] for someone who has a chocolate allergy. …Parents often feel that scolding is a punisher—after all, scolding is not pleasant; however, the evidence tells another tale—if the misbehavior continues, scolding may actually function as a reinforcer. (p. 68).

[14] Integrative psychologist Erskine (2019) notes that "the more change is the focus of our therapeutic practice, the more an individual will unconsciously maintain previously formed modes of behavior (Beisser, 1971). We facilitate our clients' understanding and appreciation of the psychological functions of their behaviors, repetitive feelings, or obsessions before attending to behavioral change…an emphasis on changing behavior distracts clients from awareness of their phenomenological experiences, the homeostatic functions of their behaviors, and the opportunity to freely choose how to live life" (p. 8).

[15] Cf. footnote #11 above.

Seeing a given item or action as inherently desirable or undesirable leads to applying it unequivocally as a reward or punishment. ACT agrees with the DDJ that social approval is one of the strongest instances of such counterproductive overgeneralization:

> Parents often think that praise must be a reinforcer; after all, they are saying something nice. However, praise has been shown to have paradoxical effects, decreasing motivation and persistence in individuals with low self-esteem (Brummelman, Crocker, & Bushman, 2016)… The important point is to know if a stimulus is functioning as a reinforcer or a punisher one must look to its effect on behavior…If 'good effort' means 'wow you failed big time' children will learn this and it will cease to be a reinforcer. (p. 68, 82)

Approving language used because it society has deemed it univocally 'good' (rather than because it is tied to actual outcomes) creates an environment in which context is ignored.[16] Evaluative language

> "often works best when it is descriptive, that is, when it specifies the exact behavior being praised…[and is] genuine and sincere. That is, parents should say "good effort" when the child actually has put in good effort" (p. 82).

ACT's use of inherent paradox is geared to bring to light the ironic effects that verbal abstractions or overgeneralizations can have on our cognition and behaviour. It sees the negative feedback mechanisms identified by Wegner and Frankl, in which misplaced mental effort or aversion produces more of the very thing one is trying to avoid, as bound up in a

[16] An intriguing study by Morrow et al. (2019) underlines the need for contextual differentiation of positive and negative feedback cycles. Their findings suggest a paradoxical relationship between supportive relational environments and greater vulnerability to impact from negative interactions. Specifically, recent findings with children in school environments suggest that "classrooms with high levels of prosocial behavior could increase children's likelihood of blaming negative peer interactions on stable characteristics of themselves" (p. 401). The authors report that these findings are consistent with those of other researchers documenting the impact of negative experiences in classroom settings as greater the more prosocial the school and classroom are. I would suggest that these findings lend credence to the notion that appropriate exposure to unwanted feelings, or other ways of fostering acceptance of future negative experiences is necessary to pre-empt "the possibility that prosocial school communities could leave certain students even more susceptible to maladjustment" (ibid., p. 402).

problematic relationship to language. ACT's goal in helping clients to realize their over-identification with the "literal" or overgeneralized meaning of words and verbal thoughts is to help them accept their emotions and to use language in a flexible, context-specific manner, thereby reducing ironic reactionary behaviour.

D. Summary and Conclusion

While researchers do not, at this point, fully understand the nature of ironic processes or how paradoxical treatments serve to interrupt them, the evidence does seem to line up with the themes of the DDJ on the following point: it is not rebellious opposition to established patterns that is good in and of itself, but rather the willingness and ability to accept the ironic limitedness, the eventual collapse, of all attempts (even good/natural ones) at self-assertion.[17] All of the PT's we have discussed—whether of acceptance, reframing symptoms as desirable or prescription, reframing symptoms as something to be actively sought out—thus share a common diagnosis on human obsession: "trying to change negative content is a major source of the negative content" (Sharp et al., p. 948), and a common solution: getting patients to stop their efforts to avoid their problems when these efforts have become problem-reinforcing.

III. Connection to Daoist Self-Yielding

We are now ready to discuss how IP and PT research supports our Daoist ethic of humility. My contention is that the thought of the Daodejing provides a link between research on the effectiveness of paradox in subverting ironic mental processes and the virtue of humility understood as a willingness to put oneself in unflattering situations and engage in menial-seeming acts when necessary. This IP and PT research, in turn, provides evidence to

[17] E.g. DDJ Ch. 9: "Keep on beating and sharpening a sword, / And the edge cannot be preserved for long. / Fill your house with gold and jade, / And it can no longer be guarded. / Set store by riches and honour, / And you will only reap a crop of calamities. / Here is the Way of Heaven: / When you have done your work, retire!" (trans. Wu, 2006).

think that such a Daoist ethic of humility is indeed realistic, that is, it is grounded in an approach to reality that takes into account both human limitation and the most helpful means of embracing life through our limitations. By examining IP and PT research in light of a Daoist realist ethic of humility, I conclude that humility is characterized by a willingness to stop attempting to control outcomes, and that, at their core, humble actions themselves cannot be forced, but arise spontaneously when we are willing to act counterintuitively.

A. IP and PT Evidence for DDJ Cycles of Reversal

The reports on IP (Wegner, 1994; 1997; 2009) and PT (Shoham-Salomon & Rosenthal, 1987; De la Peña 2009; De la Peña et al., 2010; Sharp et al., 2004, V. Batten, 2011) support the DDJ's idea that there are cyclical or self-reinforcing processes which are exacerbated by excessive evaluative attempts at achieving a positive state and avoiding its negative correlate. The Daodejing maintains that "an excessive love for anything will cost you dear in the end…there is no calamity like not knowing what is enough. / There is no evil like avarice" (Ch. 44 & 46, adapted from Wu, 2006). Wegner's work indicates that, when cognitive load becomes too high, attempts to overcome performance problems are counteracted precisely by increasing one's effort. It thus indicates that a lack of willingness to let go of one's obsessions often leads to ironic reversals on a psychological level. We are not well equipped to become obsessed with any one finite value, task, or goal (including avoiding unwanted states), to the point where we identify solely with the achievement thereof. Shoham & Rohrbaugh (1997), as well as Frankl's school of logotherapy and the school of ACT (Sharp et al., 2004) maintain that obsessive attempts at avoiding negatively perceived psychological states often create more anxiety in us, trapping us in negative feedback cycles. The DDJ states that

> favor and disgrace cause one dismay...Those who receive a favor from above / Are dismayed when they receive it, / And dismayed when they lose it…. If we have no bodily self, what calamities can we have? / Therefore she who values the world as bodily herself / May then be entrusted with the world; (Ch. 13, adapted from Lin, 1948, & Wu, 1961).

Laozi, it turns out, is validated in this assertion by the experience of numerous contemporary therapists: an attitude of avoiding weakness and humiliation at all costs oft ironically becomes a chief culprit in making anxiety and depressive thoughts unavoidable.

Particularly, the evidence from IP and PT studies shows that the DDJ is right in cases of high cognitive load or poor meta-cognitive framing. Many people do successfully complete challenging tasks for the sake of wealth and prestige on a regular basis. Behar et al. (2005) and Silva et al. (2018) show that conditions of frequent anxiety or depression are predictive of counterproductive negative mentation, while Wegner (2009, 1997) indicates that increased during mental task completion makes us vulnerable to ironic processes. Hence there is a mutual recognition in the contemporary sources and the DDJ of the futility of controlling one's mental states when the load is too high and one does not have cognitive habits of acceptance towards negative feelings. "When you have done your work, retire," Laozi tells us, indicating that measured work can indeed be productive (Ch. 9, trans. Wu, 2006).[18] It is when one's care for something is excessive, when one's hoard has grown to its largest point, when one is dismayed about even the potential of losing one's superiors' favour—in short, when one has become too fixated on controlling a particular outcome—that Laozi warns us a downswing is already in the making. While it may be questionable to hoard wealth, success, power, and ceaseless good feelings, the research we have examined does not show that in and of itself, doing these things is counterproductive. It rather confirms the

[18] Cf. DDJ Ch. 8 & 63, where Laozi recommends measured, efficient, and timely discernment in one's doings in order to prevent difficulties and strife in the long run.

DDJ's notion that by calling these things goods, we are likely to be rejecting their opposites as bad, and thereby setting up opposing poles of things to be pursued and avoided at all costs. This is fine so far as it is effective in actually preventing exploitation of others and our environment; yet it is liable to create feelings of aversion towards negative values and lust for attaining the positive value. It is easy for us to identify so strongly with these impulses that the reality of our situation becomes obscured by our conditioned instincts and desires, and our striving for a given good becomes obsessive and counterproductive. "Recognize beauty and ugliness is born," Laozi states in DDJ Chapter 2; "Recognize good and evil is born…Therefore the Sage…acts but does not presume" (trans. Addiss & Lombardo, 2007). Particularly when we become attached to specific "naming,"—when praise and blame have been attached to certain things and states unequivocally (Whittingham, 2019)—or when we are experiencing the distresses of life (Wegner, 1997), unexpected events or adversities are likely to throw us into counterproductive behaviour.

B. Common Solution: Identification with Formerly Undesired, Shameful State

We saw earlier in this chapter (Sections II.C. & D.) that what connects IP and PT research is their shared conclusion on the importance of finding ways to stop efforts of outcome-control when those efforts have become self-reinforcingly counterproductive, and of accepting the finitude of our capacities for outcome control. We can now see that there is a common solution to ironic reversal of outcomes in the IP/PT literature and in the DDJ, namely some form of paradoxical identification with the undesired, negative, or shameful state. In each group of sources, the approach varies: In IP theory, it is relinquishing or reducing a goal or purposive action; in classic Frankl-style PT, actively intending the undesired outcome; in ACT, accepting/reframing it as desirable; in Laozi, preferring spontaneous simplicity to social distinction and evaluative distinctions. For their differences,

however, they all share the conclusion that what is needed is not just more proficiency in terms of cognitive control or ethical discipline, that more conscious effort cannot solve all of our psychological problems. In their own way, they each advocate a paradoxical solution: ceasing from attempting to achieve a desired outcome and accepting or even intending an undesired or unintuitive outcome. There is of course nuance to this type of solution; careful discernment is needed as to what paradoxical means may be most appropriate to a given situation. Nevertheless, the uniqueness of paradox seems to lie precisely in its ability to get us to stop doing the things we have become habituated to think are effective when they are not. In this way, even while we may be seeking an overarching goal of health, success, or happiness when employing paradox, it still works only when we truly accept, even if temporarily, a state or an action we find unproductive, useless, or humiliating.

The reason I have examined these IP and PT sources in this paper on Daoist humility is because I believe the DDJ provides reasons to think that this research has ethical import, specifically in being relevant for contemporary definitions of the virtue of humility. In the DDJ, the themes of irony and paradox are explicitly associated with the metaphysical spontaneity of natural processes. Irony occurs when people forget that all things eventually pass on, that no object of obsession is tenable in and of itself. Paradox lies in the fact that the source and pattern of all things lies in their finitude, or in those aspects of things (weakness, darkness, emptiness, infancy, femininity, anonymity, etc.) that, when distinguished from other aspects, tend to get undervalued. Daoist sages therefore emulate the Way of reality, embracing methods of inaction, seeking anonymity in their accomplishment, and accepting lowly states and persons in order to allow for natural serenity and justice to emerge. Daoist sages make paradoxical acceptance of those things they are socially conditioned to think of as humiliating their habitual practice in order to pre-empt not only anxiety or burn-out in a given situation, but also a life of empty and dangerous obsession with material goods. For the DDJ,

"meanness is the root from which greatness springs" (Ch. 39, adapted from Wu, 2006), and the Way of Heaven is "constantly without desire" (Ch. 34, own trans.). Identifying with mean and undesired states is thus more than a therapeutic method to subvert anxiety in a given situation; it is a virtue, an act in accordance with one's comprehensive understanding of the good and of reality. The DDJ makes the case that acting in ways which society finds unproductive or humiliating is a good when, in so doing, we have prevented ourselves or others from harm and enabled an outcome in accordance with simple, spontaneous, and equitable contentment as a way of life. In such a framework, a technique in which one "is encouraged to do, or wish to happen, the very things he fears" looks a lot like an attempt to act humbly (Frankl p. 227). Trying to practice the very phobias one is evading sounds a lot like "treating one's person as foreign to oneself" whereby, paradoxically, "that person is preserved" (DDJ Ch. 7, adapted from Legge, 1891). Taking a break from the achievement one has, to the detriment of self and others, been obsessed with comes to resemble the awareness that "to know when to stop is to be preserved from perils" (Ch. 44, trans. Wu, 2006). Using paradoxical language to reframe one's weakness as acceptable becomes a prime example of "priz[ing] calamities as our own body" (Ch. 13, ibid.). In light of the DDJ showing us that our cognition has often become hijacked by false categories, humility becomes the willingness to act in ways that go against our sense of what is useful and commendable, and PT's become examples of possible ways to foster humble behavior and de-couple problematic habits of cognition.

While the DDJ reveals its relevance for realist humility, IP and PT research, in turn, is able to provide valuable evidence to support a Daoist account of humility as being, in fact, realistic. Specifically, IP research findings supports the Daoist insight that arrogance and disappointment are the result of fixation on our ambitions, while PT research supports the notion that humility as a willingness to embrace those states we think of as menial or

unappealing is an effective way to subvert said counterproductive fixations. Both the tests done on IP and the demonstrated success of PT give credence to the DDJ's contention that through excessive social pressure and forceful action, excessive *wei* (為), our happiness and self-worth becomes too tied up in controlling outcomes which can only be achieved spontaneously, i.e., without deliberate action to bring them about (through 無為, *wuwei*). This is born out by the way PT's work, namely using a paradoxical prescription of intending or accepting the very thing one is trying to avoid.

Certainly PT studies do not provide exhaustive evidence of what it means, and how effective it is, to act humbly in this sense. Furthermore, it is important to note, humble behaviour is not required in every situation, just as Wegner (2009, 1997) has shown that normal human functioning and cognitive control are regularly successful, or as one does not exercise patience or kindness at all times so much as cultivate them as virtues. Humility as adopting counterintuitive behaviour is a response to the excesses of load and rigidification processes, not a constant obsessive application in all circumstances. On the other hand, when we are in unpleasant mental states, especially when feeling depressed or struggling with low self-esteem, we should be very careful and seek expert guidance before trying to apply paradoxical methods, which we may misconstrue simply as getting ourselves to feel more depression or self-loathing.[19] As a virtue, however, a person could be characterized as humble precisely when they have learned to bear with themselves a ready willingness to act humbly whenever there is a danger of fixations on recognition, success, and control escalating into cycles of anxiety or strife.

[19] While not clinically trained in any form of therapy, I sought to make the case from the literature in Section II.A and following that it is not merely "doing the opposite" of what we would normally want or do that constitutes an effective PT. Rather, PT's are applied when specific feedback cycles perpetuated by certain cognitive habits are carefully discerned and addressed. Nevertheless, PT's reveal that in a broader context, each of us practices humility unknowingly when we simply 'try something different' when our thoughts and feelings, or our responses to people we are concerned for, have become stuck in ineffective coping patterns, or just need to be shaken up a little.

More than that, the work done on IP's and PT's also indicates that humility is not, at its core, the expenditure of arduous efforts towards self-restraint, though it may involve such efforts secondarily. Rather, the effectiveness of PT's, in which paradoxical action or language brings about an unconscious, spontaneous decoupling from a counterproductive cognitive fixation, elucidates the way in which the actual 'humbling element' in our willingness to act humbly is itself a spontaneous process which we cannot consciously or forcibly bring about ourselves. Humility, in terms of its psychological essence, is that subtle reversal from a fixation (on a delusion) back to contented openness (to reality). In terms of practice, humility is taking the actions that enable such a shift; we cannot 'practice' the reversal itself. At the very heart of the practice of humility, the release from arrogance and obsession happens *to* us when we are willing to act in a counterintuitive manner. Thus, PT's reveal that it is in matter of fact impossible to be proud of being humble, because the true occurrence of humility is not an act of deliberate self-denial, but rather comes about spontaneously in the simple, often even easy, choice to do or think that which one has been strenuously avoiding so far.[20] This means that the true, healthy paradox of humility lies in the fact that we indeed cannot practice it except by proxy, yet thus we can practice it nevertheless.[21] When we do things that we, and our society, consider lowly or counterintuitive, we open ourselves to our actions becoming humble—decoupling us and others from unhealthy obsessions—though this is something our choices cannot force to happen. This also alleviates the pressure on us when attempting to practice or teach humility; we can only hope for good outcomes, not force them, and at the same time, if our attempts to be humble are not resulting in a healthy subversion of our

[20] Thus the Daoist virtue of *wuwei* truly is non-action, or effortless action, in that we do not practice it—we "keep to the role of the sullied [and] disgraced" (DDJ Ch. 28, trans. Wu, 2006), we choose to identify with compulsive feelings and menial tasks, and the freedom of *nicht-machen* is born within us spontaneously (cf. Chapter Two, footnote 12).
Masicampo et al.'s (2014) research on self-control is suggestive of these conclusions as well. It indicates that people high in self-control actually may have lower willpower (are more prone to ego-depletion) than those in low self-control. Self-controlled people appear to share an awareness of the limits of their cognitive control, and a willingness to take the "low road," avoiding temptation, rather than trying to exert themselves at self-restraint. In other words, they share what I would call an aspect of humility.
[21] Cf. my analysis of virtuous paradox in Aquinas' account of humility in Chapter One, Section III.A.

fixations, we can simply adjust them or try other practices without having to claim that the virtue of humility is defunct after all.

C. IP and PT Evidence Supports Importance of Practical Approach to Situations over Self-assessment and Other-focus Levels

In terms of addressing contemporary twin-dimensional accounts of humility, IP and PT research shows that acceptance of the finitude of one's cognitive control capacities is primarily an active, unselfconscious process. Whether using symptom prescription or ACT's language of inherent paradox, these methods seek to elicit a new response from clients to their problems, rather than to enhance the accuracy of their self-perception or the appropriateness of their levels of other-focus. A more accurate, accepting view of oneself and a less self-asserting attitude towards others may well be the result of practicing paradoxical intention and acceptance, but they are not effective starting points.[22] Telling a subject to become aware of their weaknesses and strengths in order to become humble, is, in light of PT as a method of humility, liable to make clients only more attached to their existing conceptions of what type of actions they need to increase and what type they need to avoid. On a Daoist account informed by IP and PT research, humility will often involve precisely acting out one's weaknesses and avoiding one's strengths!

It may also involve reducing aspects of one's other-focus if it is revealed, as Shoham & Rohrbaugh (1997) intimate is often the case, that suggestions and interventions intended as helpful are only perpetuating vicious cycles on an interpersonal level. As noted in Chapter 2, Daoist humility sees self-assessment and other-focus primarily as an increasing awareness of

[22] I grant that IP research implies the need to take stock of those situations liable to induce ego-depletion, but Wegner (1997, 2009) does not speak of this assessment in terms of a self-assessment of one's strengths and weaknesses. For him, IP research confirms that humans are liable to falter in precisely the most unintended situations, or, as he puts it, to "manage to do the worst possible thing, the blunder so outrageous that we think about it in advance and resolve not to let that happen" (2009, p. 48). Ironic processes crop up not necessarily when we fail to be self aware, but often precisely when stress has made increasing effort seem the most intuitive thing to do.

the unity of self and other in one ecology: "Respect the world as yourself: / the world can be your lodging" (DDJ Ch. 13, trans. Addiss & Lombardo, 2007). In such awareness, seeing other's needs as my own is not a moral burden, but a reduction of my need to define myself by my own success and to control the personalities of others. Shoham & Rohrbaugh's suggestion that ironic processes are both intensified on an interpersonal level, but also more open to interruption when even one of the parties involved ceases their attempts at control, connects this Daoist unitive self-awareness with IP and PT research. Identifying with my own weaknesses, and finding that this is actually a productive practice, deconstructs the practice of seeing some aspects of personalities as better than others. Furthermore, becoming aware of the true relationship between self and others is often the paradoxical product of *reducing* attempts at interfering with their struggles.[23] The humble person may exert themselves selflessly for the sake of others without taking credit, but this only follows from a realization (as a result of humble practice) that all we can accomplish is to allow growth and contentment to flourish spontaneously, both in self and others:

> Sages give life to all things but do not possess them… Is it not because they have no personal and private ends, that therefore such ends are realized? …Dao never makes anything go according to purpose, / and yet nothing is not made. / If rulers can cling to it, / All things will grow of themselves… (DDJ Ch. 2 own trans.; Ch. 7 adapted from Legge, 1891; Ch. 37 adapted from Wu, 2006).

[23] According to Shoham and Rohrbaugh (1997), "Well-intentioned attempts to reassure an obsessive worrier may...inadvertently amplify[] the kind of ironic thought-suppression-intrusion cycle described by Wegner. The patient tries harder not to worry but fails, setting the stage for even more reassurance from the concerned other...In our view, ironic interpersonal processes typically offer more avenues for possible intervention, simply because…the person with the problem may be less willing or able to do something about it than a motivated other…If problem maintenance at the interpersonal level revolves around the attempted solution of reassurance or exhortation by a concerned other, *less of the same* might require persuading that person to commiserate or admit helplessness (p. 152, emphasis added)."

D. IP and PT Data Confirms Need to Accept and Modify a Daoist Ethic.

As we saw at the end of Chapter 2 (Section II.B.3), a Daoist account of humility can function within different larger ethical frameworks. And as we have noted in this chapter (Section II.A & D), the data from IP and PT research also indicate a need for ethical circumspection in how we apply paradoxical methods. Just as the DDJ's ethic of *wuwei* has been misapplied as a military, business, or self-help strategy of achieving material power through temporary self-yielding, it is certainly plausible that IP insights and PT methods can and have been applied for narcissistic purposes. This is heightened by the fact that these methods come from the context of psychological practice and research, and are not ipso facto presented as having any ethical constraints. A tyrant could use PT to overcome his nervousness when delivering a fascist speech just as much as a humble public servant could when giving a helpful public notice. Therefore, these findings confirm the need to place Daoist insights into the realistic practicality of humility into the context of a larger vision of the good.

As with Daoist humility itself, the insights of IP and methods of PT do lend themselves better to an ethical framework than a destructive or nihilistic one. The PT insight that the unhinging of destructive obsessions happens to us and cannot be forced, suggests that long-term healthy practice of paradoxical intention is more conducive to fostering contentment and harmony with others than abetting habits of self-aggrandizement and exploitation. Certainly for Frankl (1984), paradoxical intention therapy was part of the larger practice and theory of logotherapy, centred on enabling patients to find positive meaning in all of life from which happiness would ensue spontaneously. The reality of IP and the effectiveness of PT thus do suggest that there is wisdom in the Daoist warning that adopting power and prestige as life

goals provides many opportunities for self-defeating actions.[24] On the other hand, Wegner (1994; 2009) and De la Peña's (2009) IP research does not show the levels and types of effort, nor of the mental load which turns cognitive efforts counterproductive, to be inherently ethically valenced. Besides undergoing tests regarding unpleasant thoughts, subjects performed many amoral tasks such as colour-naming and motor-skill tests, and were induced to experience performance-affecting load by, for example, trying to remember numbers or keep secrets or by increasing task difficulty. An athlete, just as much as an orator or a general, could apply paradoxical tools to help get them in the 'zone' of their performance, while the larger goal of that performance and their very lives remains the domination of others and the assertion of self-superiority at any cost. The realization of the need to relax mental control often does bring with it at least a degree of awareness of one's unity with and dependence on one's larger ecology and social environment; a tyrant or narcissist may wax eloquent about how their goals and means align them with the flow of the universe. Said non-coercive interdependence must go further, however, and actually become one's ethos if abuses of the insights afforded by paradoxical techniques are to be avoided.

On the other hand, the fact that IP insights and PT methods are applicable outside of a specific ethical framework show that Daoist humility is not limited to the primitivist and passive vision of the good life in the DDJ. I mentioned above that the text's overarching ethic of *wuwei* is perhaps better translated as "not-making (things happen)" than "non-action," signalling that Daoist sages are effective in their behaviour precisely because they do not seek

[24] There is space, here, to argue that Daoist sages surpass even non-deliberative organism in their ability to follow *Dao*. While the suggestion in the DDJ and Zhuangzi may be that human evaluative and cognitive capabilities are what lead both to dissatisfaction with our own vulnerability and mortality and to our capacity for cruelty which are unique among animals (cf. Slingerland, 2014, Module 6), Doede (2003) points out that they also provide us the ability to be self-sacrificial in a way animals cannot. "Only a being that is linguistically apt," according to Doede, "could re-present its own interests as less than desirable – this is the beginning of an ethical way of being in the world" (p. 45). If such a being could also reduce the tendencies towards artificial stratification and fixation that its cognitive capacities afford, it may (and, depending on who your heroes are, often has) spontaneously avoid(ed) violence and inequity in a way that plants and animals cannot.

to control outcomes, not that they do nothing.[25] Nevertheless, and notwithstanding the differing interpretations of the text and its different versions, *wuwei* as an ideal does tend towards doing, writing, teaching, and intellectually discriminating as little as possible in a contented, self-sustaining polis (Slingerland 2014, Module 3; Ziporyn, 2003, p. 9-11, cf. Graham, 1989; Schwartz, 1998). We have already seen, in Chapter 2, that this does not mean the DDJ's insights cannot be employed in other frameworks, but that it does mean that these frameworks will be influenced to reduce their materialism, militarism, and social stratification. Here it remains to be noted that, apart from small, open-minded collectives, Daoist humility does indeed function even in the setting of more complex societies and ethical visions. Firstly, this is born out by the fact that PT's often function best when a goal of success in the task is kept in mind.[26] For Wegner (2009, 1997), furthermore, one of the goals of recognizing in what situations one's mental control will be counterproductive is to be able to avoid failure of normal daily tasks more successfully. While Frankl's paradoxical intention and ACT's acceptance do generally involve an initial relinquishing of the goal of symptom removal, Frankl (1975) also reports frequent examples of people reading about PT on their own and deliberately applying it to remove their own neurotic feedback cycles with great success. Sharp et al.'s (2004) vision of ACT also has the stated goal of reframing patient's relationships with their conditions and helping them develop healthier ways of life, not simply passively accepting that they will suffer a given symptom forever. The commonality

[25] On the other hand, as the research of Wegner (2009, 1997) and Silva et al. (2018, p. 104) indicates, "doing nothing" for a while is itself a helpful paradoxical technique when mental control is counterproductive; a place where accepting one's condition, paradoxically doing the opposite of what one would normally do ('something'), and humility—the willingness to be unproductive, unimpressive, and out of control for a while—show their affinity for one another.

[26] "It is important to stress that in order for paradoxical-success imagery to be an effective technique, the imaging of underlying confidence and successful execution/result of the particular task is of paramount importance" (De la Peña, 2009, p. 27). Interrupting ironic processes through paradoxical symptom prescription and acceptance is not simply an amoral subversion of personal and social expectations. In order to be successful, it oft involves a notion of positive outcomes or change, but only in so far as one becomes genuinely willing to relinquish control and identify with undesired states—to be humble—in the process. Recall also Whittingham (2019) and V. Batten (2011, p. 3) discussing the ways in which wariness of ironic effects of language and "willingness to experience the full range of private events" are engaged "in the service of valued life directions" and/or practical outcomes.

that shows itself here is that acts of decoupling from problematic mental control, and hence, of acts of humility, are not limited to those persons operating in frameworks of mystical, apophatic oneness with reality in which no conceptualizable ethical or social goals are endorsed. Just as PT's do not become ineffective when they are administered with a goal of psychological relief or personal productivity in mind, Daoist humility remains effective even when applied within various ethical frameworks with more elaborated visions of the good, so long as that good is not built around individual material aggrandizement.[27]

E. Conclusion

In this chapter, we have looked at research done in the fields of ironic cognitive processes (IP) and paradoxical interventions or paradoxical intention therapies (PT), which suggests that human capacities of cognitive control are not only finite, but can even become counterproductive if not interrupted at the right time. Data on IP suggests that, while differing depending on persons and circumstances, excessive cognitive stress can allow fixations on avoiding unwanted outcomes to turn into a preoccupation with, and resultant proliferation of, those outcomes. The data also suggests that meta-cognitive attitudes towards one's mental states, such as depression, are predictive of counterproductive approaches to unwanted mental states. It is not, however, conclusive enough to provide an exact guide to the question of under which circumstances ironic processes are an inevitable feature of human cognition.

Data on PT suggests that attempting to bring about, or trying to wish for, a neurotic symptom, or reframing it as desirable, or learning to see it as an inevitable by-product of not wanting it, are paradoxically effective ways to decouple oneself from the negative processes driving that symptom. This is because those negative processes involve a phobic or obsessive

[27] While not within the scope of this paper, there is likely a healthy push and pull that happens when applying socially subversive, but ultimately harmony oriented thought such as is found in Laozi and Zhuangzi to intricately articulated and reasoned systems of moral cultivation, such as those found in the long history of Confucian and Aristotelian-Thomist ethics (Cf. Slingerland, 2014, 3.8; Holloway, 2009, and footnotes #17, 19, & 20 in Ch. 2 of this paper).

reaction to the unwanted state that tends to increase the intensity or frequency of the symptom. Intending the unwanted state discontinues the compulsive attempt to suppress it when encountered which has been fuelling the vicious cycle. Data again is inconclusive as to the exact nature or function of PT, which is usually applied in the context of a trusting relationship between therapist and client. However, initial findings suggested a similar effectiveness as non-paradoxical therapies on immediate application, and a greater effectiveness upon repeated use.

Taken together, IP and PT research provides preliminary evidence in favour of a Daoist approach to humility which sees it as a willingness to act, when needed, in ways oneself or one's society considers unproductive, counterintuitive, or humiliating. Said research supports the *Daodejing*'s criticism of inflexible categorization of one's circumstances and mental states as good or bad, and fixation upon material and social goals as absolute necessities for one to achieve, as counterproductive. It moreover provides evidence to the effect that a Daoist approach to humility is truly effective at enabling people to be decoupled from psychologically distressing fixations (and restoring us to open-minded contentment). Finally, unlike contemporary twin-dimensional definitions, IP and PT research shows that humility is not primarily a function of self-assessment and other-focus. These may result from humility, but would likely increase our attempts to control the problems of self and others if left as the foundation of the virtue.

The fact that obsessive cycles are interrupted precisely when we stop trying to prevent them indicates that the effectiveness of humility in freeing us from fixating on mental control is something that happens *to* us rather than being the direct product of our own thoughts and actions. Thus, true humility is immune to becoming an inadvertent source of arrogance. We must remain circumspect when practicing paradoxical methods, however. They should not be an excuse to flaunt one's contrarianism, justify one's social apathy, or intensify one's self-

loathing. Rather, they are fittingly employed, at best with the cooperation, feedback, and guidance of other humble persons, when we realize that we have become stuck in counterproductive cognitive and behavioural habits. We cannot force ourselves or others to be humble; we can only cultivate practices of humility by discovering when and where doing things others look down on, we fear, or we simply had not thought of before, allows us to be less dependent on our attempts to control outcomes.

Chapter Four:

Possible Objections and Suggestions for Practice and Research

I. Consideration of Challenges and Possible Objections

In this chapter, we will examine a few possible objections to my account of Daoist realist humility, firstly regarding the extent to which IP and PT studies actually support my argument, and secondly regarding the question of whether my account is able to maintain a meaningful claim to the title "humility" in light of the strengths of previous accounts. Following my response to these objections, I conclude my paper by explaining how my account of humility is able to avoid the problems faced by the accounts examined in Chapter One, and offering a few suggestions for how it might be applied to practice and research.

A. The Need to Acknowledge Limits of the Evidence

There is a twofold difficulty with claiming data from cognitive science as evidence for a Daoist understanding of humility. The first is the ambiguity present in the relationship between the data and my account of Daoist humility, and the second is the inconclusiveness of the data itself. As regards the first (ambiguity), one might object that evidence for the effectiveness of PT supports, at best, the notion that certain paradoxical practices are effective at pre-empting or interrupting ironic outcomes of mental effort, but not the notion that embracing shameful and undesired states is effective for overcoming *morally* vicious tendencies, such as arrogance and self-loathing. One might also object that evidence for the existence of IP does not support the Daoist notion that socially-conditioned cognitive evaluation of states and life-goals is counterproductive. As regards the second difficulty (inconclusiveness of the data), there are both studies that have failed to find evidence for IP, and possible questions regarding the extent to which studies on PT have actually measured

paradoxical methods. While I concede that the connection between the data and my argument is not self-evident, foolproof, or closed to modification by further studies, I maintain that this does not negate the data being suggestive of my conclusions. I will now respond to each of these objections in turn.

1. The Effectiveness of PT as Evidence for Humility

Any objection to the translatability of IP and PT into moral terms must find a way to establish a disjunction between moral cognition and other forms of cognition. In other words, such an objection must argue that PT's are simply a helpful way to overcome our morally neutral, self-reinforcing neuroses, phobias, and obsessive-compulsive fixations and have no bearing upon our desires for self-aggrandizement, social positioning, and ego-boosting. Such an argument, however, is plagued from the start by arbitrary truncations of the human mind. A neurosis such as agoraphobia or stuttering is only morally neutral when treated as a psychiatric concept, abstracted from the life of the patient as a whole. The assumption that, even if she is able to accept that her neurosis is a medical condition and not a personal fault, someone's fear of crowds has no bearing upon her overall attitude and beliefs about her self-worth, relationships with others, and others' attitudes towards her, would be fairly unlikely unless supported with significant evidence.

I concede that we do not know to what extent vicious urges function the exact same way as ironic processes. However, it would be surprising to learn that a jealous fixation upon, say, appearing better than my colleagues to my superior which has the ironic result of increasing my pettiness and unreliability in my superior's eyes is not self-reinforcing in a similar way that anxiety about worry only increases the hold my worry has over me. In fact, such fixation upon jealousy is, for all intents and purposes, an anxiety that increases worry about appearances. Similar cases could be made for recurring urges towards anger or self-debasement. Studies on IP would be strangely truncated if we had to assume they do not

apply in ethically nuanced situations. On the other hand, the DDJ also points out that many of the self-reinforcing fixations upon power and success that humility pre-empts are not inherently ethically evil. They may in fact be good goals, such as clarity of expression and confidence in public, which, when fixated on, become counterproductive. For both of these reasons, it is likely that if exaggerating one's symptomatic thoughts and accepting one's neurotic symptoms weakens their hold, then so would deliberately exaggerating one's negative thoughts about what others think of one, or of how one appears or how successful one is failing to be, etc. Again this is not a call to be more jealous or self-conscious. Rather, deliberately thinking/accepting those very thought/feeling one is trying to suppress provides not only a humorous relief from attempts at repressing one's urges, but is also likely to progressively weaken the hold of vicious, self-reinforcing fears on one's actions.[1] Certainly, further research is warranted to ascertain the nature of morally vicious negative feedback cycles and the effectiveness of paradox in dealing with them. However, the effectiveness of paradox in subverting neurotic processes strongly suggests that embracing lowliness is virtuous if and when it similarly subverts vicious and arrogant mental efforts.

2. The Existence of IP as Evidence for Daoist Social Critique

A similar response can be made to those who would suggest that the evidence for IP only suggests that cognitive fixation is counterproductive under the wrong circumstances, but that this has no bearing upon interpersonal dynamics. As noted in Chapter Three (Section III.C.), Shoham and Rohrbaugh (1997) persuasively argue that "social contexts ranging from courtship and family interaction to international relations provide countless examples of how attempts to influence another person's behavior can have consequences opposite to those desired or intended" (p. 152). They contend that such phenomena as misplaced

[1] Using the example at the beginning of this paragraph, an approach might include thinking to oneself 'my superiors must think I am so weak, I really have to put my colleagues in a worse light before them, it's the only way I will ever succeed' deliberately when tempted to harbour jealousy, while also engaging in humble behaviour such as doing the boring tasks at work for a day, or standing up for oneself or others in a calm and honest way in situations of inequity. See also footnote #6 below.

encouragement increasing depression, increased nagging and pursuing causing a partner to withdraw, and increased defensiveness confirming accusers' suspicions are well documented in psychological circles and warrant the conclusion that interpersonal factors can exacerbate the type of counterproductive mental efforts studied by Wegner. It would therefore again be oddly truncating to suggest that fixation on one's goals, values, fears, and urges does not exacerbate, and become exacerbated by, the mental fixations of others. Indeed, the work of Whittingham (2019), indicating that the effects of reinforcing and punishing language from parents towards children is context specific, and by Morrow et al. (2019), showing how pro-social classrooms enable to greater vulnerability to or impact from negative interactions, not only provide evidence of ironic outcomes on a social level, but also suggest that what is considered worth fixating on may be determined by one's social context to begin with.[2] None of this amounts to conclusive evidence of the DDJ's critique of human linguistic and cognitive capacities as inherently tending towards false dichotomies and vicious fixations. But my argument does not depend on this critique's accuracy, but only on its corollary—that human cognitive efforts towards prestige, image-management, and mental control are uniquely predisposed to ironic collapse on both a personal and interpersonal level. This is I think borne out by what the data we have, though I concede that the question of how social, biological, and psychological factors combine to produce vapid, vicious, or self-destructive definitions of what is acceptable and what is shameful is open to much further research.

3. Inconclusiveness of IP research.

We already saw above (Chapter Three, Section I.C.) that the specifics of Wegner's theory of an operating and a monitoring process working together in the mind to bring about desired—and, when the load is high, ironic—cognitive results are speculative at best. Some studies, however, have failed even to find evidence of ironic outcomes themselves. Behar et

[2] Cf. Chapter Three, Section II.C. above.

al.'s (2005) study of IP in worrisome mental content "failed to find a rebound effect regardless of valence (worrisome, neutral) or mentation content (thoughts, images)," and indicate that they are not the only ones who failed to find such correlations (p. 289-290). While Behar et al. tested the results of suppressing worrisome thoughts compared with expressing them, and not Wegner's notion that it is only under situations of load that mental control backfires, their study does provide a caution to when interpreting IP data. There are likely to be times when ironic processes fail to take hold, as when we just "force ourselves" to get something done in a last minute, high-pressure situation. The wicked, as we all know, are also often able to maintain habits of corruption and vicious obsession for years without self-destructing completely (though history does seem to support the Daoist insight that most processes—good and bad—come to an end).[3] While the majority of the research I examined did suggest the reality of ironic outcomes, Behar et al.'s results stand as a reminder that stubborn insistence that certain situations will always make mental effort counterproductive is both not warranted by the data, and also liable to becoming a counterproductive fixation itself. Humility recognizes that cognitive fixation is often in danger of mistaking a finite value for an absolute good. Humble people are not those who never exert mental effort towards concrete goals,[4] but rather those who become willing to make adjustments when they

[3] Given closer examination, however, it might turn out that just gritting our mental-effort teeth and "powering through" a task last minute actually involves a pressure-induced acceptance of imperfections, relinquishing our worries about getting it right and shutting down deliberative thought to allow for spontaneous, flow-like action—in other words, a spurt, if brief and less than healthy in the bigger picture, of humble relinquishing of obsessive thought in order to get something done quickly. Similarly, those regimes and oppressors who are able to sustain their destructive movements for more than a brief moment of history are often enabled to do so through something resembling enabling and non-coercive friendships with their confidants and close cooperators, though these relationships may remain riddled through with suspicion and vicious obsession.

[4] The question of how effort figures in the thought of Laozi and Zhuangzi, and how this relates to Chinese philosophical ethics more generally, is as intriguing as it is complex. Slingerland (2014, Module 6) makes the intriguing and convincing suggestion that Zhuangzi's method involves reducing prefrontal cortex activity as much as possible. At the same time, the philosophical ingenuity of the texts shows that intellectual activity—even if 'effortless'—is at play somewhere in the story of Daoism. While Confucianism, conversely, is famous for extolling ceaseless self-cultivation, at least one saying attributed to the Master also uses *wuwei* ('not deliberately making-things-so') to describe the ideal state for the sage (Analects 15.5; cf. Analects 1.1, 2.4, 9.19). Graham (1989) thinks that all that separates the DDJ from the Analects is a critical attitude towards human epistemic capacities; both agree that, once one has rid oneself from false naming and entered into correct apprehension of reality, behavior according to the true Way will follow spontaneously (p. 29, 303). I suspect

realize their effort is hurting themselves or others, or has ceased serving its purpose and become counterproductive.

4. Do Studies Really Measure Paradox?

In their meta-analysis of empirical evidence for the effectiveness of PT, Shoham-Salomon & Rosenthal (1987) include a suspiciously wide and at times confusing variety of treatments under the heading "paradoxical." What unites them is that they all "include a symptom prescription and/or a positive connotation [of the symptom or its underlying process]" (p. 23). This means that almost any type of treatment can be counted as paradoxical if one can show it is in some capacity telling clients to either accept or intend their problems. Finally, those paradoxical treatments that gave their clients' symptoms an explicitly negative connotation were found to be much less effective than those with a positive connotation of symptoms or underlying processes. One could therefore object that the most straightforward definition of PT, intending the opposite of something helpful, is in fact not very effective. I largely dealt with this objection in Chapter Three, Sections II.B and C., showing that in fact, learning to question one's negative valuation of those states and traits one does not wish to accept is essential to humble behaviour (see also Chapter Three, footnote #9).[5] A wide variety of interventions may in fact validly be called paradoxical, but only if actually applied so as to unhinge one from a vicious cycle or fixation which conscious effort is powerless to

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that there is some truth to the notion that virtue (or living well, or good behavior, etc.) emerges spontaneously once we have met enabling conditions; cf. Chapter Three, Section III.B for an examination of how humility cannot be forced but happens 'to' us when we cease our counterproductive striving, and Section III.D & Chapter Two, Section II.3 for the question of using Daoist humility in various ethical frameworks.

[5] Interestingly, Shoham-Salomon & Rosenthal label Frankl's PT under 'reconstructing the underlying process' because it gives "a valid theoretical explanation of how [clients] exacerbate their problems by attempting to directly control them…the client is not sick but is stuck" (p. 23). One could object that Frankl's (1975, cf. Chapter Three, Section II.A) description of negative feedback mechanisms was in fact a negative one, which would cast doubt on whether Shoham-Salomon's study provides evidence in favour of Frankl's PT. The type of therapies Shoham-Salomon & Rosenthal label 'positive connotation' (including Frankl's) and which their results show to be more effective, however, seem to share the ability bring about a healthy form of resignation to the very states one is irrationally trying to avoid, as opposed to mere activation of client resistance to a paradoxical suggestion (cf. Chapter Three, footnotes #7 & #13). Frankl's PT is ostensibly trying to use symptom prescription to help clients realize in practice the futility of their attempts at avoidance; ACT and several of the treatments examined by Shoham-Salomon & Rosenthal may explain this futility to the patient more directly, as well as with the assistance of paradoxical language and practices.

overcome.[6] Here it remains to be said that, upon closer inspection, Shoham-Salomon and Rosenthal's categorization of PT does follow a careful implicit logic. A treatment that reconstructs the underlying process ('you are exacerbating your insomnia by trying to fall asleep') does not in fact reframe the symptom (insomnia) as desirable and therefore requires symptom prescription to be paradoxical. A treatment that reframes the symptom as desirable without reconstructing the underlying process as desirable is paradoxical no matter what, because symptom prescription is then at odds with the goal of overcoming the symptom's underlying process, while symptom prohibition is at odds with the positive reframing of the symptom itself. Thus, their study both reminds us to be circumspect in what we call PT, and shows us that willingness to reorient ourselves towards our neuroses and fixations is indeed effective in overcoming them.

B. Incorporating Strengths of Other Models of Humility

Even if Daoist humility is truly realistic, the question still remains whether we have arrived at something so different from previous definitions of humility (and their strengths) as to be a different virtue or concept altogether. My definition, for example, does not de facto rule out someone characterized by humility from bragging about their strengths in a situation in which willingness to do anonymous, humiliating things is not necessary. Traditional accounts would see someone bragging as undermining claims that this is a humble person, even if they act humbly at other times. Traditional accounts also share a sense of a genuine, psychological or interiorized ('self-focused') reduction of self-importance as an essential element of humility. Whether in the classical Hebraic and Confucian deferential accounts in which one subjects one's own wants to others' needs, in Medieval accounts in which one

[6] It is important to realize that paradox means 'going through the motions' of precisely that urge or thought one is trying to suppress, and hence is context-dependent rather than subject to a generalization such as 'PT = thinking vicious/anxious thoughts.' If, for example, one's fixation is trying to avoid vicious urges, humility might involve thinking them deliberately; if one's problem is simply constant vicious urges without even a desire to avoid them, humility means deliberately thinking *virtuous* thoughts even though it feels forced or rote.

resists presumptuous aspiration, or in contemporary psychological accounts in which one accurately assesses one's own weaknesses while desiring to focus less on the self, there is an implication of deep remorsefulness about one's selfishness, or at least a deliberate resistance to tendencies towards overestimating and over-esteeming oneself. The DDJ, meanwhile, has a far more behavioural approach to self-renunciation. Laozian sages "do not dare to put themselves first;" they are wary not of some innate tendency to overestimate their strength or worth, but of the negative consequences of relying on strength and valuing prestige over anonymity. In a sense, Daoist humility is precisely selfish or concerned with reducing harm to oneself, and there is nothing in my account explicitly mandating that a humble person would ever think or speak of themselves as needing to reduce or resist their selfishness, self-focus, or self-estimation.[7] Does this then not mean that, even if viable, my argument (for accepting humiliation as a practice of improving our lives and guarding against oppression) has only shown that we ought to get rid of humility altogether and replace it with a different virtue?

It is true that my account neither *explicitly* forbids practices associated with arrogance, nor explicitly mandates a reduction of self-importance, but it does limit these things *in practice* more effectively than traditional accounts. We have seen that attempts at mental control backfire precisely in situations of high stress and pressure, and there is ostensibly no situation more likely to cause us to lash out against our better judgment than when we feel threatened and ashamed. Thus, while traditional accounts of humility call us to reduce our feelings and displays of irrational arrogance, such attempts are likely to backfire precisely

[7] Of course, such a self-renunciation might be implied by the fact that Daoist humble people see the self as part of the ecology in which it subsists rather than something that needs to assert itself over against others (as in DDJ Ch. 13—"[s]he who values the world as [her] self / May then be entrusted with the government of the world," trans. Lin, 1948). However, as we saw in Chapter Three, this is the spontaneous result of an realization of the counterproductivity of obsession with success and the habit of defusing such obsession through practicing the unintuitive and accepting the undesired. In other words, the practice of Daoist humility does not even involve *deliberately* seeing the importance and worth of others as one's own, much less seeing one's own importance and worth as something to be attenuated.

when we need them most, namely when someone or something is triggering feelings of threat and shame. Arrogant people come off both as most phony, and are most likely to hurt others, when they are acting to assert themselves in light of some threat to their self-worth. Humility presented as attaining a more accurate picture of one's weaknesses or of the inappropriateness of one's self-assertion is liable to only induce more shame in someone faced with their arrogant/insecure reactions to stress, and hence, to increase their reactions in a counterproductive attempt to deny that they are actually insecure or arrogant. If, instead, humility is presented as accepting one's feelings of shame and insecurity as legitimate, and exaggerating, maybe even laughing at, one's reactionary urges, and choosing healthy alternatives to triggering situations, then a healthy reduction of irrational self-assertion is likely to emerge spontaneously. In other words, humility defined as a resistance of self-importance mistakes the self as something that can be more or less important than other things, and counterproductively prescribes cognitive effort to then lower oneself on this scale of importance. Humility defined as embracing feelings of shame and positions of anonymity voluntarily, on the other hand, will result spontaneously in a reduction of those reactionary feelings of self-importance.

One could object that 'embracing feelings of shame' and doing 'menial' or 'counterintuitive' acts already implies some type of self-assessment and self-denial. How can something be shameful or counterintuitive if one has no concept of prestige and social affirmation as things to be desired? For the sages of the DDJ who truly 'value the world as their bodily self' (Ch. 13), who have no sense of arrogance because 'ordinary people's hearts become the sage's heart' (Ch. 49), would not concepts as shame and prestige have little meaning? A twofold response is possible here. First, it is true that those of us who wish to practice realist humility share with everyone else a natural sense of self-worth that can be threatened and demeaned, overextended into arrogance or debased into self-loathing or

deception. The point is not that humility has no relation to the place of the self within social relations of credit-taking and prestige, but that healthy relationships to self and others are not achieved through self-assessment per se. Instead, actively seeking out tasks no one wants to do, people no one wants to associate with, and feelings one does not wish anyone to know about enables one to experience what acceptance of self and union with others are truly like. From such experiences, a healthy relationship to self and others can be fostered without a self-scrutiny that is not anchored in experience or practice. Secondly, even humble people who realize their unity with others will experience sorrow when they witness oppression, obsession, and exploitative tendencies, or at least not see these as good. This is not the result of excessive self-assessment or a false sense of self, but rather of an understanding of the unnaturalness of these obsessions. Hence humble people may still willingly identify with practices and states which no longer humiliate them, but which society looks down upon, in order to help others or to further their own self-cultivation and wellbeing.

It is important to note here that Daoist humility is not a completely new view of the virtue, as if no one has ever understood or practiced humility unless they have read and properly understood Laozi—or this paper, which would make it a small number of people indeed. Rather, I have been attempting to show what it is that makes the best exemplars and accounts of humility through time and space actually humble. When we define humility, as some pre-modern accounts do, as resisting inordinate amounts of self-appreciation and self-importance, we may not notice many extraordinarily humble people who never displayed signs of such self-resistance. When we define it, as several modern accounts do, as involving accurate self-knowledge, we may miss out on countless exemplars who either did use traditional language of self-abasement, or who otherwise did not show sings of an accurate self-concept and psychological balance. According to Laozi, however, the ascetic on the mountaintop voluntarily disconnecting from social ambitions; the teacher, counsellor, or

parent empathizing with the thoughts and feelings of their students rather than generically imposing their agenda; the depressed person accepting both their sickness and their self-worth; and the liberation fighter seeking reparation for his oppressed community despite majority disapproval may all be praised as examples of humility. What makes them humble is neither appropriate self-abasement nor a lack thereof; instead, it is the willingness to unhinge themselves from fixation on some quantifiable, material goal or value as if their life—or anyone's—depended on it, yet thereby paradoxically furthering their own/others' wellbeing.

This means, too, that I am not necessarily advocating a complete reorientation of one's life and practice for those whose self-cultivation or research has focused on a different understanding of humility than the one presented in these pages (or those of the DDJ). Those who seek to act humbly, on any given understanding, have likely already been practicing paradoxical subversion of ironic processes without intending to; indeed, that is perhaps the best way to do it. I do not think that it would be effective to rush to chastise oneself for excessive self-focus, self-debasement, self-analysis, etc. Rather, I hope that my account provides researchers, moral authorities (self-appointed or otherwise), and most importantly, ordinary people, some space to worry less about whether they are being too humble, or not humble enough. Rather than excessive eagerness to improve our moral practice, I have been trying to show that the DDJ provides a link between practices of humility and real benefit to our own lives in the form of reduced fixation on social, ethical, and personal outcomes.[8] While calming, this insight is also sobering; it means that, instead of rushing to change our morals and practices, we hold them more lightly. The relativism of the DDJ does not tell us to relax our scholarship and praxis because, in some mystical sense, all human knowledge is actually void and human effort is actually useless. Rather, it tells us that there are very often

[8] This does not mean we should not try hard to improve in any area of our life. We *should* try to be humble, namely by looking for situations in which we or others are in need of help in ways that we find humiliating, and then help them—or ourselves—in a way that subverts our own obsessions with prestige and self-image while fostering trust and unity.

habits of thought and desire motivating us that are harmful, and that we cannot control these. What we can do is to keep going about our business with renewed optimism and a view to accepting, and learning to let go of, those harmful obsessions we can see, and being willing to identify and address those we cannot see once they show themselves. A change of life outcomes and lifestyle may ensue, but it will do so *wuwei*, without our 'making it so.'

II. Concluding Suggestions

We are now in a position to return to the problems facing us in the closing section of Chapter One, in which we examined the difficulties contemporary twin-dimensional accounts of humility face first in maintaining conceptual consistency, and secondly in being applied to the practice and empirical measurement of humility. Having spent most of this paper developing an alternative account of humility as a willingness to behave in ways considered undesirable, un-prestigious, and counterintuitive and supporting it empirically, we are now ready to see how this account might improve our practice and clarify our research of this important virtue.

A. Suggestions for Therapy and Practical Ethics

Due to its behavioural focus, Daoist realist humility avoids the paradoxes inherent in trying to practice humility according to other definitions we looked at in Chapter One. In my plausible account of popular misunderstandings of traditional humility, I suggested that many understand it as demanding a form of "virtuous deception" "in which the mind or self is taught to be less presumptuous and immoderate by [thinking and] acting as if it were less worthy of praise than it thinks it is" (Chapter One, Section III.B). It may thus involve a vicious spiral of self-scrutiny to determine whether or not one has refused enough credit. Daoist humility, on the other hand, is not concerned with resisting undue credit or success per

se, but rather with acting, for the good of self and others, in ways that are not considered prestigious or successful. Thus, regardless how highly someone were to extoll it or how much the agent is backhandedly seeking credit in their humble act, the act itself remains humble in form so long as it is truly done with a view to pre-empt or interrupt harmful fixations on social approval and prestige. Daoist humility is, moreover, not directly concerned making the self less presumptuous and immoderate, nor is it concerned with how one is perceived by self or others at all. Rather, it is concerned with how a given *act or form of behaviour* is perceived by self and others. Daoist humility does not seek to deceive others into thinking one is a lowly person by doing lowly acts. It does not act lowly in such a way as to be seen and considered lowly by others, but because it knows that such acts have a liberating effect on the self or others in places where arrogant or self-assertive fixations are liable to take hold.

In contemporary psychological twin-dimensional accounts of humility, I noted that neither the dimension of accurate self-assessment nor that of other-focus nor a combination of the two necessarily issues in behaviour we could call humble, because one can assess one's weaknesses and give other's ones attention without self-yielding, renouncing credit, or engaging in menial tasks. Moreover, while trying to move the definition of humility away from things that could result in self-debasement, such as excessively refusing credit, twin-dimensional accounts remain trapped in the vague realm of psychological states by being solely based around how much and what type of attention one gives to one's own self as opposed to others. Daoist humility, on the other hand, is by definition the willingness to engage in humble, unappealing, control-relinquishing behaviour when to do so helps oneself and others to unhinge from vicious cycles of fear and control. It thus is neither lacking in humble behaviour nor given to excessive focus on the self or to self-debasement. There is

admittedly a level of ambiguity built into my definition of humility,[9] but this is both a commonality it shares with the other definitions we have looked at, and, unlike in their case, a protection against any one circumstance becoming definitive of what constitutes the conditions for a humble act. This would only turn humility into a fixation of its own, and prevent it from being compatible with a wide range of ethical frameworks.

In terms of suggestions for personal practice and therapy, I believe realist humility such as I have defined it here would allow persons, therapists, and communities of scholars and ordinary people to have a clear and practical understanding of how to practice and endorse the virtue of humility. Ordinary persons, if given this definition of humility by therapists and moral guides, would be enabled to actively cultivate humility in themselves by seeking out those areas in which they obsess over their self-image or success and applying paradoxical intention and acceptance to it little by little on a regular basis. They could employ such practices where they notice counterproductive and negative tendencies in their relationships as well. They could also look for those situations in which they avoid associating with others based on class or social positions and again try to regularly put themselves in situations where, without pretence, they would be able to engage in common work with people they had previously avoided. Finally they could simply try to do something different in areas where they have become the most set in their ways or where they notice their habits to be most counterproductive. Therapists could similarly foster humility by encouraging and regulating these types of practices in their clients, as well as by becoming more versed in incorporating paradox and acceptance of undervalued states and of the limits of language in helping to undercut obsessive cycles in their therapies. Researchers testing how to cultivate humility in their subjects, moreover, would not be limited to workbook exercises "such as answering open-ended questions about one's experience with humility…responding to YouTube videos

[9] 'Engaging in menial, counterintuitive behaviour' and doing so only 'when necessary' to help oneself and others to 'unhinge from vicious cycles' or from 'obsessive and oppressive outcomes' are all very context-dependent phrases.

about humility, drawing representations of humility, and identifying pop culture references to reinforce the benefits of humility" (Lavelock et al., 2014, p. 103). Rather, their interventions could focus around "having individuals perform menial tasks" (Peterson & Seligman in ibid., p. 101) and identifying in what areas of life subjects' efforts are most prone to becoming obsessive, counterproductive, and excessively self-conscious. In all of these areas—doing menial tasks, identifying with the lowly, accepting rather than denying, and trying new things personally and socially—the extent to which one is really being humble can easily be measured by whether, after a brief period of application, these methods are truly interrupting one's self-conscious or arrogant obsessions. If not, the point of counterproductive fixation has likely not been addressed, and one's practice can be adjusted accordingly. In these ways, a unique focus on finding practical ways to address fixations on self-image and arrogance gives Daoist realist humility its unique practicability for layperson and academic alike.

B. Suggestions for Research and Measuring Humility

In terms of research and measurement, the difficulty of twin-dimensional accounts is that they provide no concrete definition of humble behaviour for researchers to induce and observe in subjects. A concept of humility focusing on unassuming behaviour, specifically looking for targets who identify with menial, unprestigious tasks and unpopular people, would significantly ease the burden of state and trait humility researchers. All that would need to be tested for would be whether, given the chance, a subject accepts an unpopular task when needed, or insists on doing things their way. Vague questions of self-assessment, other-focus, and self-transcendence would be superfluous, but the helpful method of personality judgment by other subjects identified by Davis et al. (2010) could still be used, in conjunction with laboratory observation by specialists. In order to truly be informative, I posit that the personality judgment portion would have to be set up in such a way that subjects rate the

behaviour of other targets as more or less willing to adopt menial tasks, to associate with those in the group that are less popular, and to act unassumingly. The researchers would then observe targets in humility-testing games and activities to see whether the personality judgments of their peers match their behaviour in these further tests. Furthermore, even self-reports—both of state and trait humility—would become more straightforward. All that would be involved could be questionnaires providing scenarios that ask how a subject would normally respond to situations—say, whether to keep trying to change someone's mind on capital punishment, or to take their side in the argument for a while; or to try to never think negative thoughts versus accepting, once in a while, that they do come up; or to talk to a sick, lonely hospice patient as opposed to a potential business partner—that provide opportunities to do what one's society does not teach one to be popular or effective. This would both bypass some of the dangers associated with directly asking subjects to self-rate in areas explicitly associated with humility, while at the same time providing a very direct (if perhaps still self-biased) assessment of the actual extent to which these subjects are characterized by humble behaviour.

Areas of future research include defining more closely what practices interrupt arrogant and oppressive obsessions. This would involve elaborating the types of situations in which humility is necessary and what types of humble practice are most effective when faced with different types of arrogance, conflict, anxiety, and morally vicious feedback cycles. Such research might further examine what it means for a method to be paradoxical, and how to use such methods to unhinge from urges that are harmful to self or others without increasing real harm done in the process. The specific circumstances under which mental control and moral self-control efforts become counterproductive also remain to be clarified. Further, as we identified above,[10] more research is needed to identify the roles of social conditioning in

[10] (Chapter Three, Section I, footnote #2 & Section III.C)

producing arrogance and the ways in which cognitive processes and relational dynamics can become counterproductive on a wider interpersonal level. In terms of the practice of humility, evidence for the role of paradox in humility could be gained by testing whether practicing PT methods increases target scores in humility measures such as those I outlined in the previous paragraph. Other areas worth exploring include whether humility is best cultivated in isolation or together with other virtues and therapies, the relationship of Daoist realist humility to the burgeoning research on intellectual humility, what it means for communities to be humble in practice, and whether paradoxical methods to cultivate humility work best when clients are informed that humility is the goal and paradox the method, or through more indirect means.

III. Conclusion

In this paper, I have defined humility as the willingness to act, when needed, in ways oneself or one's society considers unproductive, counterintuitive, or undesirable. I argued that the ancient Chinese text, the *Daodejing*, reveals a dangerous dynamic in our social psychology: when we articulate and then obsess over finite goods, we ironically hasten the decay and dissolution of these goods by trying to bring them about through mental, social, and physical force that oppresses others and ensnares ourselves. If, however, we can learn to appreciate that which we previously thought lowly and worthless, and act without thought of recognition, the spontaneous flourishing of ourselves in union with others and our environment will have fewer obstacles in its path. Research on ironic processes of mental control and the effectiveness of paradoxical therapies, moreover, has given us evidence that such a Daoist approach to humility truly has the potential to unhinge us from our cognitive obsessions and neuroses. I therefore call my account of humility *realist*, or Daoist realist,

humility, because it takes into account both the limits of human cognitive effort as well as effective ways to pre-empt the self-destruction that ensues from obsessive aversion to and denial of these limits. Because realist humility sees the needs of self and other as part of a larger ecology, and acknowledges that flourishing can only be enabled, not forced, it provides us with practical, unselfconscious ways of avoiding arrogance and self-debasement that other accounts of humility, grounded in self-assessment and reduction of self-focus or self-worth, cannot.

Appendix:
Ancient DDJ Commentators' Use of "Humble" Language[1]

The *Heshanggong* (HSG) (lit. 'ruler on the river') is one of the two earliest and most influential ancient commentaries on the DDJ. It records explanations of the Daodejing given by a mythical sage to a ruler in the later half of the Han Dynasty (2nd Century BCE to 2nd Century CE). HSG enjoins the ruler to be humble and prudent. It is noteworthy that, unlike the DDJ itself, it uses words such as "lowly/base" (卑, *bei*) and "humble" (謙卑, *qianbei*) several times to describe the way in which *Dao* and the Sage work. For example, in commenting on DDJ Chapter 8, which says that the highest good is like water because it dwells in the places people hate, HSG explains that the places people hate are base (卑, *bei*) and dirty, implying that for the DDJ, it is good to let oneself 'flow' into situations considered vulgar or humiliating by society. Commenting on the more mystical Chapter 16's phrase "returning to the root is called stillness," HSG explains that this involves being "weak, humble (謙卑, *qianbei*), and residing below (處下, *chuxia*)." Again, explicit humility language is used to describe the DDJ's vision of virtue and reality. Thus it confirms that a reading of the DDJ which sees even its metaphysical vision as one of humility is not a completely[2] novel or foreign interpretation.

Chronologically, Wangbi (WB) is the second author of a fully surviving, highly influential commentary on the DDJ, but his influence is likely the greatest. Wang (3rd Century CE) is a historical figure, a scholar who combined elements of various ancient philosophies to create the synthesis of late-antique Chinese thought known as 玄學*, Xuanxue,* "mysterious learning," later also called "Neo-Daoism." Regarding the DDJ, his concern is to show how metaphysically, limitless absence precedes limited presences. WB' s helpfulness

[1] For the background information on the two ancient DDJ commentaries consulted in this section, cf. Chan, (1998). The translation of quotations from these commentaries is my own. The Chinese texts can be found at https://ctext.org/heshanggong and https://ctext.org/dao-de-zhen-jing-zhu.
[2] Of course, while it is perhaps the earliest DDJ commentary that survives in full, the HSG is not contemporaneous with the DDJ.

for my argument lies in the similarity of his conclusions with HSG's. Wang is continually concerned to bring out the DDJ's insight into yielding for the practical sake of harmonizing. Whereas HSG may use more ethically inflected language to encourage humility, WB focuses on the realistic consequences: embracing lowliness and passivity will lead to things being harmonized and the self being preserved. "The sage puts their self last and does not pursue things, and all things return to the sage of themselves," he comments on chapter 32. Commenting on Chapter 6's mysterious description of the "spirit of the valley," Wang explains that it is because of the absence of form and shape (which defines a valley) that the there is no resistance or disobedience to it, and that therefore the DDJ uses "spirit of the valley" to describe the "root of all things" which continually persists and is used but never used up. Wang uses the words "dwells in lowliness/baseness (處卑, *chubei*)"—very similar to the phraseology of the HSG—to describe this concept of the wholesome power of absence. Where the HSG shows that the DDJ was clearly read as enjoining an ethic of humility, WB evinces that a 'metaphysic' of humility is also not foreign to the text, and supports my own understanding that the DDJ wants to show that humility is in fact living in harmony with the way things really are, and thus also furthering social harmony.

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