

PHILIP J. IVANHOE

ONENESS



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East Asian Conceptions of
Virtue, Happiness, & How
We Are All Connected

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and How We Are All Connected

Philip J. Ivanhoe

OXFORD
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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Ivanhoe, P. J., author.

Title: Oneness : east asian conceptions of virtue, happiness,
and how we are all connected / Philip J. Ivanhoe.

Description: New York : Oxford University Press, 2017. |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017030413 (print) | LCCN 2017014031 (ebook) |

ISBN 9780190840518 (cloth : alk. paper) | ISBN 9780190840549 (online course) |

ISBN 9780190840525 (updf) | ISBN 9780190840532 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Whole and parts (Philosophy) | Concord. |

Monism. | Self (Philosophy) | Other (Philosophy) | Philosophy, Asian.

Classification: LCC BD396 .I93 2017 (ebook) | LCC BD396 (print) |

DDC 111/.82—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017030413>

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed by Sheridan Books, Inc., United States of America

For Donald J. and Ann P. Munro—

Inspiring models; true friends

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PREFACE

This work seeks to build upon a constellation of ideas found in a number of East Asian philosophical traditions that is formed around conceptions of oneness: the idea that human beings are intricately and inextricably intertwined and share a common destiny with the other people, creatures, and things of this world. It draws upon the writings of specific traditional East Asian thinkers to make clear and illustrate the concept of oneness, but its larger purpose is to show how these traditional views can inspire modern ideas of oneness that can serve as foundations for related, viable, contemporary conceptions of the self, the virtues, and human happiness.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am most grateful to Youngsun Back, Erin M. Cline, Owen Flanagan, Eirik Lang Harris, Eric Leon Hutton, Michael R. Slater, Justin Tiwald, Bryan W. Van Norden, David W. Tien, and Christian Wenzel for helpful comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of this work. I gratefully acknowledge the support of the Department of Public Policy of City University of Hong Kong and the remarkable generosity of the John Templeton Foundation, which supported this work as part of a larger project, Eastern and Western Conceptions of Oneness, Virtue, and Human Happiness (<http://www6.cityu.edu.hk/ceacop/Oneness/index.html>). I acknowledge and thank MIT Press for allowing me to use parts of my essay “Senses and Values of Oneness,” in *The Philosophical Challenge from China*, ed. Brian Bruya (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 231–51; SUNY Press for allowing me to draw upon parts of my essay “The Values of Spontaneity,” in *Taking Confucian Ethics Seriously: Contemporary Theories and Applications*, ed. Yu Kam-por, Julia Tao,

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

and Philip J. Ivanhoe (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2010), 183–207; and Oxford University Press for allowing me to draw upon my essay “Happiness in Early Chinese Thought,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Happiness*, ed. Ilona Boniwell and Susan David (Oxford University Press, 2013), 263–78.

CONVENTIONS

For the first occurrence of Chinese names, I provide the Romanization followed by the Chinese characters, for example, Wang Yangming 王陽明. For first occurrence of important terms of art, phrases, or sentences I provide a translation followed by the Pinyin Romanization and the original Chinese characters in parentheses, for example, “happiness” (*le* 樂).

Qi 氣, *yin* 陰, and *yang* 陽, which are the names of different kinds of fundamental constituents of the phenomenal world, are Romanized in Pinyin and left untranslated, since there is no helpful English word corresponding to their meaning and because these words, like Sanskrit *karma*, are becoming parts of the English lexicon.

I translate the character 天 as “Heaven” when it refers to a conscious moral agent acting intentionally in governing the universe and “heaven” when it refers to the heavens or sky or the natural realm more generally.

Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

ONENESS

Introduction

The title of this book, *Oneness: East Asian Conceptions of Virtue, Happiness, and How We Are All Connected*, offers a good preliminary sketch of its content and focus, which I will endeavor to elaborate and fill out in this introduction. At the core of this work lies the *oneness hypothesis* and its implications for theories of virtue and human flourishing.¹ The *oneness hypothesis* is not a single theory but a family of views—more a genus than a species—that can be found in different forms in a wide variety of disciplines (Ivanhoe 2015; Ivanhoe et al., forthcoming). The oneness hypothesis is a view about the nature of the world; its primary moral aspect concerns the nature of the relationship between the self and the other people, creatures, and things of the world; its core assertion is the claim that we—and in particular our personal welfare or happiness—are inextricably intertwined with other people, creatures, and things.

The oneness hypothesis entails more than the simple claim of connection between ourselves and the rest of the world, for while such connection is an obvious truth, it is practically and morally ambiguous. At times we find ourselves connected with other parts of the world, for example, malignant bacteria, tumors, corrupt institutions, very bad people, and so on, to which we would strongly prefer not to be connected and have no good reason or

plausible obligation to be so united. The connections the oneness hypothesis advocates are those that conduce to the health, benefit, and improvement of both individuals and the larger wholes of which they are parts. One of the goods that such connections supply is the satisfaction of a deep need that human beings and many other animals have to belong to larger communities (Baumeister and Leary 1995). An example of this kind of connection and relationship is an individual dog and the pack to which it belongs. In its natural environment, in order for a dog to fare well it must be a member of a pack, and being well-integrated into such a group not only conduces to the individual dog's well-being but that of the pack as well.² The well-being of the dog in this example is broadly construed and extends well beyond mere survival, though it surely includes that too. Being a member of a pack enables the dog to do all the things dogs like to do, and this includes enjoying the complex social relations that define and regulate a dog's life and that of its pack. The particular sense of connection seen in this example explains and helps us understand why the ideal of oneness often gets expressed by metaphors of natural organic unity, for example, about how a healthy person is connected to the various parts of her own well-functioning body or how the good state is analogized to such a well-functioning body. This aspect of the oneness hypothesis explains why it carries the particular practical implications it does: since the kinds of connections it concerns are integral to the health and well-being of both the individual and the larger wholes of which she is a part, it tends to imply certain obligations to endorse and extend care beyond the strict limits of individuals and to see and feel common cause and a shared identity and destiny between self and others. Chapter 1 introduces the oneness hypothesis, offers several examples of East Asian thinkers who have advocated particular versions of such a view, and explores how these

can guide us in constructing contemporary versions of the oneness hypothesis.

What has been said up to this point makes clear that the oneness hypothesis entails a new, relational view about the nature of the self, which offers an alternative to more individualistic accounts. Some claim that relational views of the self or the idea of oneness involve a “loss” of independence, self, or autonomy, but the idea of organic unity that we have noted shows this to be mistaken or at best misleading; the relationships involved and the conception of oneness that serve as the ideal are more accurately and helpfully understood as ways to achieve a *more expansive* conception of the self, a self that is seen as intimately connected with other people, creatures, and things in ways that typically conduce to the greater advantage, well-being, and happiness of all concerned. In contemporary analytic philosophy, psychology, and cognitive science, this general issue is more commonly discussed in terms of the “boundaries of the self” (Russell 2012), and versions of this idea are found in views such as epigenetics and process ontology for organisms in biology (Dupré 2014). Eric Scerri draws upon a notion of oneness that he rightly sees as an “aspect of Eastern philosophy” to propose an alternative account of the history of science in which “the development of science should be regarded as one organic flow in which the individual worker bees are all contributing to the good of the hive” (Scerri 2016: xxiv, xix). Recent work in the field of extended cognition challenges traditional views that presume that the proper scope of the mind stops at the boundaries of the skin and skull (Chemero 2009; Menary 2010). One prominent neuroscientist argues that “losing oneself” or “blurring” the identity between self and other is a neurologically efficient and effective capacity, generated through natural selection, that enables human beings and some other animals to achieve “a virtually endless repertoire of ethically

acceptable behavioral choices” (Pfaff 2007: 62). On more expansive conceptions of the self, being cut off or alienated from the greater wholes which in part constitute the self is seen and felt as a loss and an impediment to a full sense of self and the possibility of flourishing. The relational conception of the self that lies at the heart of the oneness hypothesis is the subject of chapter 2.

The more expansive view of the self that is part of the oneness hypothesis challenges widespread and uncritically accepted views about the strong (some would say hyper-) individualism that characterizes many contemporary Western theories and conceptions of the self, but it also has direct and profound implications for a range of practical concerns such as how we conceive of and might seek to develop greater care for the people, creatures, and things of the world. How would our view of ourselves change, and how would our approach to and views about ethical, social, and spiritual life change, if we begin with the belief that we all are deeply and inextricably interconnected with other people, creatures, and things and that our own flourishing and happiness is bound up with the well-being and happiness of at least large parts of the rest of the world? Much contemporary philosophical, economic, and social theory assumes, without evidence or argument, *hyper-individualistic* conceptions of the self. Roughly, such a self is thought to be a self-centered maximizer of its own best interests. Even though this model has been shown to be extremely poor at predicting how people actually behave (Sen 1977) and even less reliable as a guide for successfully tracking one’s best interests and attaining personal happiness (Haybron 2008: 225–51)—an issue we return to in chapter 6 of this work—it is still widely employed and largely regarded not only as the best way to be but also as simply *the way people are*. The first of these claims is highly dubious, and the last is patently false. Many cultures around the world and especially in South and East Asia