

# On Ivanhoe on Oneness

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## 1. Introduction

P. J. Ivanhoe's *Oneness* is a bold and refreshing book.<sup>1</sup> He paints a picture of the mutual interconnection of things in the world and of the ethical implications of this. To do so, he draws on certain aspects of Eastern philosophy, especially neo-Confucianism, and philosophers such as Zhu Xi and Wang Yang Ming. But the book is no simple textual exegesis: it aims to bring these aspects of Eastern philosophy into dialogue with 21st Century Western philosophy. There is much in the book which I find admirable, and there is much to be learned from it. I will leave the scholarly aspects of Ivanhoe's book for others to comment on. In what follows, I wish to explore some of the details of the metaphysical and ethical picture that Ivanhoe paints.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. The Oneness Hypothesis

This picture is built around what Ivanhoe calls the 'oneness hypothesis'. As a first cut, he explains this as follows (p. 1):

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 other people, creatures, and things in the world; its core assertion is the claim that we—and in particular our personal welfare or happiness—are extricably intertwined with other people, creatures, and things.

A few things will be clear from even this rough statement of the hypothesis. First, it is, in part, a view about how things in the world are. That is, it has a descriptive component. Second, the way the world is, is meant to ground an ethics. That is, it has a normative component.

One thing that will not be clear is whether the relation of oneness is supposed to hold between literally all things, or just some of them. Nearly always, whenever a

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<sup>1</sup> Ivanhoe (2017). Page and chapter references are to this.

<sup>2</sup> And let me make it clear right at the start that I am in complete sympathy not only with Ivanhoe's bringing together Eastern and Western philosophy, but with the the picture of the world which he paints, as will be clear to anyone who has read my own thoughts on the matter in Part 3 of Priest (2014).

phrase of the form ‘other Xs’ is used in the book there is no quantifier: *all*, *some*, *most*?<sup>3</sup> However, one thing is clear: once we have fixed on the relevant things, it applies to *all* of them. (Though the ethical component can apply, of course, only to some things: the sort of thing that are ethical agents: people.) Let us call this *universality*.<sup>4</sup>

According to the oneness hypothesis, all things (of the relevant kind) are one. But what does it mean for two things to be one? Ivanhoe enumerates five possibilities (p. 19):

- (1) They are literally identical.
- (2) They are ‘inextricably intertwined’ with one another.
- (3) They are part of an organic whole, such that losing a part will damage the whole.
- (4) They are part of a single ecosystem.
- (5) They are part of a society, club, tradition, etc.

Now, these things are really rather different. That all things are one in the sense of 1 is crazy. If it were true, my left foot would be literally identical with my right foot, and I would be a monopod. Oneness in the sense of 3 implies that the whole is an organism of some sort. The view is not crazy, but it is a view of the cosmos that no physicist is likely to take seriously. 4 and 5 differ, in that 5 applies only to people, whereas 4 was presumably the case even before there were any sentient beings in the cosmos. So which of these does Ivanhoe endorse?

Ivanhoe hedges his bets on this, saying merely that we have here a family of views (e.g., pp. 1, 150). Perhaps; but if one is going to advocate something, it should be clear what one is advocating. These views have very different consequences, and, depending on how their details are cashed out, may not even be consistent with one another.

On the whole, Ivanhoe’s preferred view seems to be 2 (p. 30):

The core and most characteristic assertion of the oneness hypothesis is that we are inextricably intertwined with other people, creatures, and things in ways that dispose us to care for the rest [the] of world much as we care for ourselves.

And this is indeed the position one would take if one were coming from a neo-Confucian direction. As Ivanhoe glosses neo-Confucianism many times, each thing may have different matter (*qi*), but there is a single form (pattern, *li*) which is in each of them—or maybe each has a form that is in all of them.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Another example (p. 34): given the oneness hypothesis, ‘we see the other people, creatures, and things in the world as parts of ourselves, in the sense that we are all part of shared, much grander wholes, and as integral to the health, well-being, and happiness of both ourselves and the larger wholes of which they are parts’.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Given this general picture, neo-Confucians have not only a more metaphysical robust sense of oneness [that their Confucian predecessors], but also a new and strong sense justification for universal care’ (p. 24). I will come back to this matter.

<sup>5</sup> I wasn’t clear which of these is the case. Sometimes there is a reference to a form (sing.), e.g., pp. 27, 46, 120; sometimes to forms (pl.), e.g., pp. 23, 68, 144; and sometimes to both in the same sentence, p. 45.

The next obvious question is why one should believe such a view. Ivanhoe recognises that the neo-Confucian *li/qi* metaphysics is unlikely to be persuasive to most people nowadays,<sup>6</sup> so we have to look elsewhere (p. 27):

... the question and challenge for modern conceptions of oneness is how to replace claims about ... universally shared principle or pattern and *qi* with an account of the world that is consistent with our best science, but still underwrites and supports an imperative to care.

If one cannot do this, the quotation goes on to explain, we might adopt the view as a matter of taste, but we cannot urge others to adopt the view on the ground of its truth. A lot is at stake here then. So where do we look?

### 3. Physical and Biological Science

Ivanhoe looks to science itself. As he says in his concluding remarks (p. 151 f.):

[A]s has been argued earlier, modern science supports a number of contemporary versions of the oneness hypothesis; we are in fact connected to other people, creatures, and things in the complex webs of relationships: biologically, socially, psychologically, and intellectually... When we come to understand the true nature of what we are as individual organisms and as a species, we cannot fail to acknowledge our connections and interdependencies with other parts of the world, and this can serve and in fact does incline many of us toward enhanced levels of care for other people, creatures and things.

So let us look at how science may support the picture. Let me stress that I agree entirely with the case Ivanhoe makes against the individualism rampant in many modern societies. My concern in what follows is how far the picture can be pushed.

Let us start with the physical sciences. Physics applies to everything, so in the case, we are dealing with all things in the most general sense. And indeed, the laws of Special Relativity assure us that each object in the universe is causally related with every other object—at least every other object within its light cone. And some physicists have suggested that every particle in the cosmos is entangled, in the sense of Quantum Mechanics, with every other.

Looking to these kinds of connections would be a bad bet, though. Physics cannot ground ethics. Physics tells us what *is* the case, and it notoriously seems to be the case that one cannot get an *ought* out of an *is*, as Hume put it. What happens is one thing; what should happen is a quite different matter.

Perhaps one could contest the *Humean* dictum; but the prospects look bleak for wringing out from the physical sciences moral consequences of the required kind. Neither Special Relativity nor Quantum Mechanics offers the prospect of delivering anything about an ethical relationship between myself and another person, forest, or planet.

Another place to look is, not to physics and the natural sciences, but to the biological sciences and, especially, ecology. And Ivanhoe does invoke ecological consideration at many points (e.g., pp. 8, 54, 74). As is clear, moving from physics to ecology delivers

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<sup>6</sup> I am perhaps one of the few Western philosophers who does subscribe to something like this. See Priest (2014), Part 3, which endorses a view very similar to the Huayan Buddhist view, which informed much of neo-Confucian metaphysics.

an enormous restriction of the oneness hypothesis. The neo-Confucian view is that *all* things are intertwined. Restricting ourselves to the biological/ecological forces us to restrict this *all* to things on the Earth—or perhaps a little way beyond.

But at least we are now dealing with human beings as such. True, we still have to get from what these sciences tells us to be so to ethical consequences, but there is more hope of bridging the gap here. A very plausible ethical principle, and one which Ivanhoe endorses (ch. 6), is that ethics is about human flourishing—*eudaimonia*, as Aristotle refers to it. Exactly what this means is certainly disputable,<sup>7</sup> but the exact details are not relevant here or in what follows.

Whatever flourishing is, biology and ecology tell us what it is for biological organisms to be able to survive and reproduce; and this is, presumably, a necessary condition for anything that counts as flourishing. Given this, ethical consequences do seem to follow. If I and my species wish to have any kind of life that is not seriously degraded—or maybe any life at all—we need to stop melting the ice caps, destroying the rain forests, and so on.

But the biological sciences would not seem to take us far into ethics, simply because, whatever flourishing is, there has to be a great deal more to it than simply staying alive or reproducing the species. And ecology doesn't have much to say about these things.

Moreover, return to the universality of oneness. If flourishing is at the core of its ethics, this has to be mutual flourishing. Now, it is true that my flourishing—or at least the flourishing of my grandchildren—depends on preserving what is left of the world's rain forest. But it is hardly the case that the flourishing of that rain forest depends on my flourishing. My life or death would make very little difference to it. Moreover, it may well be the case that the rain forest would flourish better if certain members of the human species—namely those that destroy the forests for profit—ceased to exist, and so to flourish.<sup>8</sup>

What's more, the human species has flourished, and can flourish much further, by eradicating noxious parasites of various kinds, the bacteria which carry infectious diseases, and so on. That is, human flourishing depends on destroying various species, or at least, restricting them to a Natural History Museum.

#### 4. Social Sciences

So the physical and biological sciences, it would seem, don't get us very far. Where we face real prospects of success is with the social sciences. True, this forces an even greater narrowing of the scope of the oneness hypothesis to just people and their societies. But in return, we obtain very significant scope for moral import. For the social sciences concern what people think, what makes them happy or unhappy, how they earn a living, etc. This is the stuff of which any notion of flourishing is made.

Unsurprisingly, then, Ivanhoe frequently appeals to the social sciences.<sup>9</sup> And here, there is a great deal of evidence, cited by Ivanhoe (see below), that the flourishing of

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<sup>7</sup> As Ivanhoe notes, p. 155, nn. 1, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Ivanhoe notes (e.g., p. 49 f.) that neo-Confucianism is not committed to the view that all components of a system are equally important. Thus, we protect our head with our hands. But this should not be taken to entail that things can simply be sacrificed. 'What a proposed, modern conception of oneness brings with it is a greater sense of shared identity and destiny between self and world and an imperative to find balanced, *mutually beneficial*, and harmonious ways of living together' (p. 77, my italics).

<sup>9</sup> '[W]e have shown that . . . [conceptions of a properly modest expression of the oneness hypothesis] find considerable support in a wide range of biological, psychological, anthropological, and sociological facts about human beings and the world in which they live' (p. 124).

each person depends on the flourishing of others—at least some others. Much of the evidence is plain common-sense. No person can survive in their early years without carers; no one can enjoy the pleasures of the sport of cricket or the game of go unless that there are people to teach them, practice with, etc; no one can enjoy the music and other arts unless there are people to create and perform them, and so on.

Much of the relevant evidence is much more scientific, though, such as sociological and psychological studies of the effects of solitary confinement, being part of a functional social group, the importance of friendship, etc.

But it is not clear that the considerations here are sufficient to take us to the ethical claim that all (people this time) should flourish. Given the socio-psychological considerations just mooted, it is clear that my flourishing depends on the flourishing of *some* other humans. But come back to universality again: it is far from clear that these considerations universalise to all people.

Take, for example a slave owner and their slaves. This might be Ancient Athens, Antebellum USA, or even contemporary sexual slavery. It is clear that the lot of the slave and the lot of slave owner are deeply entangled. The slave owner depends on the work of the slave to make money; the slave depends on the slave owner to provide at least enough resources to live. It is not clear that this mere entanglement provides the slave owner with any reason to look after the well-being of the slave. (If they did, they would clearly free them.) Indeed, it would appear to be in their interest to exploit the slave's labour as much as possible—especially if there is a ready supply of slaves, so that any particular slave is expendable.

Indeed, what these social sciences deliver may well speak against the flourishing of all. The earth is rapidly becoming over-populated. There are currently about seven and a half billion people on the planet. At current rates, by the end of the century this will have become over 10 billion. It is unlikely that the Earth has the resources to support 30% more people. It would therefore seem to be in the interests of those with a high standard of living, and who have the requisite power, to institute a program of eugenics, or even genocide, to decrease the world's population and keep it from rising further. They should prevent a large chunk of the world's people from flourishing.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, it is far from clear how one can appeal to considerations in the social sciences to extend the ethical considerations required by the oneness hypothesis beyond the domains of one's class, race, or nation. Thus, consider the scientific evidence cited by Ivanhoe. We have a natural tendency to feel empathy for others (p. 90). Some others, certainly. All others? No. Racism, xenophobia, misogyny—not to mention vindictiveness and schadenfreude, seem equally natural human dispositions—at least to many humans. Or sociobiology has explained altruism in genetic terms (p. 91). Maybe, but only to those who share a significant genetic overlap with the agent (e.g., blood relatives), or at least are part of their social group (p. 6).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Let me make it clear that I am not endorsing such action, which I would find abhorrent. I am simply pointing out that the mere fact of social entanglement does not imply the flourishing of *all* people.

<sup>11</sup> 'We can add to these points by noting that human beings clearly do not tend to identify themselves as deracinated "persons", but instead in terms of familiar, larger social relations, groups, institutions, cultures. We are daughters, sons, husbands, wives, mothers, and fathers; we belong to this or that synagogue, mosque, temple of church; we are black, Latino, Asian, or white; French, Chinese, Croatian, Korean, or German; we support the Red Sox or the Yankees, etc', (p. 55). Note that these groups exist by *excluding* others.

## 5. Giving up Truth

So scientific considerations, at least of the kind we have looked at so far, seem to be coming up short of what is required for what Ivanhoe has in mind. This suggests another possibility: just cease to worry about the grounds of the oneness hypothesis. And Ivanhoe does moot the possibility of something like this (p. 56):

While radical claims of identity between self and the rest of the world fade into implausibility, there is nothing incoherent or impractical with living one's life as if one were a traditional Buddhist, Daoist, or neo-Confucian. One can be inspired by such traditional visions and lead at least one's moral life in the light of these visions. One can choose to follow such a path, perhaps motivated by the happy consequences of such a life or the sublime feelings it generates within. One might believe, like Pascal, that immersing oneself in such a form of life, by embracing what one at least initially regards as improbable, impossible, or even a hallucination, one will over time feel it as true and act accordingly, perhaps forgetting why one ever worried so much about whether or not it was literally true.

Certainly one can do this. But as a move in the ethical game, it is woefully inadequate. One can apply this idea to the noble sort of end that Ivanhoe envisages; but unfortunately, exactly the same can be said about less noble ends. One can apply it to the ideology of being a member of IS, a member of the Spanish Inquisition, or a Donald Trump supporter. To give up truth, and the evidence for it, is to cast oneself into the void of ethical nihilism.

## 6. Conclusion

So where does this leave us? What we have seen is that appealing to the scientific considerations of the social sciences, or even these augmented by the biological sciences, seems to fall short of what is needed.

There is, however, another possibility: to go back to metaphysical considerations about the nature of the things in the world. These, after all, were what was driving the neo-Confucians. True, I doubt that the neo-Confucian considerations themselves would persuade many people nowadays. The notion of *qi* is, after all, a proto-scientific hypothesis, and not compatible with the science of our day. But why limit the domain of knowledge to science? Philosophical considerations *also* tell us what the world is like. And metaphysics is no more a static thing than science. It may well be that the best way to develop the oneness hypothesis is with novel developments in this area of human thought.

## References

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