Senses and Values of Oneness[1]

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> *In fact the whole antithesis between self and the rest of the world…disappears as soon as we have any genuine interest in persons or things outside ourselves. Through such interests a man comes to feel himself part of the stream of life, not a hard separate entity like a billiard ball, which can have no relation with other such entities except that of collision…Such a man feels himself a citizen of the universe, enjoying freely the spectacle that it offers and the joys that it affords, untroubled by the thought of death because he feels himself not really separate from those who will come after him. It is in such profound instinctive union with the stream of life that the greatest joy is to be found.*[2]

I.   Introduction:

In this essay, I explore different ways in which people do or might claim themselves to be "one" with other parts of the world or with the universe at large and what ethical implications might come with recognizing and living in light of such a conception of the self. In particular, I am interested in how such views about the self and its relationship with the rest of the world entail or imply various types and levels of care for other people, creatures, or things. I will discuss a range of views currently being discussed among contemporary psychologists and philosophers but my primary purpose is to describe the views of several Chinese neo-Confucian thinkers and bring them into dialogue with modern psychology and philosophy. As will be clear, I think that in order to do this, we must first exert considerable care and effort in coming to

[2] Bertrand Russell, *The Conquest of Happiness*, Reprint, (London: Routledge, 1995): 191.

understand what these neo-Confucian thinkers really thought about these topics and how the world would look when seen from the perspective of someone who took up and lived according to their kind of view. This will require us to take seriously a range of metaphysical beliefs that I describe as "heroic." I mean by this that such beliefs would be very difficult for a modern person to embrace since they cannot be reconciled with widely accepted views at the heart of modern science. To make clear my own point of view, I find these traditional metaphysical views implausible, just as I find many of Plato's views about value or Aristotle's views about human nature untenable. I would like to suggest, though, that by thinking from and through the perspective of these traditional neo-Confucians, we can be led to formulate modern interpretations of their views that make significant contributions to contemporary debates about the ways we are and can see ourselves as related to other people, creatures, and things in the world. Describing such a conception of the self and explaining its ethical implications are the ultimate constructive aims of this essay.

II.   The Vicissitudes of Altruism:

A number of philosophers and psychologists have sought to understand our capacity to care for others and the ways in which we might improve and strengthen whatever abilities we have in this regard. Philosophers like David Hume and Adam Smith offered different but related accounts of "sympathy" and the ways in which sympathy functions to develop and strengthen other-regarding desires and behavior. For quite some time, modern philosophers, biologists, and psychologists have tended to doubt the possibility of genuine psychological altruism—self-consciously choosing to benefit others and not oneself at one's own expense—but recent work in all three fields has reestablished not only the possibility but also apparently the fact of such altruism. Thomas Nagel attempted to defend one version of this claim: that human beings can

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freely and rationally choose to act in consideration of the interests of others without having any ulterior, prudential motives.[3] Developing a parallel between agent-relative and agent-neutral reasons for acting, Nagel argued there is an objective moral requirement on all rational agents to behave altruistically. Biologists have always recognized biological altruism, defined simply in terms of behavior: one organism acting in ways that benefit others at its own expense. Seen in terms of evolutionary biology, altruism is behavior that decreases the fitness of one organism while increasing the fitness of others.[4] Psychological altruism was regarded as impossible since it was thought inconsistent with natural selection, but in a recent, ground-breaking work, Elliot Sober and David Sloan Wilson have shown that such altruism is fully consistent with natural selection when selection is viewed in terms of groups rather than individual organisms.[5] Their work has overturned years of opposition to the very idea of psychological altruism and has reinvigorated inquiry into the nature and roles of altruism in all its expressions and forms. Additional momentum and interest has come from experimental psychologists; the most developed and influential line of inquiry in this field is known as "the empathy-altruism hypothesis."[6] Those who defend the empathy-altruism hypothesis claim that empathy with others can lead to caring for and working to increase their welfare, even at the expense of the agent.

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[3] Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979).

[4] Which organism or group receives or loses benefit and what type of fitness is gained or lost are complex issues and depend upon the precise definition of altruism one employs. For a careful analysis of this issue, see Benjamin Kerr, Peter Godfrey-Smith, and Marcus W. Feldman, "What is altruism?" in *Trends in Ecology and Evolution*, 19.3 (March 2004): 135-40.

[5] Elliot Sober and David Sloan Wilson, *Unto Others: The Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behavior*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

[6] The earliest work on this theory was done by C. D. Batson. For example, see his, "Prosocial motivation: Is it every truly altruistic?" in L. Berkowitz, ed., *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 20, (1987): 65-122 and *The Altruism Question: Toward a Social-Psychological Answer*, (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1991). This theory has also been well defended against egoistic alternatives. For example, see C. D. Batson, J. L. Dyck, J. R. Brandt, J. G. Batson, and A. L. Powell, "Five Studies Testing Two New Egoistic Alternatives to the Empathy-Altruism Hypothesis," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 55.1, (1988): 52-77. Martin L. Hoffman has made influential contributions to this movement and especially in regard to the methods of cultivating empathy. See his, *Empathy and Moral Development: Implications for Caring and Justice*, Reprint, (Cambridge University Press, 2007).

Among other consequences, this research has helped to foster a revival of sentimentalist virtue ethics, in the tradition of Hume and Smith. Since "sympathy" or more properly empathy plays a central role in sentimentalist virtue ethical conceptions of the virtues, the findings of psychologists who do research on the empathy-altruism hypothesis has provided considerable support for such theories.[7] Prominent among the exponents of such new versions of sentimentalism is Michael Slote, whose work draws directly upon contemporary psychological studies, like those of Batson and Hoffman.[8] Stephen C. Angle relates Hoffman's views to neo-Confucians like Wang Yangming, paying particular attention to issues concerning moral development and education.[9] In section four, I will discuss the empathy-altruism hypothesis, both its psychological formulation and philosophical use, and will contrast this view with an alternative account of other-directed feeling and behavior, what I will call the "oneness hypothesis."[10] In order to set the stage for this comparison, I begin with a general discussion of the concept of oneness and a rough survey of Chinese views about oneness.

III.   Oneness and Chinese philosophy

Even a concept as apparently simple as "oneness" can be complex: it turns out there is more than *one* way to be one.[11] The strongest sense in which two or more things can be one is by the relation of numerical identity: Clark Kent and Superman are "one" in this way. Some who

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[7] Sympathy and empathy overlap in sense and use. Given our purposes, we will focus on empathy, which entails not only feeling *for* another but feeling *as* another feels. I can have sympathy for others who are not themselves aware of their situation and hence who have not experienced any feelings for me to share. For a careful and revealing analysis of these issues, see Stephen Darwall, "Empathy, Sympathy, Care," *Philosophical Studies*, 89 (1998): 261-82.

[8] See *The Ethics of Care and Empathy*, (London: Routledge, 2007): 13-5 and *Moral Sentimentalism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010): 13-25.

[9] See his *Sagehood: The Contemporary Significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy*, (Oxford University Press, 2009).

[10] As I argue in section five, the notions of empathy and oneness are not mutually exclusive, though they are distinct and offer different perspectives on other-regarding care.

[11] I offer an analysis of different senses of oneness in regard to notions of anthropocentrism in "Early Confucianism and Environmental Ethics," in Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Berthrong, eds., *Confucianism and Ecology: The Interrelation of Heaven, Earth, and Humans*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998): 59-76.

defend environmental concern based upon interpretations of the Gaia hypothesis rely upon a slightly less but still robust sense of oneness—something we might refer to as the "nature is a blended whole" hypothesis—when they insist that each and every part of the world is inextricably intertwined and passes in and out of one another.[12] Two or more things can also be one by being parts of a single organic body: as my arm is one with the rest of me. This idea often is confused with the idea of being part of a single ecosystem. In the latter case, though, the relationship between part and whole is not as direct or crucial as in the former. Removing important members of a given ecosystem may *alter* the system but rarely will it lead to its collapse or directly and immediately affect all the other parts; cutting off a person's arm or head will have more immediate and dire results. A fifth way to be one with others is as a member of some tradition, institution, team, club, or group. Those who identify themselves as members of such associations, to varying degrees, take the interests of other members in the group as their own. They share a sense of solidarity, of being one with others, at least in regard to certain activities and on certain occasions. One finds examples of all these different senses of oneness in the course of Chinese history and exploring the different ways this concept has played out over time is a most worthy project to undertake. Here, though, I will not attempt an adequate survey of conceptions of oneness in Chinese history; I only aim to present a number of examples in order to help prepare for and frame my discussion of distinctively neo-Confucian conceptions of oneness.

There is a clear and persistent metaphysical motif, in early texts like the *Yijing*, that describes the world as condensing out of inchoate, primordial *qi* 氣. Roughly, the idea is that the

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[12] See for example the work of Joanna Macy, quoted in Lawrence E. Joseph, *Gaia: The Growth of an Idea*, (New York:St. Martin's Press, 1990): 243. The Gaia hypothesis takes many forms; its original formulation, by James Lovelock, focused on the ways in which the earth is a self-regulating system and in this respect can be understood as a single living organism.

universe began as a vast undifferentiated reservoir of *qi* which over time began to fracture, shift, eddy, and gather into discrete layers or zones, differing in clarity, purity, density, movement, etc. These regions of different quality *qi* eventually gave rise to distinct types of *qi*: clear, turbid, light, heavy, active, inactive, etc. This primal soup continued to stir and began to form regular patterns, discernable as vague images (*xiang* 象), which served as the basis of more distinct and stable shapes (*xing* 形). Individual things (*qi* 器) gradually precipitated out of this ongoing process, and the world came into being. The important point for our purposes is that in its origins and at its most fundamental level, all the things in the universe, the starry heavens above and the most modest mote of dust below, arose out of *qi*. In these respects, the things of the universe are one in a deep and distinctive sense.

Daoists took up these ideas and gave them a distinctive spin by emphasizing how everything we see and make use of in the world comes from an original state of nothing (*wu* 無), by which they tended to mean not a state of absolute "nothingness" but "no-things-ness": a stage in which there were no discrete and individuated entities. So, as the *Daodejing* teaches: "The world and all its creatures arise from what is there; What is there arises from what is not there" (*tian xia wan wu sheng yu you; you sheng yu wu* 天下萬物生於有；有生於無). This was also a prominent theme in the writings of Wei dynasty thinkers such as Wang Bi (226-49) and He Yan (d. 249), who understood and appreciated Daoist thought but insisted that Kongzi was superior to Laozi because only the former *really* understood how everything arose from and is unified by their common origin in primordial nothing (本無 *ben wu*). In their thought we see clearly the connection between the metaphysical unity of the world and an ethical imperative to care for everything in the world: because of our primordial connection with every aspect of the world, we

are fundamentally one with all things and should care for them as more distant extensions of ourselves.

A similar and related view about the world as a unified system or spreading web of "principles" or "patterns" (*li* 理) emerged about the same time and expressed another sense of oneness, something close to being part of an ecosystem.[13] On this view, the phenomena of the world constitute an interconnected system like the system of roads in a country or like the various parts of a living organism such as a tree. The latter idea was captured and deployed by terms such as "root" (*ben* 本) and "branch tip" (*mo* 末), which convey not only the fact that different parts of the whole are organically connected or "one" but also that some parts (the roots) while hidden from view are still integral to the system, that each part has its distinctive place and role, and that some parts are more fundamental or important than others. The metaphor of root and branch invites one to examine or investigate the things of the world in order to understand and appreciate its unified structure: starting from the accessible and obvious (branch tips) and tracing one's way back along the complex web of intertwined patterns to arrive at the hidden, fundamental "root" of things. Such ideas were taken up by and shaped the thinking of neo-Confucians. Drawing upon a term found in the *Great Learning*, neo-Confucians developed different conceptions of how to carry out the "investigation of things" (*ge wu* 格物), but for them the world and its underlying principles had changed under the broad and profound influence of Buddhism.

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[13] For a most informative survey of the notion of *li* in the history of Chinese thought, see Wing-tsit Chan, "The Evolution of the Neo-Confucian Concept *Li* as Principle," *Tsing Hua Journal of Chinese Studies*, 4.2 (1964): 123-49. See also the numerous entries under "pattern" in the index of John Makeham, *Transmitters and Creators: Chinese Commentators and Commentaries on the* Analects, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

I will not rehearse the complex story of Buddhism's influence on neo-Confucian philosophy, which I have argued for in previous publications, but instead will summarize and describe some of the most important results of this interaction.[14] Under the influence of Buddhist metaphysical beliefs, neo-Confucians developed a more robust and dramatic sense of oneness as a kind of identity between self and world. Rather than seeing the world as an interconnected system or web of principles, they believed each and every thing in the world contained within itself all the principles in the universe. This idea, which we might identify as "all in each," came most directly from certain teachings within Huayan Buddhism. One can see this idea illustrated in many Buddhist temples around the world by displays in which the figure of the Buddha—representing our original nature and containing all the principles in the universe—is placed within a circle of mutually reflecting mirrors. The effect is that the image of the Buddha is projected and appears everywhere, with the pattern repeated in infinitely expanding repetitions.[15] Wherever one looks, one finds the perfect image of the Buddha. The lesson is that all things possess pure and perfect Buddha-nature. In neo-Confucian terms, each thing contains within a shared original nature (*ben xing* 本性), which consists in all the principles of the world. Individual things and types of things are what they are not because of a difference in their original natures or stock of principles but because their endowment of *qi* only allows certain principles to manifest themselves. Humans are unique among creatures because the principles of their heart-minds provide them with access to all the principles in the universe. All they need to do is to refine the *qi* that blocks the *li* within to the point where the principles of their heart-

[14] See, for example, my *Confucian Moral Self Cultivation*, Second Edition, (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000); *Ethics in the Confucian Tradition: The Thought of Mengzi and Wang Yangming*, Second Edition, (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002); *Readings from the Lu-Wang School*, (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2009); and "Virtue Ethics and the Confucian Tradition," in Daniel Russell, ed., *Cambridge Companion to Virtue Ethics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming, 2011).
[15] For those devoted to *gongfu* movies, this common Buddhist teaching device is the inspiration for the famous "hall of mirrors" fight scene in Bruce Lee's classic movie, *Enter the Dragon*.

minds can shine forth and illuminate the things they encounter or imagine, resulting in proper understanding and appreciation. These ideas all are clearly expressed in the following passage from Zhu Xi.

> Someone asked, "Since the physical endowment of *qi* can be more or less dull and impure, is the [original] nature endowed by heaven sometimes complete and sometimes partial?"
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> [Zhu Xi] said, "There is never a difference of complete or partial. It is like the light of the sun or moon. If you are in an open field, then you see it all. If you are inside a thatched hut, some of the light is blocked, and so you see some of it but not all of it. Dullness and impurity occur only because of *qi* being dull and impure. As a result, there will naturally be some [principles] that are blocked, as if [in the example of light being blocked] one was inside a thatched hut. Nevertheless, in the case of human beings, the blockage can be penetrated.
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> Birds and beasts all have this same nature; the only problem is they are constrained by their physical forms. From birth they are severely blocked and cut off and have no way to penetrate the blockage. If we consider the benevolence of tigers and wolves [which they show toward their young], the way otters perform sacrifices [by washing and apparently arranging their food], the dutifulness of bees and ants [who attend to their respective roles in the hive or colony], we see that they are able to penetrate through [their physical endowments] in these various ways—like a sliver of light shining through a crack [in the thatch]. If we consider apes, their physical shape is similar to human beings and so they are the most intelligent among the other animals. The only thing they cannot do is talk."[16]

Given this general picture, neo-Confucians have not only a more metaphysically robust sense of oneness but also a new and strong justification for universal care: our shared principles supply a deep connection with other people, creatures, and things.[17] Along with this came an explanation for *why* people are emotionally affected not only by the suffering of other people, but by the suffering of non-human animals, the harming of plants, and even the wanton destruction of inanimate objects. Such phenomena are familiar to all human beings, even though

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[16] *Imperial Edition of the Complete Works of Master Zhu* (*Yu zuan Zhuzi Quan shu* 御纂朱子全書) in *Si ku quan shu* 四庫全書, Volume 721, (Shanghai: Shanghai gu ji chu ban she, 1987): 42.29a,b.

[17] Neo-Confucian thinkers described a lack of feeling for the welfare of people, creatures, and things as being "numb" (*buren* 不仁) to the world. This allowed them to play on the term *buren* which, in their age, had the ethical sense of "lacking benevolence" *and* the medical sense of "paralysis." One who was "unfeeling" toward the things of the world was like a person with a paralyzed limb. In both cases, they failed to see and appreciate an underlying connection between themselves and something else. For a more thorough discussion of this idea, see *Ethics*, pp. 27-9 and "Virtue Ethics and the Confucian Tradition."

the explanation for *why* people tend to feel this way is not at all obvious or straightforward. Neo-Confucians had a ready explanation. For example, Zhou Dunyi (1017-73) famously refused to cut the grass growing in front of his window saying, "I regard it in the same way as I regard myself." Zhang Zai (1020-77) expressed the same sentiment when he heard the braying of a donkey.[18] Like other neo-Confucians, these men felt a profound sense of oneness not only with other human beings but with the entire universe. The self was in some deep sense not only connected or intermingled with other people, creatures, and things but coextensive with the universe. One of the most influential and moving expressions of this ideal is Zhang Zai's "Western Inscription" (*Ximing* 西銘).

> *Qian* is my father, *Kun* my mother and even an insignificant creature such as I have a place within their midst.[19] And so, what fills the universe is my body; what directs the universe is my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters; all things my companions. The emperor is the eldest son of my father and mother; the great ministers are his stewards.
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> Respect the aged, as this is the way *to treat the elderly as elders should be treated*; love those who are orphaned and weak, as this is the way *to treat the young as youths should be treated*.[20] The sage is the harmonious power of Heaven and earth; the worthy its refined expression. Those who are weary, infirm, crippled or sick, those who are without brothers, children, wives, or husbands—all these are my brothers, who are suffering distress and misfortune and have nowhere to turn.[21]

Wang Yangming takes up this set of beliefs and general point of view giving special emphasis to the metaphor of being one body with heaven, earth, and the myriad creatures (*tian di wan wu wei yi ti* 天地萬物為一體). Though this image is not original with Wang, he

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[18] Both of these stories are recorded in the same passage in chapter three of *Extant Works of the Cheng [Brothers] from Henan* (*Henan Cheng shi yi shu* 河南程氏遺書), (Taibei Shi: Taiwan shang wu yin shu guan 1978).

[19] *Qian* 乾 is the first hexagram in the *Yijing*; it represents heaven and the *yang* force. *Kun* 坤 is the second hexagram; it represents earth and the *yin* force.

[20] The quoted phrases are from *Mengzi* 1A7.

[21] *The Complete Works of Master Zhang* (*Zhangzi quan shu* 張子全書) in *Si ku quan shu* 四庫全書, Volume 697, (Shanghai: Shanghai gu ji chu ban she, 1987): 79-82 (1.1b-7a).

deploys it in new and powerful ways, urging us to feel the connection between ourselves and

the rest of the world in the way we feel the connection among the various parts of our bodies.[22]

> Great people regard Heaven, earth, and the myriad creatures as their own bodies. They look upon the world as one family and China as one person within it. Those who, because of the space between their own bodies and other physical forms, regard themselves as separate from [Heaven, earth, and the myriad creatures] are petty persons. The ability great people have to form one body with Heaven, earth, and the myriad creatures is not something they intentionally strive to do; the benevolence of their heart-minds is originally like this. How could it be that only the heart-minds of great people are one with Heaven, earth, and the myriad creatures? Even the heart-minds of petty people are like this. It is only the way in which such people look at things that makes them petty. This is why, when they see a child [about to] fall into a well, they cannot avoid having a sense of alarm and concern for the child.[23] This is because their benevolence forms one body with the child. Someone might object that this response is because the child belongs to the same species. But when they hear the anguished cries or see the frightened appearance of birds or beasts, they cannot avoid a sense of being unable to bear it.[24] This is because their benevolence forms one body with birds and beasts. Someone might object that this response is because birds and beasts are sentient creatures. But when they see grass or trees uprooted and torn apart, they cannot avoid feeling a sense of sympathy and distress. This is because their benevolence forms one body with grass and trees. Someone might object that this response is because grass and trees have life and vitality. But when they see tiles and stones broken and destroyed, they cannot avoid feeling a sense of concern and regret. This is because their benevolence forms one body with tiles and stones.[25]

This imagery readily lent itself to another aspect of the neo-Confucian view: neo-

Confucians don't lose the self in or wholly merge the self with the world; they maintain the

hierarchy of concern characteristic of Confucians in every age. Wang uses the *world as body*

metaphor to emphasize our visceral connection with the world; at the same time, he explains that

the various parts of one's own body display a natural hierarchy of concern: we instinctively use

our hands and feet to protect our eyes, not because we do not value our hands and feet, but

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[22] The somatic aspects of many forms of empathy, both cognitive and affective, offers a way one might reinterpret Wang's claims about being "one body," at least with other sentient creatures. For this idea, see Jeanne C. Watson and Leslie S. Greenberg, "Empathic Resonance" in *The Social Neuroscience of Empathy* edited by Jean Decety and William Ickes, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press): 129.

[23] Wang here is paraphrasing the example of the child and well from *Mengzi* 2A6.

[24] *Mengzi* 1A7 offers the example of King Xuan being "unable to bear" the anguished cries and frightened appearance of an ox being led to slaughter and goes on to infer a general aversion to seeing any animal suffer.

[25] See Philip J. Ivanhoe, tr., *Readings from the Lu-Wang School of Neo-Confucianism*, (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2009): 160-2.

because we spontaneously recognize and follow a natural order. As Wang says, "According to the principles of the Way, there naturally is a hierarchy of importance" (*wei shi dao li zi you hou bo* 惟是道理自有厚薄).[26] So while we are one with every aspect of the universe, there is a hierarchy of concern, a core and periphery to the universal self, modeled on the natural hierarchy among the parts of our physical bodies.[27] From the perspective of principles, our oneness with the world is complete, universal, and expresses a particular structure and order; from the perspective of our physical embodiment, this unity gets manifested in terms of being "one body" with the world.

IV.   Empathy, altruism, and oneness

The most widespread and influential contemporary view about how we can feel a connection with and develop concern for other people involves various conceptions of empathy.[28] In philosophy, thinkers like Hume and Smith offer examples of such a view, though, as noted above, they employ the term "sympathy" and use it more broadly than the sense of empathy I am relying upon. In psychology, this view finds its clearest representative in what is known as the empathy-altruism hypothesis; roughly, this is the idea that our feelings of empathy encourage

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[26] This line and the analogy of the use of the hands and feet is found in section 276 of Wang's *A Record for Practice* (*Chuanxilu* 傳習錄), my translation. For a translation of the entire passage, see Wing-tsit Chan, *Instructions for Practical Living and other Neo-Confucian Writings by Wang Yang-ming*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963): 222-3.

[27] In comments on an earlier draft, David W. Tien pointed out to me that the hierarchy described here, which is typical among neo-Confucians, is more subjective in nature: positions in the hierarchy are relative to their relationship to the subject. One also finds within traditional Chinese thought a more objective hierarchy in which the sage-king occupies a more prominent position than the commoner. Both of these are distinct from a Christian hierarchy, laid out in 1 Corinthians 12:12-28, which also is illustrated by using the metaphor of the body and its various parts. In the biblical example, the positions are relative to an objective hierarchy set by God. These constitute three different senses of "hierarchy within oneness."

[28] Earlier, I sketched the particular sense of empathy I use in this paper, but the term has a varied history and is defined and employed differently in contemporary writings. For a helpful survey and analysis, see C. Daniel Batson, "These Things Called Empathy: Eight Related by Distinct Phenomena," in *The Social Neuroscience of Empathy*, pp. 3-15.

and sustain selfless or altruist feelings and behavior. Regardless of the particular conception of empathy one chooses or whether one finds this idea in philosophy or psychology, such views about our care for others share several key features; I would like to highlight three such features, as these provide helpful ways of comparing the empathy-altruism hypothesis to the oneness hypothesis.

The first feature of the empathy-altruism hypothesis I want to draw attention to is that it is based on *general features of human psychology*. That is to say, the foundation for our connection with others is psychological rather than metaphysical in nature, not simply the ability to feel as another feels but to do so out of concern for the other. Properly speaking, the view involves a claim about a psychological capacity for *empathic concern*.[29] The second feature is that those who rely upon empathic concern as their explanation for other-regarding care tend to begin from *how individual agents feel and respond to other individuals*, often others who are suffering in one way or another.[30] Thus Hume asks us to imagine how we would respond to someone intentionally and for no reason stepping on another man's gouty toes.[31] This is important because it tends to focus the issue of care upon the psychological bond between two people. It seems dubious to believe that we can fully empathize with most non-human animals, and we cannot empathize at all with plants or inanimate objects under this description; even in the case of

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[29] Such a capacity is actually an active human tendency to empathize with others, as seen in the phenomenon of psychological contagion observed in very young children. In this respect, the modern psychological evidence offers some support to Mengzi's claims about moral "sprouts" and Wang Yangming's claims about "pure knowing." For Mengzi's and Wang's ideas, see my *Confucian Moral Self Cultivation*, Second Revised Edition, (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000).

[30] As thinkers like Hume make clear, one can have empathic concern for the joy of others, but as ethicists tend to be most interested in getting people not to act badly, the primary examples of empathy involve relieving the distress or suffering of others. Psychological studies of empathy almost all focus exclusively on the relief of perceived distress or suffering on the part of human beings.

[31] *An Inquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Charles W. Hendel, ed., (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1957): 53. I have argued that Mengzi's examples of empathic care are much more complicated. See footnote #23 of my "Virtue Ethics and the Chinese Confucian Tradition."

intimate non-human animals it is not clear how successfully we can empathize with them, as opposed to simply projecting human feelings and concerns upon them.[32] The third and final feature of the empathy-altruism hypothesis concerns the issue of altruism. Advocates of empathy argue that it is *the path to selfless or altruistic behavior*. When I feel as another feels and am concerned with the other's welfare, I become interested in and more willing to behave in ways that benefit the other, even at my own expense. Empathy leads to altruism: my ability to feel as others do leads me to a greater willingness to risk or sacrifice my welfare for theirs.

Several contemporary psychologists have argued that a sense of oneness and *not* empathic concern is what motivates people to help others.[33] Such research relies upon the idea that most often people feel *and act* in a benevolent manner not because they experience more *empathic concern* for another, but "because they feel more *at one* with the other—that is because they perceive more of themselves in the other."[34] On such a view, our concern for others is not purely selfless or altruistic, because it is grounded in what I will call an *expanded view of the self*. In addition to a growing number of experimental results, this view is supported by notions like "inclusive fitness" in evolutionary theory. Here, the sense of oneness is more palpable and related to shared genetic inheritance. Contemporary research on mirror neurons can also be understood as providing support for the primacy of oneness. While our understanding of mirror

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[32] Richard Holton and Rae Langton express considerable skepticism about how well we can simulate animal states of mind and therefore how exclusively or strongly we should rely on empathy in moral theory. See their "Empathy and Animal Ethics" in Dale Jamieson, ed., *Singer and his Critics*, (Oxford, Blackwell, 1999): 209-32. For a brief response to their concerns, see Slote, *The Ethics of Care and Empathy*, pp. 125-6.

[33] See for example, Robert B. Cialdini, Stephanie L. Brown, Brian P. Lewis, Carol Luce, and Steven L. Neuberg, "Reinterpreting the Empathy-Altruism Relationship: When One into One Equals Oneness," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 73 (1997): 481-94. This is an especially important contribution because it is one of the earliest clear statements of this view and because the authors note the connection this view has with East Asian societies. For a groundbreaking study that explicitly relates the psychological literature to the philosophy of Wang Yangming, see David W. Tien, "Oneness and Self-Centeredness in the Moral Psychology of Wang Yangming," *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 40.1 (2012): 52-71.

[34] Cialdini, et al., "Reinterpreting the Empathy-Altruism Relationship," page 483. The current literature often describes other-regarding feelings as either empathy or oneness, but, as I will argue below, there is no good reason to draw a sharp line here or to regard these as mutually exclusive.

neurons is still in its infancy, they appear to play a direct and important role in our ability and tendency to imitate or mimic the behavior of others. Such imitation or mimicry plays a vital role in empathy and our more general capacities to simulate and understand others.[35] While the *process* by which mirror neurons enable us to feel what others feel functions more like empathy than oneness, the fact that we *have* this shared capacity to engage in automatic, unconscious simulation points to a deeper, preexisting oneness among people in something like the way our greater tendency to empathize with kin depends on perceived genetic relatedness. It is only because we are one in the sense of having such innate mechanisms that we are able to feel with and understand each other as well as we do.[36] A sense of oneness, though, is not limited to shared genes or mirror neurons; we can feel one with others in many different ways; for example, we can identify with ideas, beliefs, images, symbols, and practices transmitted and inherited across generations just as strongly. In both these cases, a modern, non-metaphysical interpretation of Wang Yangming's idea of shared "principles" readily lends itself as a general way to explain what we share.[37]

Wang's way of looking at the phenomenon of oneness takes us considerably beyond the work of contemporary philosophers and psychologists who tend to focus exclusively on the possibility of genuine concern for the suffering of other *human beings*. Recall that Wang thought

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[35] For mirror neurons, see Jennifer H. Pfeifer and Claus Lamm, "Mirror, Mirror, in My Mind: Empathy, Interpersonal Competence, and the Mirror Neuron System"; for imitation, see Rick B. van Baaren, Jean Decety, Ap Dijksterhuis, Andries van der Leji, and Matthijs L. van Leeuwen, "Being Imitated: Consequences of Nonconsciously Showing Empathy," both in Decety and Ickes, *The Social Neuroscience of Empathy*, pp. 183-97 and 31-42.

[36] A significant volume of research links abnormal mirror neuron functioning with autism; this implies those who lack this shared mechanism for imitation suffer an at times severe deficit in regard to an ability to empathize and thereby are cut off from a normal sense of human community. See Pfeifer and Lamm, "Mirror, Mirror, in My Mind," pp. 190-1.

[37] Lawrence Blum defends a similar view arguing that human beings begin life with a strong sense of oneness with particular others and that this "sense of connection, on which sympathy is founded" (p. 317) is a fundamental part of a child's sense of self. See his, "Particularity and Responsiveness" in Jerome Kagan and Sharon Lamb, eds., *The Emergence of Morality in Young Children*, (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1987): 306-37.

we are one not only with other people, but also with other animals, plants, and even inanimate objects. There is every reason to think that we in fact can and to some extent already do feel a sense of oneness with many of these and that such a sense is essential for getting us to act on behalf of these other creatures and things. For example, it is quite plausible to maintain that we need to believe and feel we are one with Nature in order to sustain anything resembling an adequate commitment to protecting Nature. Such a belief and sensibility need not in any way conflict with science or be irrational or mystical. Quite the contrary, a *denial* of our intimate connection to the natural world, properly understood, and our linked common future is clearly contrary to our best scientific understanding, irrational, and a dire threat to human welfare as well as many other forms of life on earth.[38] Wang's kind of view suggests that one of the most powerful bases of our concern for other people, creatures, plants, and things is an *enlarged sense of self*; at least in a number of cases, for example in the cases of inclusive fitness and our general, evolutionary interrelationship with Nature, this is more than just a stance on the world, it reflects important facts about *how we actually are* related to things in the world that we hold dear.

One challenge to such a view is that it seems to deny the possibility of altruism, for it appears to say that when we act in the interest of other people, creatures, plants, and things we really are simply helping ourselves.[39] Altruism requires that our acts be *selfless* but to some extent oneness includes the other within the self; albeit a new and expanded sense of oneself. This is a complex and subtle issue, which I will not attempt to settle definitively here. I do, though, want to suggest that some have sought to settle it too quickly. For example, Cialdini, et

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[38] I have defended a version of this claim in "Freud and the Dao" in Tao Jiang and Philip J. Ivanhoe, eds., *Freud and China*, (London: Routledge, forthcoming 2012).

[39] Ensuring that human beings do at times act selflessly or altruistically is a central concern of C. Daniel Batson's defense of the "empathy-altruism hypothesis." For example, see his "Prosocial Motivation: Is It Ever Truly Altruistic?"

al. claim that "When the distinction between self and other is undermined, the traditional dichotomy between selfishness and selflessness loses meaning."[40] I am not so sure about this. If we could not *in any way* distinguish between self and other, the notions of excessive self-centeredness and selflessness would indeed lose meaning. That, though, is not what modern psychologists, like Cialdini, or neo-Confucians, like Wang Yangming, have argued for. They have described an expanded sense of self and identified varying types and degrees of "interpersonal unity."[41] For example, while Wang insists that underneath it all there are shared principles, he does not dissolve the self into the world; *qi* preserves the world of physical things and a hierarchy of concern even for the sage. What the proposed, modern conception of oneness brings with it is a greater sense of harmony between self and world and the need to *rethink* the meaning of notions like selfishness and selflessness.

V.   Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to compare the oneness hypothesis to the empathy-altruism hypothesis in regard to each of the three features of the empathy-altruism hypothesis mentioned in Section IV. My aim is to show not only how the former differs from the latter but also how it offers different and in some cases greater resources for handling certain ethical problems. The first feature I noted was that the empathy-altruism hypothesis is based on *general features of human psychology* and not metaphysical claims about the self or the world. At first this seems like a great advantage, and it surely is if by "metaphysical claims" we mean the heroic metaphysics of people like Wang Yangming. However, if instead we understand metaphysics in very low-flying terms, as a general view about the nature of the world, then we can see an

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[40] Cialdini, et al., "Reinterpreting the Empathy-Altruism Relationship," page 491. This is a much stronger claim than that one made by Bertrand Russell in the epigraph of this essay.
[41] Cialdini, et al., "Reinterpreting the Empathy-Altruism Relationship," page 490.

important contrast between the oneness hypothesis and the empathy-altruism hypothesis. The former insists that moral theory must rely significantly on how things are in the world and not just or even primarily on how human psychology disposes us to be. Such a view recognizes human psychology as an important *part of the story*, but the story is larger and more complex; it's about the world as much as the mind; it concerns genes, mirror neurons, and much more.[42] For example, the story told by the oneness hypothesis involves the evolutionary history of human beings and their intimate and enduring contact with the natural world. It includes the long histories of different cultures and their various impacts on the lives of human beings. These and many other facts about the world contribute as much as human psychology to what and how we value. The fact that human beings have had such a long and complex history with Nature, explains why we feel certain ways about features of the natural world. The more we understand this history and our actual relationship with the natural world, the greater the likelihood of us deepening our appreciation for the value of Nature.[43] In a similar way, the histories of human cultures contribute in unique ways to what and how we value. Being parts of different, complex traditions is something distinctively human and often of immense value, and this value only emerges in our reflective understanding of actual cultures and traditions. Human values are not just discovered by the study of human psychology, they are forged and crafted in the course of our complex biological and cultural histories. The oneness hypothesis offers us a way not available to the empathy-altruism hypothesis to see why we care about and for so many of these things. We are moved by aspects of Nature because in a fairly direct and intricate way *we are one* with it; we are committed to and admire various cultures and traditions because *these are parts of* individual lives and the common heritage of humanity.

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[42] This feature of the oneness hypothesis makes it more clearly an example of moral realism.
[43] This view is powerfully advanced and defended in E. O. Wilson's *Biophilia*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984). I develop and relate this view to other thinkers, East and West, in my "Freud and the Dao."

The second feature I discussed is that those who rely upon empathic concern as their explanation for other-regarding care tend to begin from *how individual agents feel and respond to other individuals*. This point highlights the degree to which the empathy-altruism hypothesis is based and focuses attention on interpersonal responsiveness. This differs from the oneness hypothesis in several ways. For one thing, the latter view foregrounds the larger wholes of which individual people, creatures, and things are parts; in this respect it tends to valorize the greater, common good and invite the individual to fit into and find a place within the larger whole—e.g. Zhang Zai's "Western Inscription." In other words, the oneness hypothesis is more holistic and communal; the empathy-altruism hypothesis is more individualistic. In certain respects, evolutionary theory favors the oneness hypothesis as having priority over empathy and altruism. As noted earlier, psychological altruism developed out of *group* not *individual* fitness. The common good of groups offers the explanatory foundation not only for the evolution of altruism but also its primary value.[44] Another difference is that the empathy-altruism hypothesis is restricted almost exclusively to feelings *between human beings*. It can, with varying degrees of success, accommodate relationships between humans and non-human animals, but even on this score there are the challenges and difficulties noted above. The rest of the living and non-living natural world is left completely out of the picture, as are all human artifacts. We cannot *empathize* with these parts of the world for the simple reason that they are insentient and unfeeling; empathic concern is not a possibility. And yet, it is clear that we care, often deeply, about these parts of the world. The oneness hypothesis also readily accommodates our ability to care for larger groups, entities, or collections; we can feel one with large numbers of individuals

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[44] I do not intend to claim or believe that oneness explains *all* that is valuable about altruism or caring for others. As I note below, in reference to the work of Nel Noddings and Michael Slote, caring often requires us to understand and appreciate the particular, individual preferences and aspirations of others. The common good does not exhaust the good of caring and can even mask certain important goods that mature forms of empathy reveal.

such as all human beings, all sentient creatures, all living things etc., larger systems such as ecosystems or the planet earth, and sets or collections of things, like expressionist paintings or a particular architectural style.[45] The oneness hypothesis has the advantage of offering us a ready way to understand and develop our feelings for these aspects of our lives.

The third and final feature of the empathy-altruism hypothesis is the claim that empathy is *the path to selfless or altruistic behavior*. The oneness hypothesis does not aim at and is widely understood as undermining the possibility of altruism because it describes our apparently selfless, other-regarding actions as in some sense aimed at our own good. As noted above, the denial of pure altruism blurs but does not completely collapse the distinction between self- and other-interest. Some seem to think that if I act out of a sense of oneness, my actions not only are not altruistic but are in fact selfish. Unless, though, we mean by oneness something like identity, this stronger claim does not follow. Selfish actions place *excessive* or even *exclusive* weight on one's narrow self-interest and neglect the welfare of others. Acting out of an enlarged sense of the self clearly takes the welfare of others seriously and can even give them priority over one's narrow self-interest. A person acting out of such an enlarged sense of self not only can act for another but can do so *for the other's sake*. What I can't do from the perspective of the enlarged sense of self is to act *exclusively* for the sake of another. Outside of religious contexts, for example, Christianity, where *agape* expresses a distinctive theological value, it is not immediately evident why this latter kind of selfless, pure altruism is such a wonderful thing. As a regular and general perspective on the world, it may strike one as more pathological than fine: living *only* for others

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[45] Thanks to Justin Tiwald for pointing out this virtue of the oneness hypothesis.

is not a particularly appealing ideal.[46] At the very least, this kind of view has the potential to generate new and distinctive ethical problems.[47]

Take for example my desire to benefit my children. I regard myself as one with my children in the sense of seeing their good as my own. When I benefit them, I seek to act *for their sake* but in doing so I further my own good as well. Most times, when I do things for them, I don't think about how much *I am sacrificing*; quite the contrary, I *enjoy* helping them flourish. I realize and embrace the idea that in order to achieve their happiness, I must pay careful attention to what *they* want and be on guard not to simply project my own desires and aspirations onto them. Nel Noddings has shown how central such concern for *the one cared for* must be in genuine cases of caring.[48] This already shows that seeing my children as parts of my life does not entail merging or dissolving myself completely in them (or them in me). I would sacrifice my personal welfare and even my life in order to protect my children; some might insist this shows I am prepared to act "selflessly" on their behalf, but I disagree and find such claims in some respects self-congratulatory and pretentious.

An excessive emphasis on self-sacrifice distorts the true nature of caring. For example, my wife and I are happy to devote considerable sums of money to educate our children, but our aim has never been to spend ("sacrifice") our money but to educate our children. If some anonymous benefactor offered to pay the rest of our son's future tuitions with no strings attached,

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[46] For a revealing exploration of how altruism can go wrong, see Barbara Oakley, Ariel Knafo, Guruprasad Madhavan, and David Sloan Wilson eds., *Pathological Altruism,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[47] In this respect, the oneness hypothesis has certain formal similarities with Nietzsche's criticisms of compassion and his call to "revalue" this value. For a clear and insightful account of Nietzsche's ethical philosophy, which analyzes his concerns with virtues like compassion, see Brian Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality*, (London: Routledge, 2002). Thanks to Michael Slater for encouraging me to note this comparison.

[48] See Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminist Approach to Ethics and Moral* Education, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984). Michael Slote has developed this insight into a robust account of how sentimentalism supports respect and autonomy. See his *The Ethics of Care and Empathy*, pp. 55-66 and *Moral Sentimentalism*, pp. 107-39.

my wife and I would not object; we would be delighted to accept. We would not feel that we were being *deprived* of the opportunity to sacrifice for our child. Our aim is to see him get a good education and flourish. If we were to insist on using our own money to pay the tuition so that we could enjoy reflecting on what remarkably self-sacrificing parents we are, this would show our real concern is not our child's welfare but some self-centered desire to feel good about ourselves.[49] This is one kind of problem neo-Confucians worried about; such cases show that at least sometimes caring is not about avoiding selfishness, understood as being overly concerned with one's narrow personal welfare, but more about avoiding being self-centered in one's life and relationships.[50]

Being self-centered overlaps with but is different from our normal conception of being selfish. Being selfish means to give excessive or exclusive weight to one's own narrow interests over and against the interests of others; being self-centered means to take the self as the center of one's thoughts about the world.[51] It is a general point of view and seems to involve both a *metaphysical* claim and an *evaluative* claim. This clearly is how neo-Confucians regarded self-centeredness; to take the self as the center of the world involves cutting oneself off from a world with which one *really is* intimately connected—like denying the connection between one's arm

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[49] Such a desire could take many forms. The example I have offered has the desire connected to a hedonic end, but it could just be a desire to sacrifice or to uphold an ideal of parental obligation.

[50] One can try to understand the case I have proposed in terms of selfishness. For example, one might say that such parents are selfishly concerned about their moral reputations and not properly concerned about their child's education. This though is not the way we normally think about selfishness. A more conventional conception of selfishness might suggest the parents are selfish in wanting to secure for themselves excessive or exclusive claim to being *caring parents*, thereby denying due recognition to other parents. There is nothing though in the view I have described that would entail or imply such an attitude. Self-centered parents could welcome other parents having a similarly self-centered view about themselves and *their* children; it would not affect them in the least. This suggests strongly that understanding the problem in terms of self-centeredness is more intuitive and revealing. Thanks to comments by Christian Wenzel on this issue.

[51] In therapeutic settings, empathic concern for others often is described in terms of "de-centering" the self: a process of moving people from the "default mode" of egocentricity. This seems to support the idea that the goal is weakening self-centeredness—a view about the self and its relationship with the world—rather than working to eliminate selfishness—an attitude about the relative importance of one's needs and desires. For "de-centering," see Watson and Greenberg, "Empathic Resonance," p. 131.

and the rest of one's body—and, by alienating oneself from the world, becoming *unfeeling* toward it.

Adopting the perspective of a concern with self-centeredness alters the way we look at many cases of caring. Imagine a woman who by nature acts with great generosity and kindness but who thinks of her attitude and actions as expressions of *her* remarkable compassion toward the world. Neo-Confucians like Wang Yangming would fault her for having the wrong view not only about herself but about her relationship with the world. Of course, many Western ethicists would also tend to think there is something wrong with her view. Kantians would say her kindness has no moral worth because she acts out of her nature and not the moral law. Most virtue ethicists would think she is not virtuous because she thinks too much about how nice she is and not enough about the needs of others; the proper focus of her attention is the latter not the former. Most people, if encouraged to think about it a bit, would worry about the moral value of her attitude (though not what she *does*). She seems overly *full of herself*, and this familiar yet uncommonly wise expression implies that the problem largely lies in her self-conception. The early Confucian Mengzi would say she is *acting* benevolently but not acting out of benevolence. Wang would agree but diagnose her problem as having a wrong view of herself and her relationship with the people, creatures, and things of the world. Her view is too self-centered; it is also selfish, but only in an indirect and rather unusual sense.

Taking neo-Confucian thinkers as my primary inspiration, I have developed and presented a notion of oneness as an alternative way of thinking about how and why we come to care for other people, creatures, and things and have drawn certain contrasts between this view and the empathy-altruism hypothesis. I have argued that the oneness hypothesis offers some significant advantages over the empathy-altruism hypothesis; it allows us to account for a much

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greater range of human concern and avoid the problems empathy poses in regard to our care for non-human animals. I do not, though, intend to imply that the oneness hypothesis offers an exclusively better account of human caring than those that rely upon empathic concern. In many cases, empathy and oneness are related, complementary, and mutually supporting. On the one hand, regarding others as parts of one's life tends to lead one to develop greater empathy with them (though here we are on firm ground only when we talk about other human beings). On the other hand, those toward whom we have empathic concern tend to come to be regarded as parts of our lives: we feel varying degrees of oneness with them. Sometimes empathizing may precede a sense of oneness; other times a sense of oneness gives rise to feelings of empathy. There is a logical connection but no fixed and necessary ordering. Other factors can come into play as well. For example, often our practices or routines establish connections with other people, creatures, or things that are the basis for a sense of oneness or give rise to empathy. We can engage in such practices or routines before having either a sense of oneness or feelings of empathy, but there is a natural relationship among these. Contemporary psychological research on imitation and mimicry shows not only how important these are for empathy and mutual understanding but also how they regularly occur without intention or conscious awareness.[52] Rituals and other kinds of routinized behavior can be understood as intentional policies that tap into this deeper, hard-wired feature of human nature. Oneness or empathy can, of course, and almost always does result in us taking up practices and routines that express and reinforce our sense of oneness or feelings of empathy. There is a natural relationship among these three features of human life but no absolute sequential ordering or necessary connection.[53] Such issues warrant much more systematic study

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[52] For an informative analysis of imitation, see Baaren, et al., "Being Imitated."
[53] There is a parallel here with moral cultivation in general. For example, the practice of rituals, which figure prominently in all forms of Confucianism, often precedes feeling or understanding in the process of cultivating ethical dispositions; in some cases, practice or feeling is largely constitutive of understanding. As Brad Wilburn has

by both philosophers and psychologists. What I hope to have contributed is the idea that oneness

should be a central concern for anyone interested in how and why we care for many of the things

we do.

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argued, these three, practice, feeling, and understanding, take turns and cooperate in the development of virtue and in the larger project of forming and defining a way of life. See his "Moral Self-Improvement" in Brad K. Wilburn, ed., *Moral Cultivation : Essays on the Development of Character and Virtue*, (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007): 71-86.