

***Oneness: East Asian Conceptions of Virtue, Happiness, and How We Are All Connected*, by Philip J. Ivanhoe. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. 208 pp.**

Alicia Hennig, Southeast University Nanjing

Being the elementary basis of various Asian philosophies, such as Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism, which represent belief systems but secular ones, the idea of *oneness* builds on a conception of the self that goes beyond the limits of the individual. Here, the self is seen as something inextricably connected with other human beings (beyond blood relations), nonhuman beings, and nature through a “shared connection,” a feeling of belonging to something larger. Hence, a feeling of care, engaging with others, and being just and fair in one’s actions are natural results of internalizing and living up to this idea. Most importantly, the idea of oneness does not rule out individuality and does not subsume the individual within a large and single group of all beings, nonhuman beings, and nature.

Philip J. Ivanhoe’s work on oneness does not aim to convince us to embrace and internalize this idea immediately. Rather, he bridges the gap to contemporary thinking in Western society and provides some scientific evidence that supports the idea of oneness, cutting through its alienness and making it more plausible. Over six chapters he explains the idea of oneness, discusses it in the context of the self, selfishness, and self-centeredness, and expands on its connections to virtue, spontaneity, and happiness.

Although the concept of oneness can be linked to a number of theories according to Ivanhoe, he illuminates only one theoretical origin: Neo-Confucianism within Chinese philosophy. This philosophy constitutes the foundation of his presentation of such concepts as the self, happiness, and harmony (amongst others), which are then contrasted with definitions and concepts from a Western angle.

Ivanhoe’s starting point is that oneness implies the concept of an expanded self, which is not only reflected in Asian philosophies but also supported by the sciences, such as neuroscience (the brain not as a single entity, but as an expanded, dispersed sub-system, which is continuously and dynamically interacting with other subsystems). Ivanhoe uses the expanded-self concept to criticize what he calls “hyper-individualist notions” advocated, for example, by Nozick and Rawls in contemporary Western political philosophy or by Freud in Western psychology. He claims these hyper-individualist notions are creating dichotomies between mind, body, and emotions, resulting in destructive misconceptions of the self, leading to selfishness and self-centeredness (discussed in more detail in chapters two and three) and eventually blocking the way to a fulfilling and good life.

In the three remaining chapters, Ivanhoe links virtue, spontaneity, and happiness with the concept of oneness. Virtues are connected with oneness as manifestations of positive innate tendencies that make us fulfill our human nature (Mengzi) or make us part of a larger universal scheme (Xunzi), as in Neo-Confucianism. More specifically, virtuous behavior in Neo-Confucianism is seen as the manifestation of the

“unity of knowing and acting” (Wang Yangming). With regard to virtuous behavior, spontaneity plays a major role, as it is seen as the internalization of virtue, which finds its expression in spontaneous benevolent and kind actions. Reaching happiness, or *le* 乐, which does not refer to superficial, ephemeral pleasure but presents a condition of life (similar to Aristotle’s *eudaimonia*), is the ultimate goal to be attained. By overcoming self-centeredness, which limits the individual to fulfilling mainly material desires and pleasing mostly oneself, one can lead a good and, in that sense, happy life.

Accordingly, virtue, especially when manifested in spontaneous, benevolent, and kind behavior, helps us to overcome our self-centeredness and enables a shared connection to feeling “one” with others, which eventually brings us closer to *le*, a happy life. Ultimately, oneness is the result of overcoming self-centeredness, allowing us to become fully human, which is essential for a good life from the view of Chinese philosophy.

With regard to the science on the idea of oneness, Ivanhoe draws on empirical evidence from neuroscience, neurobiology (the phenomenon of mimicry and imitation), evolutionary biology, and ecological theory (specifically environmental ethics), as well as psychology (the link between empathy and oneness). Additionally, he derives a number of philosophical arguments in support of the oneness hypothesis from Buddhism, Neo-Confucianism, and representatives of Western philosophy including Dennett and Ricoeur.

The idea of oneness could potentially also be applied in business ethics, thereby providing us with an alternative perspective on ethical business beyond the argument that business is embedded in society. The argument of embeddedness is, for example, reflected in the “social license to operate” that some business ethicists advocate (see, for example, Demuijnck and Festerling 2016). Here, business is essentially seen as part of the larger society, and hence needs to adhere to the same ethical rules. Maintaining a social license to operate can be achieved, in practice, through implementing a more pragmatic stakeholder approach or a more politically oriented corporate citizenship approach to managing the sociopolitical relations of a company. In reality, however, both approaches are often implemented in combination, representing different operational aspects and responsibilities of a corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategy. Yet, the idea of oneness applied in business ethics reaches further than just embeddedness proposed by sociopolitically oriented approaches, such as the social license to operate, stakeholder approaches, or corporate citizenship.

In contrast, applying the idea of oneness implies a humanistic approach, as it is grounded in the feeling of a shared connection with others based on identification. Thus, this approach introduces a more emotional concept into business ethics. It reminds us of our very human essence, which is, next to our capacity for reason, our emotions and the ability to reflect upon those. Accordingly, emotions need to be acknowledged as a driver for more ethical behavior in business ethics. Business ethics today cannot rest alone on the pillars of Western philosophy, such as rationalism and individualism. In the age of globalization, diversity within the business ethics discipline could be further promoted by including concepts derived from other cultural settings, such as the Asian idea of oneness.

Furthermore, oneness reminds us not only of our connections with other human beings, but also with nonhuman beings and nature, thereby going beyond the primarily anthropocentric perspective present in work on stakeholder theory or corporate citizenship. As Ivanhoe observes, in environmental ethics this oneness-related perspective is foundational; a broader view that transcends anthropocentrism to include nonhuman beings and nature is essential to effectively tackle pressing issues related to climate change and related challenges.

Lastly, Ivanhoe's discussion of virtue ethics in the context of Chinese philosophy is an important reminder that this ethical approach did not emerge only in Western philosophy. Virtue ethics is far from being a singular concept; even in Western philosophy we can observe variation. For example, Aristotle's mean, Thomas of Aquinas' four cardinal virtues, and Adam Smith's prudence all present different approaches to and definitions of virtue. In Chinese philosophy, whether it is Confucianism, Neo-Confucianism, or Daoism, spontaneity contributes a vital element to virtuous action since spontaneous benevolent action is considered more natural, authentic, and honest than meticulously adhering to rules (see, for example, a classic contrast in Western philosophy when it comes to ethical behavior: extrinsic rule-orientation in Kant vs. intrinsic virtue-orientation in Aristotle).

Hence, with respect to virtues in business ethics, we should allow for a variety of virtue ethics frameworks to enrich this field of inquiry. Virtues derived from the various streams of Chinese philosophy can open up entirely new avenues in business ethics. For example, what is the difference in management if virtuous behavior is based on values derived from the idea of oneness in Chinese philosophy, such as spontaneity and effortlessness, or harmony and balance (but not in the sense of Aristotle's mean), or humbleness and modesty in leadership, compared to Western virtue ethics approaches in business?

Lastly, ethical principles derived from Chinese philosophy can most importantly also advance business ethics research and practice in China, in places of Chinese diaspora and in countries like South Korea and Japan, which are also highly influenced by Confucian ethics. For example, other Chinese philosophical concepts related to oneness, such as *tian ren yi hi* 天人合一, the unity of heaven, earth, and the human being, can be linked with Western concepts of sustainability, making those more comprehensive. Moreover, Confucian ethics are currently finding their way back into business ethics research through more recently discovered ethical business practices in China, such as *ru shang* 儒商, the Confucian entrepreneur (originally: Confucian merchant).

The topic of Ivanhoe's book is inspiring, as it provides us with a new perspective, which appears to be plausible even from a rather conservative, Western point of view. Furthermore, it offers an important contribution to comparative philosophy and business ethics. It discusses a relevant concept from Asian traditions and links it with notions in (contemporary) Western philosophy and insights from other disciplines, including psychology, neuroscience, or biology. Yet, interesting though it is, this work has shortcomings.

To start with, there are limitations to the depth of Ivanhoe's contribution. With respect to the idea of oneness, the book is superficial in two ways. First, the title of

this book alludes to “East Asian conceptions,” whereas, in fact, Ivanhoe primarily concentrates on merely one source of origin, Neo-Confucianism, which presents a very specific understanding of this idea. Since this could be the first book on the idea of oneness that is philosophical rather than spiritual or mystical, the audience would have benefited from a broader treatment offering wider representation of East Asian philosophies, including Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, and Neo-Confucianism, and their respective views on oneness (instead of prioritizing the latter). Moreover, since Ivanhoe asserts that the idea of oneness is actually quite complex, a broader discussion would have helped to better locate this concept and its meaning in the field of Asian philosophy more generally.

Second, Ivanhoe provides scientific support from various disciplines, which though commendable in purpose seems superficial. For example, regarding the existence of an expanded self, he refers to concepts derived from neuroscience (the brain is a dispersed subsystem), philosophy (the self is not a separated, single entity in Buddhism), psychology (empathy), and ecology (evolutionary biology acknowledges the extensive and complex ways of interactions between humans, nonhuman beings, and nature). Although these concepts are substantiated through the arguments of one or two authors within each discipline, the presentation feels somewhat one-sided in light of the absence of various, perhaps even contrary, perspectives on that matter.

In addition, although Philip Ivanhoe’s book represents an interesting attempt to link oneness with virtues, spontaneity, and happiness (all of which he plausibly links with each other), another, at least equally important, idea is missing. Being a substantial part of the entire discussion around oneness, the idea of “identification with others” is only briefly discussed in the context of empathy and sympathy by referring to Hume and Smith. A discussion of what it means to identify with others (and with nonhuman beings and with nature), and what results from that identification, would have been vital in this context, since oneness, as it is presented here, directly pertains.

To conclude, although Philip Ivanhoe’s *Oneness* is more of an introduction than a refined theoretical advancement, it nonetheless makes a valuable contribution. It presents an inspiring starting point for a deeper look into the concept of oneness, and in doing so offers to enrich virtue ethics and business ethics by adding a different perspective: the nature of virtues and virtuous behavior in practice from the standpoint of Chinese philosophy.

REFERENCE

- Demuijnck, Geert, and Björn FASTERLING. 2016. “The Social License to Operate.” *Journal of Business Ethics* 136 (4): 675–85.