The Joy of Fish: A Summary Review and Analysis of *Oneness*

In a poetic yet lucid manner, Philip J. Ivanhoe's *Oneness: East Asian Conceptions of Virtue, Happiness, & How We Are All Connected* provides a careful and earnest consideration of the potential implications and ramifications of a oneness hypothesis. In this stunning book he carefully shows a path to living a good life that has roots in traditional East Asian metaphysics, but also takes care to note how such a path can still be found in modern science and society, on an experiential (but perhaps not metaphysical) grounds. He lays out his hypothesis clearly: he begins with a introduction to oneness in Chinese philosophy, continues to views of the self under such a hypothesis, builds upon those grounds to show concerns for self-centeredness, shows how oneness is easily seen in accordance with virtue, begins to bring conceptions of the self and virtuous action together through spontaneity, and finishes with a demonstration of how such conceptions lead to joy. Overall, his purpose is to, quite literally, "open" one's eyes – to provide an ideal, a way of seeing and living that has both traditional and experiential value, and to demonstrate how such a hypothesis can still be deeply relevant to the modern self.

He begins with a demonstration of how oneness, in some form or another, can be found present throughout much of thought. He discusses how this idea that "we…are inextricably intertwined with other people, creatures, and things" has seen various forms of varying intensity.[1] He describes how, despite the commonality with other traditions, many of the traditional Chinese views may be regarded as "heroic…since they cannot easily be reconciled with widely accepted views at the heart of modern science" but takes care to show that oneness is still worthy of consideration, and present in thought spanning Western history as well.[2] He notes that Aristotle's view of the polis was pre-ontological, and that the polis demonstrated a

[1] Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Oneness: East Asian Conceptions of Virtue, Happiness, & How We Are All Connected* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1
[2] Ivanhoe, *Oneness,* 14

possible facet of a oneness hypothesis; he equally reminds the reader that the famous cover of Hobbes' *Leviathan* literally depicted society as one large interconnected man.[3] As such, Ivanhoe began with a consideration that such a conception of oneness, though possibly unpalatable to many, is one that nonetheless deserves an earnest consideration.

Ivanhoe continues with more detailed descriptions of what the self would be, and how it can be understood as such. He highlights throughout the entirety of the book how many descriptions are, if not validated by then at least supportive of conceptions of oneness and of a subsequent self. He describes the incredibly powerful affect of loss as a means of understanding the inextricability of oneness; he describes notepads and memory-drives as a means of enlarging the concept of cognition.[4] Such examples function as support of a oneness hypothesis in that both entail an enlargement of what one considers the self. He then spends time specifically demonstrating the neo-Confucian views of the self. For this tradition, there is an incredible importance on hierarchy and patterning. The neo-Confucians take an "all in each" approach to the self, in that the patterning and hierarchy of Nature are present in us, as parts of such a patterning.[5] He pulls conceptions of hierarchy for neo-Confucians away from modern conceptions of hierarchy as subjugating or oppressive, instead referring to a naturally understood "hierarchy of care."[6] In this way, the hierarchy of Nature is present in oneself; just as one trims hair and nails, there is a lived reality where people care about some things more than others. To not care for another person then would be akin to having a paralyzed limb: "one who was 'numb or unfeeling' towards the people, creatures, and things of the world was like a person with a paralyzed limb."[7] With a neo-Confucian view of oneness, the human subject is part of the

[3] Ivanhoe, 17
[4] Ivanhoe, 34
[5] Ivanhoe, 22
[6] Ivanhoe, 47
[7] Ivanhoe, *Oneness,* 48

patterning of the world, and that pattern comes to being in and is formative for humans. He concludes with a note that "there is nothing incoherent or impractical with living one's life as if one were a traditional Buddhist, Daoist, or neo-Confucian," highlighting what was described earlier as his careful consideration of how such a hypothesis is applicable outside those traditions.[8] In total, his sketch of a self within oneness is one where the self is enlarged and expanded; the self includes and is constitutive of more than a single conscious body, and is patterned by and included within the patterning of Nature.

After his treatment of the self, Ivanhoe then shows how such a treatment can be seen in the face of selfishness and self-centeredness. The distinction between the two is such that "selfishness is interpersonal" whereas "self-centeredness is primarily a view about the self."[9] As such, selfishness is a problem of behavior while self-centeredness is a problem of understanding one's self. As with the previous chapter, Ivanhoe then dives into neo-Confucian thought to flesh out oneness as related to selfishness and self-centeredness. He describes the metaphor of the mirror commonly used in neo-Confucian tradition, where "the responsiveness of pure knowing [is likened] to the reflective quality of a mirror – a metaphor that captures its spontaneous responsiveness and lack of personal point of view."[10] In this way, the issues of overly valued conceptions of a singular and important self would be dishonest means to understand what the self is – like a mirror does not offer prejudice, so too does the self not necessitate a privileging of an individual subject. For neo-Confucian thought then, self-centeredness is quite truly the heart of suffering and misery as one neglects and forgoes the truth of how one is. Yet – Ivanhoe is clear that this does not require a dissolution of the self, nor does it portray altruism as simply helping oneself. Just as one requires an overly valorized self to be self-centered, so too does one

[8] Ivanhoe, 56
[9] Ivanhoe, 59
[10] Ivanhoe, 65

require some sense of an individual self in order to behave in a manner possibly altruistic: "claims about purely selfless action lose sight of the fact that every intentional action requires an agent who decides and desires to act in a particular way."[11] Ivanhoe is clear: oneness is not the obliteration of the self into a whole, but rather a means of approaching the self as non-central or unbiased as it is inherently connected to and with others. He writes so that one recognizes "the need not to do away with but to *rethink* the meaning of notions like selfishness, selfless-ness, and altruism."[12] Under such treatment, if the *self* is to be reconceived, then so to must notions of selfishness and selflessness. He concludes by noting how "our physical separation from the rest of the world leads to the mistaken view that we exist as unconnected and independent creatures," once again highlighting both the reality of a separate individual subject (a contained body) but also the inherent and fundamental connection such a body has to the world it is patterned into.

Following his dissection of ways to envision the self, Ivanhoe then works to show that a conception of the self in oneness offers insight into virtue and empathy. He begins with a reference to a consideration of virtue he finds problematic: virtue as purely corrective. While he denies that virtue must be viewed as a means to correct a fault, he takes note that such a view nonetheless demonstrates a truth that "becoming fully virtuous will require overcoming certain excesses or deficiencies."[13] Ivanhoe is outlining how "one cannot *really* possess moral knowledge if one has not properly engaged in moral activity," an idea that acknowledges that there is indeed a required effort to be moral and virtuous.[14] This shows not only that the attainment of virtue requires work, a view shared by Aristotle, but that virtue is only truly *lived through* such work. Within the oneness hypothesis then, this work makes clear and intelligible sense: if one is deeply connected to others, then by *acting outwards* towards them one is truly

[11] Ivanhoe, *Oneness*, 73
[12] Ivanhoe, 71
[13] Ivanhoe, *Oneness*, 86
[14] Ivanhoe, 67

engaging in moral action. This is clearly evident in conceptions of empathy. Ivanhoe notes that one may view "the foundation for our connection to others [as] psychological rather than metaphysical in nature," a view that is supported by many psychological studies of empathy and altruism.[15] In this regard, a moral and empathetic action nonetheless arises from a basis of being one with another; there is an "enlarged sense of self."[16] He teases out this enlargement to some extent, notably when he describes how "people often make claims about a certain place or city being 'in my blood and bones.'"[17] In this description, one notices echoes of *fudō* as he describes the intimate connection one feels to one's environment as constitutive of who one is. While the psychology in this section could be rather difficult to make headway through, Ivanhoe still keeps the reader grounded in constantly imagining the self as expansive. Just as one ought to care for oneself and cultivate virtue in oneself, one equally ought to give life to that virtue through action and engagement with the people and things that constitute one's environment.

In his penultimate section, Ivanhoe paints a stunning picture in one of the most compelling sections of the book. While the chapter on virtue could, at times, become cumbersome to grasp both psychologically and structurally, the following chapter on spontaneity was powerful, clear, and insightful. Ivanhoe distinguishes between two conceptions of spontaneity: untutored and cultivated, roughly split as Daoist and Confucian. In untutored spontaneity there is a sense that one with a self-centered view manifesting in selfish and narcissistic action must have "'lost touch' with an innate and spontaneous capacity for empathy and care," requiring that one "pare away or eliminate the 'unnatural' impediments."[18] There is the idea that oneness represents a natural harmony with things, a harmony that can only be obfuscated and confused but not changed or altered. The intimate connection between things is a

[15] Ivanhoe, 90
[16] Ivanhoe, 93
[17] Ivanhoe, 92
[18] Ivanhoe, *Oneness*, 106,107

natural view of how things are – one must simply return to this primordial way of being. This means that if one were to take pure experience, as it appears to us, stripping away any attempts at cognizing over it, then one would recognize the absurdity of extreme individuation in the face of their raw experience.

In cultivated spontaneity there is the idea that one must internalize patterning to the point where it *becomes* natural, and from there experience a creative spontaneity. Ivanhoe uses the example of a pianist to illustrate this, noting that the beauty of a piano solo shows the "ability to engage in such spontaneous play [and] presupposes an extended period of learning, practice, and innovation," where one who internalizes such learning and practice "will be able to amend, bend, and at times suspend the norms of ritual action in light of a greater understanding of what ritual aims to achieve."[19] This is the state of mastery that Ivanhoe shows as commonly experienced; there is an experiential validity to the understanding that mastery at spontaneous levels arises out of an ingrained pattern or structure of doing, an understanding applicable to artists, sages, or language speakers. Once one has mastered grammar, linguistically and socially, one can master communication, literally and spatially. The grammar of sentence will allow for one to create poetry; the grammar of dinner party will allow one to appreciate the guests. A naturalization of structure can open one to creative spontaneity. Picasso is a shining example: his late art was *unbelievably* radical and new, yet it arose out of a lifetime of constant practice and learning of perfect forms. Make no mistake – Picasso had the knowledge and skill to paint beautifully realistically, but in true Confucian fashion was able to enact a creativity through his internalization of technique and structure. Ivanhoe then wraps up the two conceptions nicely, writing that both spontaneity's presuppose a structure that one is guided by, where "in the case of untutored spontaneity, Nature provides this larger context, guiding pattern, and energizing force;

[19] Ivanhoe, 110, 112

in the case of cultivated spontaneity, culture and tradition of one sort or another play this role."[20] It becomes clear how such acceptance of a universal patterning and openness to the immediacy of things results in spontaneous benevolence towards others, a natural upsurge of compassion patterned either naturally or culturally - the distinction between which is deeply porous regardless.

In his final full chapter, Ivanhoe then links these conceptions to happiness. He is careful to note that such happiness is an "emotional state" like that of *euidamonia*, where the aim is not so much to have happy moments or do happy activities but to *live well*, and from that derive a metaphysical comfort.[21] He first discusses Kongzi's views on happiness, explicitly saying here that "joy is the feeling that one is living well."[22] Happiness is found in one realizing how one is; in the context of this book, happiness arises out of an awareness of the oneness of being and self. Ivanhoe writes how "true joy is fully experienced only when we wholeheartedly give ourselves over to the Way and lose ourselves in its spontaneous play," showing that happiness comes a) from a 'giving over' as a means of loosening one's grip on an individuated self b) from 'losing oneself' as a means of more fully embracing an expanded self with others c) from engaging in the spontaneity of such a giving over and d) from the inherent playfulness and beauty of living.[23] Oneness then provides a genuine framework to metaphysically understand one's role in the patterning of the world, and finding one's place in such a way will inevitably lead to a sense of wellbeing and true happiness. In a 'untutored' way, one will be happy when one recognizes how oneself is deeply in connection with and formed by nature; one will feel content knowing their constituency with their environment. In a 'cultivated' way, one will be happy when one realizes their role in the grand patterning of their social and cultural relationships. The way in which this

[20] Ivanhoe, *Oneness*, 118
[21] Ivanhoe, 130
[22] Ivanhoe, 136
[23] Ivanhoe, 133

"happiness" takes form is not, as Ivanhoe is careful to note, a happiness of immediate pleasures. This is demonstrated in Zhuangzi, here Ivanhoe emphasizing the focus on decluttering and naturalness. Joy is what is at the root of human nature as lived with others; if one lives in a truly "human" way, a way connected to and part of one's natural world, then one will feel true happiness. Ivanhoe writes that the Daoist would "abandon the frenzied and pointless rush to accumulate wealth, power, prestige, and all the other goods commonly associated with 'happiness'" and cut down to the joyful oneness at the center of one's being. [24] If one returns to the natural state of being, if one truly returns to the natural way of humans, they will be happy; yet "people become accustomed to the misery they create and lose sight of their true nature, which is the only source of reliable and stable joy."[25] What Ivanhoe is doing here is to note that such conceptions of oneness can provide a comfort in knowing how one fits into the world. If one sees the world as connected and patterned, and works to be a thriving and compassionate part of the pattern as is natural, then one will feel content and secure in their life and cannot help but feel happy.

There is much to be taken away from such a book, but the most potent realization for me can be found in the final page: "oneness as an aspiration rather than a destination…must remain open-ended ideals."[26] Ivanhoe is careful not to prescribe a way of life – to do so would be contrary to all conceptions of oneness he espouses. Just as the Daoist would find slivers of truth in various positions, so too is Ivanhoe working to provide a means of going through the world, not as a prescription, but as a powerful possibility. In a modern society where there is an *incredible* weight on "the frenzied and pointless rush to accumulate wealth, power, prestige," this book hits close to home. One is not a disconnected subject -- there are many truths that one can

[24] Ivanhoe, *Oneness*, 137
[25] Ivanhoe, 141
[26] Ivanhoe, 154

experientially notice to emphasize this fact. Ivanhoe is calling for one to drill down into their experience, to truly allow it to present itself as lived, and to then consider the ways in which such a pure experience inclines a healthy consideration of the oneness hypothesis. In many beliefs, in many forms, across many traditions, and throughout multiple psychological studies, one sees the possibility of the beauty of such a view of the world. As this author knows, one feels connection to one's twin sister beyond any conception of connection less than one of oneness – there is an inextricability of selves, as clear individuals, with an undeniable sharing of being. One can then feel the same way for one's town, for one's wintery environment, and perhaps even for one's school. Oneness is a way of viewing things, and whether one agrees with the metaphysics, it is undeniably a beautiful way of being.

A final note: Ivanhoe seems ready to allow others to take his work and apply it in a hundred myriad ways. As such, there is a consideration that Ivanhoe clearly touches at - without expansion - that is undeniably critical to the human today: the relationship with the internet. If one takes the phenomenological aim of true experience and the neo-Confucian recognition of pure knowing to one's encounter at a cybernetic level, one will encounter a radically new grammar for oneness. Yes, one's cognition is expanded outside the skull whenever one's writes notes on a computer and treats the hard drive as memory neurons, but if one accepts the validity of claims of oneness at a metaphysical and experiential level then one sees the horizon of the self encountered in entirely new ways on the internet. Throughout so much of lecture, there were many moments where technology was brought up, as a question or means of understanding a topic. In many ways, these traditions and hypothesis offer much in the way of simply mapping their conceptions onto the realm of the internet: one feels connected to the people on one's phone, one experiences changes in moods and behaviors due to online interactions, one can even

organize in a group and compete in complex, teamed, competitive videogames at a level of spontaneity and rapidity of frame-perfect timing that strikes resonance with Zhuangzi's butcher. People feel *connected* over the internet because they truly are connected on some level. One can listen to, speak with, write to, read about, and flirt with others through the internet, directly experiencing a dissolution of a contained and fully individuated self.

Yet for as much resonance as there is, there is also an undeniable dissonance. The internet *is not* the experience of living – there is an inherent mediation present both somatosensorily in a touchscreen and cognitively in the "back-end" patterning of highly complicated algorithm. As such, while conceptions of oneness as discussed are highly mappable onto conceptions of the internet, there is still distinctive difference. From a conception of oneness, how does one approach the internet? In a way, one could make an argument for the internet as providing another sphere to comprehend oneness as separate from Nature and culture, as a new environment with entirely novel means of connection and disconnection, as a new area of consideration that can be neither written-off as inapplicable nor hailed as entirely revolutionary. It is clear then that a question bubbles forth in the wake of reading *Oneness* in a book and writing this essay on a computer: how can one use this hypothesis to learn and engage more fully with our relationships to the internet? The connections and harmonies are as evident as the dissonance and inexplicabilities, and one suddenly feels perched at the bottom of a tall stair ascending in darkness, wondering where to place one's feet, dimly aware of the shape of the steps as both hesitantly familiar and entirely unknown.

References

1. Ivanhoe, Philip J. *Oneness: East Asian Conceptions of Virtue, Happiness, & How We Are All Connected*. New York: Oxford University Press. 2017