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IS THE EMPATHY-INDUCED MOTIVATION TO HELP EGOISTIC OR ALTRUISTIC: INSIGHTS FROM THE NEO-CONFUCIAN CHENG HAO

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I. Introduction

Empathy is generally regarded as an emotional contagion between what one person feels and what another, the empathic person, comes to feel. This essay focuses on one aspect of the altruism/egoism debate involving empathy, that is, whether the empathy-induced motivation to help is egoistic, altruistic, or neither, and demonstrates that the philosophy of the Neo-Confucian Cheng Hao 程顥 (1032–1085) can provide unique insights. By referring to Cheng's conceptions of empathy and oneness involved in his famous notions of benevolence (*ren* 仁) and "ten thousand things in one body" (*wanwu yiti* 萬物一體), the present essay claims that the notions of egoism and altruism are inapplicable. It will introduce the notion of empathy in contemporary Western philosophy and psychology and of Cheng before turning to the debate and Cheng's contribution.

II. Empathy in Ethics and Moral Psychology

Although a unified definition of empathy in ethics and moral psychology remains to be seen, it basically refers to the feeling of what others feel mainly by means of perception, inference, or perspective-taking. It is not "an emotion in its own right but a way of feeling emotions" (Maibom 2014, p. 9; italics in original). Namely, it is a kind of operation or mechanism of emotion but not an emotion *per se*. In empathy, there are at least the empathic agent or person (the "empathizer") and the one who is the object of empathy (the "empathized"). Besides, the feelings to be felt may be positive, negative, or neutral, although this essay focuses on the negative ones. It may help to note some influential definitions of empathy in the literature of contemporary ethics and moral psychology. According to Martin Hoffman, empathy is "the vicarious affective response to another person," with "the involvement of psychological processes that make a person have feelings that are more congruent with another's situation than with his own situation" (Hoffman 2000, pp. 29–30) as the key requirement. According to Michael Slote, empathy involves "having the feelings of another . . . aroused in ourselves, as when we see another person in pain" (Slote 2010, p. 15). Jesse J. Prinz regards empathy as "a kind of vicarious emotion" that is "feeling what one takes another person to be feeling" (Prinz 2011, p. 212).¹ These definitions are basically consistent.

More specifically, empathy in ethics and moral psychology has cognitive and affective aspects. That is, there can be *cognitive empathy* and *affective empathy*. The former can be defined as “the capacity or process of knowing what another wants, believes, or feels,” whereas the latter is “feeling the way another feels, or having a congruent emotion, because the other feels that way” (adapted from Kauppinen 2014, p. 99).² Cognitive empathy can be regarded as the route to affective empathy, which includes the following:

1. The perceptual route: one empathizes with the other when one witnesses the other in the situation. Emotional contagion may be an instance of it.
2. The inferential route: one believes that another person is in a certain situation or is experiencing a certain emotion.
3. The imaginative route: one imaginatively engages with the person’s point of view, that is, perspective-taking.³ (see Maibom 2014, pp. 9–14)

Besides, it is generally thought that affective empathy will lead to the motivation to help, because the shared feeling is happening to oneself and prompts one to act (e.g., see Hoffman 2000, pp. 30–36, and Huang 2016, p. 215);⁴ for cognitive empathy, however, such a motivation is doubtful.⁵ Both cognitive empathy and affective empathy are important for empathy in ethics and moral psychology, as the former makes our grasping of others’ feelings and thoughts possible, and the latter allows one to share others’ feelings and thoughts and be motivated to help accordingly. To highlight, the empathy under concern in ethics and moral psychology has two essential features:

1. One feels what the other feels as if one is having that feeling oneself.
2. One is motivated to help relieve the feeling, if the feeling is negative.

Lastly, the distinction between empathy and sympathy should be noted. The former is feeling someone’s pain and the latter the feeling for someone who is in pain. As Slote suggests, in sympathy one can feel sorry and bad for someone who is humiliated, but does not feel humiliated oneself (see Slote 2007, p. 13). Besides, they both involve concern and the motivation to help, but the point is that sympathy does not necessarily involve shared feelings.⁶

III. Cheng Hao’s Notion of Empathy

Cheng Hao 程顥, also known as Cheng Mingdao 程明道, was one of the pioneers of Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism.⁷ I argue that his notion of “ten thousand things in one body” involves a kind of empathy.⁸

“Ten Thousand Things in One Body” and Ren 仁

Our understanding of Cheng’s empathy can begin with his sayings on “ten thousand things in one body” (*wanwu yiti* 萬物一體) and benevolence (*ren* 仁). We can read

his famous passage, which is later called “On Understanding Benevolence” (*Shiren-pian* 識仁篇):

The students must first of all understand benevolence (*ren* 仁). A person of *ren* is completely in one body with things. Righteousness (*yi* 義), propriety (*li* 禮), wisdom (*zhi* 知), and faithfulness (*xin* 信) all are *ren*. Once one understands this *li* 理,⁹ all that remains is to preserve it through sincerity (*cheng* 誠) and reverential attention (*jing* 敬). There is no need for caution or restraint, no need for inquiry or investigation. If one’s heart-mind (*xin* 心) becomes lax, then there is a need to be on guard.¹⁰ If it is not lax, why would one need to be on guard? . . . This Way (*dao* 道) [of *ren*] is not opposite to anything, so that “great” is too weak a word to describe it. The functions of everything within heaven and earth are my functions. Mencius said, “The ten thousand things are all complete within me.”¹¹ One must examine oneself and discover sincerity, and then one will experience the greatest of joys. If one has not achieved sincerity, it will be as if there is still something standing in opposition to one. Even if one tries to identify oneself with the things opposing one, one still does not achieve unity. How can one have joy? The point of [Zhang Zai’s] “The Western Inscription” is to provide a thorough account of this Substance (*ti* 體) [of *ren*]. . . . Pure knowing (*liangzhi* 良知) and pure capability (*liangneng* 良能) are never lost. Because we have not gotten rid of the heart-mind dominated by habits, we must preserve and exercise our [original] heart-mind, and in time old habits will be overcome. . . . This *li* is concise and simple. (*Er Cheng Yishu* 二程遺書 [hereafter *Yishu*] 2a, pp. 16–17)

Cheng was probably the first Confucian to explicate *ren* in terms of “being in one body with things.”¹² On the one hand, he said that a person of *ren* is “completely in one body with things,” or “being *ren*” means the *state* of “being completely in one body with things.”¹³ On the other hand, *ren* can also mean a kind of *virtue* or *ability*, which is originally possessed by each of us.¹⁴ This is revealed by our moral heart-mind, which is or has pure knowing and pure capability. The ability is in fact never lost but just sometimes left unused. All one has to do is to be sincere in letting the moral heart-mind exercise or function. If one has yet to be sincere in practicing *ren*, one does not feel to be in one body with things, that is, “it will be as if there is still something standing in opposition to one.” For Cheng, the virtue or ability of *ren* leads one to feel to be in one body with things, and the feeling of being in one body with things requires the virtue or ability of *ren*. That is, while *ren* points to the state of “one-bodiness” as well as the virtue or the capacity for it, the state or the feeling of “one-bodiness” is the manifestation or achievement of *ren*.

The Analogy of Numb Limbs

Let us study more substantially the idea that “being *ren*” means the state of “being completely in one body with things.” Cheng explained it with the following analogy:

A book of medicine describes paralysis of the four limbs as not-*ren*. This is an excellent description. The person of *ren* regards heaven and earth and ten thousand things as one body. To him there is nothing that is not himself. And when the things are recognized (*ren* 認) as one’s own, there is nothing one will not do for them. If things are not parts of the self, naturally they are of no concern to it. When the four limbs are not-*ren*, the vital force (*qi* 氣) no longer penetrates (*guan* 貫) them, and therefore they are no longer parts of the self. (*Yishu* 2a, p. 15)

When there is perfect *ren*, heaven and earth are regarded as one body, and the different things and innumerable forms within heaven and earth as the “four limbs and hundred parts of the body.” How can any man regard his “four limbs and hundred parts of the body” without love? The sage is *ren* to perfection, simply because he alone can embody this heart-mind. Why should he make all sorts of distinctions and look for [*ren*] outside him? Hence “the ability to judge the needs of others by one’s own” was offered by Confucius to Zi Gong as “the means to apply *ren*.” Some medical books describe paralysis of the hands and feet by saying that the limbs are “not-*ren*,” as the pain in them does not embroil (*lei* 累) the heart-mind. What better term than not-*ren* could there be for unfeeling the pain in hands and feet, which are parts of oneself? The self-abandonment of the callous and merciless men in the world is no different from this. (*Yishu* 4, p. 74)

In short, being *ren* or being in one body with things means feeling what things feel and simultaneously regarding the feeling as one’s own and the others *per se* as oneself, and thus taking care of them as taking care of oneself. Another’s feeling is felt by the empathic person (i.e., the person of *ren*), who regards it as his or her own—just as within a physical body one can feel one’s hands and feet, say, painful or itchy, for they are interconnected within the single body. Such a situation of feeling is called *ren*. Hence, these three items—“*ren*,” “feeling (of pain and itch, etc.),” and “feeling being in one body with (things)” —are made possible altogether. The way Cheng illustrated such a picture can be regarded as the “analogy of numb limbs”:

Doctors regard a person as not-*ren* when the person cannot feel pain and itch; we regard a person as not-*ren* when the person has no awareness and does not recognize the principle (*yili* 義理). This is the best *analogy* (*pi* 譬). (*Yishu* 2a, p. 33)

Cheng took one side of the analogy as referring to the medical/physical sense of *ren*, and the other side the ethical sense of *ren* (Huang 2016, p. 216), or as the narrow/intra-personal sense and the broad sense of *ren*.

The medical or intra-personal side of the analogy concerns the most basic or narrowest sense of *ren*: a normal or healthy person feels and is aware of how his or her limbs are, and will definitely take care of them. Let’s recap some of the paragraphs above, as follows:

1. “What better term than not-*ren* could there be for unfeeling the pain in hands and feet, which are parts of oneself?” (*Yishu* 4, p. 74)
2. “Some medical books describe paralysis of the hands and feet by saying that the limbs are ‘not-*ren*’, as the pain in them does not embroil the heart-mind.” (*Yishu* 4, p. 74)
3. “When the four limbs are not-*ren*, the vital force no longer penetrates them, and therefore they are no longer parts of the self.” (*Yishu* 2a, p. 15)
4. “When the things are recognized as one’s own, there is nothing one will not do for them. If things are not parts of the self, naturally they are of no concern to it.” (*Yishu* 2a, p. 15)

Highlighting the opposite scenario, these sayings indirectly reveal that a normal or healthy person will feel the pain and itch of his or her limbs and will take care of

them. In traditional Chinese medicine, “feeling” is an activity of the heart-mind’s sensing and manifesting the fluctuations of the *qi*. There is the *qi* that is essential for living.¹⁵ If it flows normally, it penetrates every part of the body with an average force.¹⁶ *Shen* 神 (approximately equivalent to “mind”), which is an aspect of the heart-mind, resides in *mai* 脈 (i.e., the flow of *qi*) and is aware of and manifests the situation of *mai*.¹⁷ That is, *shen* notices and manifests the fluctuation of *qi*, say, the fluctuation of *qi* near the hand because of the hand’s hitting the wall. As *shen* is an aspect of the heart-mind, the heart-mind is thus embroiled. One is said to be *ren* in being able to feel the situation of the body. Naturally enough, one will recognize the painful part that one feels with as one’s own and will take care of it. Contrarily, when the *qi* runs abnormally and does not penetrate the limb, the limb is paralyzed or numb. Not having the *qi* that originally penetrates into the limb that makes signals to the heart-mind, the heart-mind is thereby not embroiled. One has no feelings over the limb that one originally has, so it is as if not of one’s own (though in fact it certainly is) and thereby not of one’s concern. One is thus said to be not-*ren*.¹⁸

Now we turn to the ethical/broader side of the analogy. “Feeling the pain and itch of ten thousand things” is analogized with the case of feeling the pain and itch of one’s own body. Myriad things are deemed as different parts of a large body that have interactions and resonance. In other words, the whole universe—that is, myriad things—are in one “large body” or unity (*yiti* 一體) with connections and interactions. Such recognition is the worldview of the Confucians who have undergone moral cultivation. For them, there is the *li* 理, that is, the ultimate reality, which makes existence possible.¹⁹ The *li* is also the foundation for the interaction and unity of things.²⁰ Cheng Hao said, “The person of *ren* regards heaven and earth and ten thousand things as one body. To him there is nothing that is not himself” (*Yishu* 2a, p. 15), and “When there is perfect *ren*, heaven and earth are regarded as one body, and the different things and innumerable forms within heaven and earth as the ‘four limbs and hundred parts of the body’” (*Yishu* 4, p. 74).

Similar to the case within a person’s body, by the capacity of feeling, that is, *ren* in terms of virtue, one can feel the pain and itch of other people and things, which in turn demonstrates that these are all in one body. You and I are only different parts of the whole large body, just like the hands and the feet of one body, but the difference is only that human beings in the body of the universe are capable of feeling and acting and are supposed to have individual agencies, but the limbs of a physical body do not. One feels others’ feelings by ways of perception (through the medium of *qi*)²¹ and perspective-taking (*shu* 恕).²² One’s heart-mind is embroiled and finds the pain unbearable; simultaneously, by virtue of the feelings, one takes others’ feelings as one’s own and at the same time others as oneself. One is therefore in that one “large body” with the others.²³ Hence, Cheng Hao said that there is “no opposition” between the things. In the ultimate stage,²⁴ that is, when there is “perfect *ren*,” everything is oneself, so there is no longer any “other,” because “self” and “other” are possible only under contrast. Being aware of the feelings of myriad things (which are but “his” or “hers”), one will naturally offer help. Thus, it is in this sense that Cheng followed Mencius in saying that “All the ten thousand things are complete in me.”

Contrarily, if one does not feel the pain and itch of myriad things, one is said to be numb and merciless, and is very probably not going to help.²⁵

Empathy Involved in "Ten Thousand Things in One Body"

I argue that the "ten thousand things in one body" of Cheng Hao involves a kind of empathy in ethics and moral psychology. As mentioned previously, empathy in these two fields includes the following:

1. One feels what the other feels as if one is having that feeling oneself.
2. One is motivated to help relieve the feeling if the feeling is negative.

Cheng's notion of "ten thousand things in one body" thus involves empathy as it involves both points. A person of *ren* is always empathizing with people and things. What I would like to put forward is that, for Cheng, such empathy involves not only one's regarding another's feeling as one's own, but also regarding the other as oneself. The taking care of pain is a simultaneous act of such an "expansion of the self."²⁶ Hence, I propose that his empathy includes three essential characteristics:

1. One feels what the other feels as if one is having that feeling oneself.
2. One regards the other as oneself.
3. One is motivated to help relieve the feeling if the feeling is negative.

For Cheng, 1 and 2 are interrelated. However, 2, which he took together with 1 to account for the motivation to help, may not be included in the conceptions of empathy of some contemporary ethicists and moral psychologists. In fact, 2 concerns the self-other relationship under empathy. Some hold that there is the self-other merging, but some still insist on the self-other distinction. Besides, even if one supports or opposes the view of merging, one can still have different interpretations of the nature of motivation. These are the themes of the sections that follow below.

IV. Empathy-Induced Motivation to Help: Altruistic or Egoistic?

There has been a controversy over whether empathy-induced motivation to help alleviate another's negative feelings is altruistic or egoistic (or neither). This question carries ethical importance in two ways. First, if that motivation is shown to be altruistic, it will imply that genuine altruism is possible for human beings.²⁷ Second, the investigation may provide directions for moral education. I will briefly introduce the debate and the prominent arguments of both sides and choose to focus on the issue of "self-other merging" for which Cheng's idea of empathy can provide some insights.

A couple of clarifications are in order. First, the debate is on the *motivation* or *motive* (altruistic, egoistic, or neither) of the empathy-induced behavior and not the behavior itself. Second, "egoism" and "altruism" under the debate concerned are psychological egoism and psychological altruism, which are *descriptive positions*.²⁸

The motivational states or desires concerned must first be *ultimate* (or “intrinsic,” or “non-instrumental”)—that is, a desire for something for its own sake (see May 2011, p. 27). An altruistic desire is for another’s sake, whereas an egoistic desire only takes one’s own benefit into account.²⁹ Then, for example, if one does something good to another to make another happy and not for any other purposes, such a desire is ultimate, and such a motive is altruistic.

The Basic Arguments: The Empathy-Altruism Hypothesis and its Opponents

One may find the debate a bit strange, for empathy, as shown in our discussion above of Cheng’s “ten thousand things in one body,” is an emotional operation that seems moral and thus altruistic.³⁰ In fact, the motivation for help may still be suspected of serving some self-interest. C. Daniel Batson examines six non-altruistic interpretations that he puts into three classes: aversive-arousal reduction, two versions of punishment avoiding, and three versions of reward seeking. They all purport that helping others is solely instrumental to the ultimate desire to benefit oneself.³¹ But Batson and his group conducted numerous experimental researches that they believe have refuted the egoistic interpretations.³² Batson is thus regarded as the most famous psychologist championing the position that “empathy” will lead to altruistic motivation. His famous “empathy-altruism hypothesis” states that empathic concern produces altruistic motivation (Batson 2011).³³

While this essay will not scrutinize the competing interpretations above, it is of particular interest here to focus our attention on one issue of the debate, namely “self-other merging” or “oneness,” which Batson also addressed elsewhere (Batson 1997), as it is most relevant to Cheng’s conception of empathy.

The “Self-Other Merging” Issue

This section introduces the role of “self-other merging” or “oneness” in the issue of empathy-induced motivation to help.³⁴ The empathic person may have the “experience of oneness,” which is “a sense of shared, merged, or interconnected personal identities” when the empathizer and the empathized become too related and share perspectives (Cialdini et al. 1997, p. 483). This poses a question on the nature of agency or self under empathic relationship.³⁵ So, first, under such a condition, the helping motivation can be egoistic, as the empathic person may help only for his or her own sake as he or she is merged into one with others. Cialdini et al. suggest that the conditions that produce empathic concern lead to increased helping of the other to whom one is closely attached:

... not because individuals feel more empathic concern for the close other but because they feel more *at one with* the other—that is, because they perceive more of themselves in the other. . . . [There is] the symbolic merging or expansion of the self into the other. (Ibid., p. 483; italics in original)

Since the object of help is one that includes the subject—the empathic “I,” it is possible that the act is merely done for the empathic person himself or herself, or at least it is unclear whether it is solely done for the empathized party. Second, Cialdini et al.

also acknowledge that, in the ultimate sense, it may even be impossible to tell for whom such a helpful act is aimed to provide: "When the distinction between self and other is undermined, the traditional dichotomy between selfishness and selflessness loses its meaning" (ibid., pp. 490–491). However, it seems that Cialdini et al. only argue clearly for the non-altruistic nature of the helping motivation, but not the non-egoistic side.³⁶ Subsequently, Cialdini disagrees with Batson's empathy-altruism hypothesis and suggests another view, regarded by Batson as the "empathy-merging hypothesis" (Batson et al. 1997, p. 497). What Cialdini suggests is that the empathy-helping relationship is in fact a "oneness-helping relationship": perceived oneness is the real cause of increased helping behavior, and empathy is a mere "concomitant" (Cialdini et al. 1997, p. 483). "[E]mpathic concern would no longer be predictive of helping after the influence of oneness was extracted," but "oneness would be significantly predictive when empathic concern was partialled out" (ibid.).

Below are some responses to Cialdini's position. Some, like Batson (2011) and Joshua May (2011), reject the idea of genuine self-other merging and maintain self-other distinction; some, like Slote, suggest a certain type of unproblematic self-other merging (or oneness). Their views on empathy-induced motivation also thereby differ.

Batson refutes any genuine self-other merging and insists on self-other distinction, as he seems to think that empathy involves awareness of the other's particularities and uniqueness (see Batson et al. 1997, p. 497).³⁷ Therefore, Batson admits self-other merging in a metaphorical but not a literal sense:

There is much evidence that our self-concept is malleable. . . . How we think of ourselves changes depending on with whom we are (friends, family, professional colleagues, strangers), where we are (home, work, play, abroad), and what we are doing (fixing dinner, losing at tennis, giving a professional talk). This malleability should not, however, lead us to conclude that there are no constraints. Our self-concept is constrained both by our personal history and by our body. (Batson 2011, p. 159)³⁸

And he agrees that "One body goes with one self" (ibid.). The self is the substance of the reference and it has its own distinct body. So, he also thinks that phrases like "two shall become one," "self-other confusion," "self-expansion," "including the other in the self," "seeing oneself in the other," "oneness," "self-other merging," and the like "are best taken metaphorically rather than literally, at least when applied to the empathy-helping relationship" (ibid.). Namely, there is still the self-other distinction. He admits that the human capacity for empathic concern has a very wide range that can include total strangers, members of stigmatized groups, such as a convicted murder serving life imprisonment, and even members of other species, such as dogs and whales, but he thinks that "merging with and seeing oneself as psychologically indistinguishable from a convicted murderer seems unlikely; expanding the self to include a whale even less likely" (ibid.). What he thinks plausible is that "empathic concern reflects an extension of value to include an interest in the welfare of the other, distinct from oneself, that is beyond self-interest" (ibid., pp. 159–160). In short, Batson refutes any genuine self-other merging.

Joshua May claims that the possible versions of self-other merging are either problematic themselves or fail to support Cialdini's view on motivation (May 2011, pp. 32–37). Although May's discussion does not provide a direct answer to the motivation question, it is relevant to our concern, as it is about the implausibility of certain ideas of merging.

1. *Peculiar Beliefs*. This version will “just attribute the belief to empathically aroused subjects that they exist in two separate bodies” (May 2011, p. 32). The subjects' desire would be to benefit themselves, but they believe they exist in the other body; “[s]o, they instrumentally desire to help themselves in their other incarnation, so to speak.” That is why they help and help in an egoistic way (ibid.). But May thinks that such a belief is delusional:

Of course, on certain metaphysical views we are all one, in which case the belief that one exists in two separate bodies would not be an error and so perhaps is not a delusion. But even if such a view about the world is correct, we need an argument to show that people would believe it. After all, typical Western subjects (as these are) do not seem to hold such a metaphysical view. (Ibid.)

2. *Indeterminate identities*. Just like Cialdini, who maintains that the representations of oneself versus another are to some extent blurred in empathy, this proposal purports that “the identities of the people represented in the content of the relevant mental states are indeterminate” (May 2011, p. 33). May's idea is that “[i]n order to properly explain the behavior of helping *another*, it must posit a representation of another. But if a partial representation of another in the content of ultimate desire can explain such behavior, then it is arguably altruistic” (ibid., p. 36; italics in original). A helping action is possible only if there are the helper and the helped. Therefore, clear identities are required. Besides, if there is the other who after all receives help, then it is altruistic (i.e., not as what Cialdini would like to claim as neither egoistic nor altruistic, or somehow non-altruistic).³⁹

3. *Properties*. This is an attempt “to appeal to merging representations of *aspects* or properties of self and other” (May 2011, p. 36; italics in original). May explains that, in this proposal,

the explanation of the act of helping another is supposed to be explained, it seems, by appealing to an ultimate desire to benefit oneself, combined with a belief that aspects of oneself are, as it were, over there in that other body. (Ibid.)

But May has two doubts. First, the belief that aspects of oneself are “over there” in another body is mystical. Second, people can help without believing that they will receive the same benefits. Then, the help can be altruistic. Hence, overall, whether the motivation is altruistic or egoistic is still uncertain.

Michael Slote makes some intriguing comments. He thinks that self-other merging is possible and that the empathy-induced motivation is altruistic. He does not think that oneness is necessarily faulty (see Slote 2014, pp. 107–108). In empathy, oneness and identity, to Slote, “aren't best interpreted as nonliteral or metaphorical,” but “involve a literal sense of ‘oneness’ and ‘identity’ different from what Cialdini

has imagined" (ibid., p. 109). He then brings in the distinction between *qualitative identity* and *numerical identity*. He says, just as in ordinary speaking about "two persons owning identical cars," we are not talking about the numerical identity of shared ownership, but having the same make and model of car (see ibid.). Then, he states:

[I]f I am or feel at one with the person I live with, there is no reason this should have to be interpreted in terms of numerical identity—it can simply mean that (I feel that) we *intimately share many things and are deeply similar in our attitudes and habits*. . . . [M]uch the same can be said about the locutions of oneness and identity that occur in contexts of empathy, concern, and helping. There is no reason to call them metaphorical, and it makes more sense, I think, to interpret them as *invoking or involving qualitative identity, oneness, or sameness rather than numerical*. (ibid., pp. 109–110; my italics)

The intimacy and the sharing of attitudes, habits, and the like, in Slote's eyes, can be regarded as something qualitative, and thereby not in numerical terms, which purport absolute sameness. So, it will not lead to the confusions in May's first two proposals. Besides, it avoids the third proposal's problem, as the properties are "shared" or "over there in that other body" in the sense of quality or nature but not in numerical oneness. Under the oneness in a qualitative sense there are still the "self" and "other" as two distinct bodies and agencies.⁴⁰ And all these lead Slote to think that genuine oneness is possible, and the usual construal of altruism can be secured from Cialdini's challenge (see ibid., p. 110).

It is noteworthy that Slote subsequently stresses the very opposite view against Cialdini: "[T]he talk of helping those one identifies with or feels at one with simply points to an important causal factor in altruistic helping behavior rather than giving us any reason to doubt the reality of psychological altruism" (ibid.). In the endnotes, he takes Cialdini as "saying that we have to think of other people as one with us in order to be devoted to them and want badly (i.e., strongly) to help them" (ibid., p. 223 n. 19). But Slote then intriguingly suggests:

[W]hat if the order of explanation is reversed? What if we have to be devoted to certain other people and want badly to help them in order to be able to think of them as one with us? This would suggest that the very strength of our altruism can make us blur the lines between certain others and ourselves, and such an order of explanation, far from calling altruism into question, may actually highlight its strong role in our psychology. (ibid.)

In short, Slote thinks that it is precisely altruism that leads to and facilitates the sense of oneness, and not the other way around, as suggested by Cialdini.

V. An Alternative Perspective on Self-Other Merging and Motivation from Cheng Hao

Cheng's account gives us some insights. His notion of self-other merging is a literal one and can be immune to the problems discussed above. And the empathy-induced motivation is thereby neither altruistic nor egoistic.

Cheng Hao on Empathy and Oneness

Cheng's notion of oneness can be immune to these problems as it suggests that the things under empathy or merging can be more pertinently thought of to be in *one-body/unity/oneself* but not of *identity*. "One body" denotes the "large unity" after the merging, but not the numerical identification of physical bodies, and "(one)self" denotes one's regarding this large unity as one's own. So, the terms "one-body" ("one-bodiness"), "unity," and "(one)self" are all referring to the merged entity.⁴¹ By then, while having empathy, different parts of the whole unity can still keep their distinctiveness (and even individual agencies, such as human beings in Cheng's "ten thousand things in one body")—just as the brain, the liver, and the eyes in a single body have different kinds of material composition and function,⁴² and yet they are of the very same body. The distinction between the ordinary usage of "self" and "other" can then be drawn on the level of different parts of the same merged large self. In short, for Cheng, in empathy one (a part of the merged self) feels what another (other parts of the merged self) feels, and both are "one" or "merged into the large body/unity/self" in that each shares feelings and a concern for the other, in the same way that one is related to one's foot—or, even more accurately, how one's hands are related to one's feet.⁴³

Let us see more substantially how Cheng's picture can be immune to the problems of the authors above. Cheng's picture suggests that self-other merging can be literal but not metaphorical in the sense that the feelings of and the concern for the parties' well-being are shared and that the others are regarded as oneself, at least from the empathizer's point of view. Self-other merging is not confined to the delusional type of "one person in two physical bodies" suggested by Batson's and May's first proposal, the one with the indeterminate identities of May's second proposal or the mystically interrelated properties of May's third proposal. Rather, it is the kind of shared feelings and concern and of regarding others as oneself. This is because the notion of self, to Cheng, unlike what Batson thinks, is not confined to physical bodies. The self is rather constituted by people and things that one feels and are of one's concern, which is highlighted in the second essential characteristic of Cheng's empathy. We can reply to Batson's denials of our inclusion of animals, plants, and things into the self and our "merging with and seeing oneself as psychologically indistinguishable from a convicted murderer." The former can be possible not only by including them into one's concern and care but also by perspective-taking, which is made possible by their common origin, *li*.⁴⁴

Concerning the merging with the murderers, to Cheng, a person of *ren* is in one body with everything, is able to feel how they feel, and is concerned about their well-being, although he or she is basically psychologically different from murderers. We should also empathize with the wrongdoers, who are still in one body with us. Through other-oriented perspective-taking, an empathic person or a person of *ren* with a certain level of wisdom can imagine how and why the object feels and acts in certain ways. But the point is that the person of *ren* feels pain when he or she sees others doing evil things and is motivated to help them stop doing so. That is, just as one will hail one's injured leg, he or she will help the wrongdoers correct them-

selves.⁴⁵ Hence, I do submit that Batson's point—that "empathic concern reflects an extension of value to include an interest in the welfare of the other, distinct from oneself, that is beyond self-interest" (Batson 2011, pp. 159–160)—more or less implies the helping actions of a person of *ren*, but my point explains that concerning the wrongdoers, empathic concern, merging, and empathy are possible and required.

Moreover, to Batson's point that empathy must be based on a self-other distinction it can be replied that there can be empathy between different parts of the merged, large self (for instance, person A and person B). The self-other distinction appears in the level of different parts of the merged, large self. This means that the identities of person A and person B under merging are not indeterminate, as May's second proposal suggests, although they are of the same large unity.

Besides, Cheng would agree with Slote's distinction on qualitative identity and numerical identity regarding the talk of oneness, and could accommodate Slote's insight in his talking of unity but not identity. With this, Cheng could emphasize that the merging is not of the numerical-identity kind, and can even express the picture more astutely, for not only do the merged parties share the feelings and concern that are regarded by Slote as qualitatively identical, but they also regard themselves to be in a large merged body, that is, the unity, which can be as huge as the universe when the highest level of *ren* is realized.

Cheng Hao on Empathy-Induced Motivation

Empathy-induced motivation is thereby neither altruistic nor egoistic. This is because without any "others" to put the "self" in a relative position, the labels of altruism and egoism become inapplicable. To recap, in Cheng's empathy-helping relationship, we have the "empathic person" (i.e., the person of *ren*), the "object of empathy" (i.e., the empathized), and the "one-body/unity/oneself" that appears in such an empathic relation. Let's call these three A, B, and C, respectively. Thus, there are the helper (i.e., A), the aimed receiver of the help (i.e., B), and the merged self (i.e., C). Even not having reached the highest level, once one empathizes with others, the empathized is in one body with the empathizer, and, at least from the empathizer's point of view, they are recognized to be of the same merged self. Since the different parts of the self, or "small selves" (e.g., A and B), have already merged into the "large self," the aimed receiver and the provider of the act cannot be genuinely identified as something outside the "oneself" (i.e., C). That is how Cheng thought that myriad things like A and B, which are instances of the "four limbs and hundred parts of the body" (*Yishu* 4, p. 74), are "not in opposition" (see *Yishu* 2a, p. 17). That is, when A helps B, it is just one part of C that helps another part of C. There is not any other that is in a parallel relation with C. The picture is thus viewed more broadly and aptly that it is C who is the receiver of the help and it is also C whose sake the help is for.

Hence, I agree with Yong Huang that the so-called "motivation of A to help B" is for the sake of C (see Huang 2014).⁴⁶ However, I disagree with his ensuing contention. He says:

What really takes place is rather A's empathy for B is for the sake of C, which includes A and B as its constituent parts. In this sense it is neither egoistic (merely for the sake of A) nor altruistic (merely for the sake of B). (Ibid.)

I disagree with him because the motivation, in my opinion, cannot be classified as altruistic or egoistic, not because of its being neither *merely* for the sake of A nor *merely* for the sake of B—that is, *the coverage of sake*; rather, it is because of the very one-bodiness/unity/oneself that A and B belong to that makes the helper and the intended receiver the very same one, that is, C. A and B are different parts of the merged body/unity/self and are no longer in genuine opposition; that is, they are not two opposing selves. It is the same as when, ordinarily, within the case of one body, we will not ask whether the hand's protecting the foot at a cost of an injury is egoistic or altruistic, since it is the one who acts and who receives the act. So, it can be regarded as "C helps for the sake of C," but it is only because whenever C is to have an action the action is always performed by some part(s) of it, for instance, A; only then can we say that A helps for the sake of C with the specific receiver as its other constituent part, say B.⁴⁷

Hence, Cheng's philosophy can provide a newer and more plausible picture on merging and motivation issues than that of Cialdini (who stands clearly for the non-altruistic but not the non-egoistic nature of the motivation and whose account of merging may be subject to the aforementioned difficulties) and Batson and May (who fail to appreciate a plausible kind of merging). In other words, to Cheng, empathy-induced motivation is neither altruistic nor egoistic. It also explicates a plausible construal of oneness that can be a step further than Slote in emphasizing unity in addition to shared feelings and concern.

En passant, we also come to a plausible picture of the relation between empathy, oneness, and the helping motivation, which is different from the ones by Cialdini and Slote. As already mentioned, Cialdini thinks that the helping motivation is caused by the feeling of oneness or one-bodiness but not empathy; that is why he is thought by Slote to be suggesting that "we have to think of other people as one with us in order to be devoted to them and want . . . strongly . . . to help them" (Slote 2014, p. 223 n. 19). But as I have argued, for Cheng, the feeling of oneness or one-bodiness and empathy logically happens simultaneously, as one recognizes others as one's own during empathy. Although it seems that Cheng attributed the motivation to recognizing the feelings and objects as one's own (i.e., oneness), this did not prevent him from taking empathy together with oneness as the cause for motivation and action, as oneness and empathy are the two sides of the same coin. This is different from Cialdini, who thinks that oneness is distinct from empathy in regard to the cause of motivation.

Besides, Slote suggests that it may be the case that "we have to be devoted to certain other people and want badly to help them in order to be able to think of them as one with us" (Slote 2014, p. 223 n. 19), which is the opposite of Cialdini's view. Although insightful, Slote's contention can also be formulated differently. In Cheng's empathy, the motivation is ultimately not altruistic, so we can take "helping"

to replace “altruism” in Slote’s contention. Besides, it is not only the helping but also the feeling of others’ feelings (i.e., empathy) that leads us to think that we are at one.

Nevertheless, for Cheng, both Slote’s (with the alterations above) and Cialdini’s views do tell some truth and are in fact indispensable. Epistemologically, Cheng would not object that we know we are in one body because we can feel with and want to help others. That is, the feeling and desire to help convince us to think of our being one. This is what Slote is about to claim, whereas, ontologically, Cheng thought that we are able to feel and help others because we are originally in one body. It is precisely this oneness that urges us to help; that is why Cheng said, “When the things are recognized as one’s own, there is nothing one will not do for them. If things are not parts of the self, naturally they are of no concern to it” (*Yishu* 2a, p. 15). And this is what Cialdini is about to claim. It is only by taking the two sides into consideration that one can obtain a complete comprehension of the nature of and relationship between empathy, oneness and the helping motivation.

Notes

- 1 – “Feeling what one takes another person to be feeling” is likely still a kind of operation of emotion.
- 2 – It is possible to have cognitive empathy without affective empathy, as one can think of another’s emotions without thereby experiencing these emotions oneself. But it is a moot point whether the reverse is true (see Maibom 2014, p. 2). One key issue is how much or how deeply cognitive empathy is needed for affective empathy.
- 3 – There are “self-oriented perspective-taking” and “other-oriented perspective-taking” (see Coplan 2011, pp. 9–15).
- 4 – While it is usually in the negative cases that help is needed, in positive cases corresponding (positive) reactions are also expected, but we cannot discuss that here.
- 5 – Some argue that affective empathy (or any kind of empathy) may not lead to a helping motivation. Stephen Darwall suggests that empathy does not necessarily lead to concern or a helping motivation, as empathy “can be consistent with the indifference of pure observation or even the cruelty of sadism” (Darwall 1998, p. 261). Besides, “empathic over-arousal” may prompt one to escape from the source of pain (i.e., the empathized) (see Hoffman 2000, p. 198). But these do not affect the main theme of the present essay, which focuses on the cases where helping motivation is present.
- 6 – See, e.g., Darwall’s account (1998, p. 261) of sympathy.
- 7 – The primary source for this essay is Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi, *Er Cheng ji* 二程集 (Complete works of the two Chengs) (Cheng and Cheng 2008), contain-

ing the *Henan Chengshi yishu* 河南程氏遺書 (also known as *Er Cheng yishu* 二程遺書)—hereafter cited as *Yishu*. The translations are either adapted from Chan 1963, Graham 1992, and Tiwald and Van Norden 2014 or are my own. For quotations, the citations in parentheses give the name of the collection (the *Yishu*), the volume number, and the page number of the *Er Cheng ji*. The present essay considers the author of the texts in the *Yishu* by consulting Mou 1968 and Pang 1992, and does not provide further detailed explanation.

- 8 – I suggest translating such empathy in Cheng as *tonggan* 同感 (literally, “shared/same feeling”). In contemporary Chinese, *tongqing* 同情 (“shared/same emotion”) mostly denotes sympathy or compassion; and *yiqing* 移情 (“moved/shifted emotion”) denotes the projection of one’s feeling onto the other, which is common in moral encounters as well as the appreciation of artworks.
- 9 – While sometimes translated as “reason” (Chang 1957, p. 190) or “coherence” (Angle 2009), *li* is more frequently translated as “principle” or “pattern” (e.g., Chan 1963 and Graham 1992). Given its complexities, I leave it in transliteration (e.g., Huang 2007, p. 189).
- 10 – The character *xin* 心 is mostly translated as “heart-mind,” for it has the affective part (heart) and the cognitive/intellectual part (mind) (see Huang 2013, pp. x–xi).
- 11 – *Mencius* 7A4, in Lau 2003, p. 287.
- 12 – “Things” here equals “ten thousand things” in *Yishu* 2a, p. 15, in denoting all things. But one may ask how one empathizes with plants and even inanimate things, which are normally regarded as not having any feelings. Cheng did not explicitly address this, although he did think that they are in one body with us. If these things have no feelings, his notion of “ten thousand things in one body” may include something more than, or a more complicated form of, empathy, a question that deserves further exploration. Besides, the present essay also leaves aside the interpretation of “things” as “events” (*shi* 事) and focuses on empathy between animate things, especially human beings.
- 13 – *Renzhe* 仁者 can be read as “a person of *ren*” or “being *ren*.” Mou Zongsan emphasizes the latter, as he thinks Cheng wanted to explain what *ren* is but took the level of the state of a person of *ren* for an illustration (*yiren biao fa* 以人表法) (Mou 1968, p. 220). I add that this is grammatically plausible, since in ancient Chinese there is the usage of *zhe* as a word that prepares for an explanation, such as “*x zhe*, *y ye* 也,” which means, approximately, “*x* is *y*” or “*x* means *y*,” although there is no *ye* here.
- 14 – That *ren* can also mean a kind of virtue or ability is revealed first by saying that virtues like righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and faithfulness are all manifestations or variations of *ren*, and, probably, second by the different descriptions of the notion of *ren*. Mou Zongsan notes that *dao* 道, *li* 理, *xin* 心, and *ti* 體 all refer to *ren*, i.e., the core moral notion (Mou 1968, pp. 219–220). *Xin* is of

concern to us here. In terms of the pure knowing and pure capability (i.e., the moral capacity of human beings, which appears in *Mencius* 7A15), it is called “(ren) *xin*,” as *xin* bears the core of agency. The close tie between *ren* and human *xin* is seen in *Mencius* 6A11 (Lau 2003, p. 255).

- 15 – *Qi* is widely discussed in traditional Chinese medicine; see, e.g., the *Huangdi neijing* 黄帝内经 (Niu et al. 1994). Besides in traditional Chinese medicine, the notion of *qi* has a long history of development in Chinese thought; see, e.g., Onozawa et al. 2007.
- 16 – The abnormality of *qi* will cause disease. See, e.g., the “Benbinglun” 本病论 (literally, “On the origin of disease”) in the “Suwen” 素问 in the *Huangdi neijing* (Niu et al. 1994, p. 484).
- 17 – In traditional Chinese medicine, it is said that “the heart-mind stores the mind” (*xincangshen* 心藏神). For details, see the “Benshen” 本神 (Based on *Shen*) chapter of the *Huangdi neijing* (Niu et al. 1994, p. 29; see also p. 408).
- 18 – Here comes an interesting question: how is it possible for one to get rid of the numbness or restore the feeling in one’s limbs if one does not even recognize the limbs as one’s own? Cheng did not give an explicit explanation. Besides the brute fact that a limb is certainly one’s own, perhaps we can think that although the numb parts have no feeling now, one can still be *aware of* the numbness itself in a certain way, say, by the signals to heart-mind by *shen*’s sensing the fluctuation of *qi* around the blockage and also by the sensitivity in the neighboring parts. Lying with one’s head on one’s arm, for instance, may cause the arm to become numb, but one can still control one’s hand by moving one’s fingers. So, it is likely that if there are connections between the parts, one is able to be aware of, if not feel, that some part is abnormal (e.g., being numb). Having noticed the numb limb’s being one’s own, one can revitalize it. If this scenario is plausible, we may conceive of two senses or orders of *ren*. The first order of *ren* means the “direct feeling of the limbs” (like pain and itch), and the second order “an awareness of the lack of feeling,” if we are to avoid the seemingly strange report of “a feeling of numbness.” While the first order of *ren* prompts one to alleviate the pain, the second order of *ren* urges one to revitalize the limb. *En passant*, this distinction somehow matches the two Chinese characters *gan* 感 (to feel) and *jue* 覺 (to be awake or be aware of), which together form the contemporary Chinese phrase *ganjue* 感覺 (literally, the verb “to feel” or the noun “feeling”). According to the *Suowen jiezi* 說文解字, *gan* means “to move a man’s heart” (Xu 1978, p. 222), whereas *jue* means “to awake from sleep” (p. 178). Seemingly, feeling presupposes the state of being awake, but not vice versa, as one can be aware of one’s not having feeling.
- 19 – For Cheng’s discussions of *li* 理, heart-mind (*xin* 心), and nature (*xing* 性), see e.g., *Yishu* 1, p. 4; 2a, pp. 31, 33–34; 5, p. 76; 11, p. 121. Cheng’s construal of *li* as the ultimate reality can be an “explanatory” but not a “foundational” one; see the distinction in Huang 2015.

- 20 – So, one may understand “*yiti*” 一體 in the phrase “ten thousand things in one body” (*wanwu yiti* 萬物一體) in terms of sharing the same ontological substance (literally, *tongyi benti* 同一本體). But the present essay focuses on *yiti* in terms of one-bodiness or unity (see Guo 2006, p. 114)—an important distinction. The latter sense is about the phenomenon or manifestation of empathy, and the former sense is the foundation of the latter sense.
- 21 – The Neo-Confucians had the phrase “*yiqi liutong*” 一氣流通 (see Chen 2014, pp. 35–36); Cheng took emotions to be “the vital force of the heart-mind” (*xinqi* 心氣), which is interactive with external and internal circumstances (see *Yishu* 4, p. 70).
- 22 – *Shu* denotes the maneuver by which one attempts to grasp another’s feelings, wishes, and desires by taking the other’s perspective. See *Yishu* 2a, p. 15, which quotes *Analects* 6.30 (for the numbering of the *Analects*, I follow Lau 2010).
- 23 – If one does not recognize or admit one’s being in one body with the other even when one can feel the pain of the other, it is very likely from Cheng’s perspective that he or she is abnormal, just as one does not recognize one’s limb even when it is healthy. Such a person is no less blameworthy than the numb people who are “callous and merciless.”
- 24 – Note that for Cheng, everything is originally (ideally) supposed to be in one body; so the ultimate stage can somehow be taken as the “original state.” Besides the quotation above, e.g., he said, “Human beings and heaven and earth are one thing” (*Yishu* 11, p. 120). It is only when one leaves one’s capacity of *ren* unused that the sense of one-bodiness is lost and the “restoration” in terms of cultivation is required.
- 25 – If one is aware of numbness (perhaps by noticing that there are shared feelings and interactions among other people and things, and that one does not have these by oneself), one will naturally feel the urge to revitalize one’s own feelings vis-à-vis others and help accordingly. So, the tentative illustration of the first and second orders of *ren* in note 18 above also applies.
- 26 – Similar to what has been stated in note 24 above, for Cheng, everything is originally (ideally) supposed to be in one body and thereby belong to the same one “large self” that includes everything in the world. So it is only when one is not yet *ren* that one sees an “expansion of the self.” This explanation of “expansion” also applies henceforth.
- 27 – Altruism is often deemed valuable and important. That is why Slote says there are reasons to want the ones who champion altruism to be right (see Slote 2014, p. 90).
- 28 – While a normative position makes claims about what one ought to do, rather than what one actually does, a descriptive position describes in fact how human beings act.

- 29 – Slote highlights the distinction between selfishness and egoism. We will not call a behavior (such as making soup for oneself) selfish “unless it was neglectful of what others need or want” (Slote 2014, p. 221 n. 3).
- 30 – But, I shall argue, in Cheng’s case the empathy-induced motivation is neither altruistic nor egoistic, although certainly virtuous or moral.
- 31 – See, e.g., Batson 2011, pp. 70–76 and 110–134.
- 32 – See Batson 2011, pp. 96–109, for the details of the experiments. For convenience, I mention Batson’s name only (see the References).
- 33 – He explains “empathy” in terms of “empathic concern” and contrasts it with seven other uses of empathy that he thinks other scholars may adopt (Batson 2011, pp. 11–20). By “empathic concern” he means “other-oriented emotions elicited by and congruent with the perceived welfare of someone in need” (ibid., p. 11). Nevertheless, what he tested in the experiments were empathy and the ensuing motivation, although he understands “empathy” in terms of “empathic concern” in his famous hypothesis.
- 34 – Henceforth, I take “self-other merging,” “merging,” and “oneness” as synonymous.
- 35 – That is why Slote says: “Cialdini and his associates change the picture by offering a new kind of argument against the hypothesis of altruism, one that emphasizes metaphysical issues and their potential relevance to issues of motivation” (Slote 2014, p. 106).
- 36 – He says, “[U]nder conditions of oneness, helping should not be considered necessarily egoistic; it can be considered nonaltruistic, however, to distinguish it from the concept of selflessness” (Cialdini et al. 1997, p. 491). The inapplicability of both altruism and egoism labels is stated explicitly in Batson et al. 1997, pp. 496–497.
- 37 – See Amy Coplan, who holds a similar position: “Taking up one’s perspective without clear self-other differentiation can result in enmeshment or in self-oriented perspective-taking, which prevents one from successfully representing the other’s experience and leads to personal distress, false consensus effects, and prediction errors” (Coplan 2011, p. 17). However, this view is arbitrary, since empathy and merging are not necessarily of the kind that neglects the particularities of the “other.” See my discussion below.
- 38 – He goes on to quote Antonio Damasio, a neuroscientist: “In all the kinds of self we can consider one notion always commands center stage: the notion of a bounded, single individual that changes ever so gently across time but, somehow, seems to stay the same. . . . Continuity of reference is in effect what the self needs to offer” (quoted from Batson 2011, p. 159).
- 39 – This point is arbitrary. First, even if there is the representation of the “other” in the helping, it may be that one merely helps for the sake of the original self by

this only possible means of helping the merged entity; then we cannot say it is altruistic. This is what Cialdini would agree on. The second problem concerns the distinction of self and other. See Section V.

- 40 – But it should be added that the feelings that share a qualitative identity concerned here are obtained through empathy.
- 41 – The term “unity” seems to recruit less confusion only for it is free from the wordings of “body” or “self.” In fact, they all point to the shared feelings, the regarding of others as oneself, and the shared concern. This reminder applies for the rest of this essay.
- 42 – Again, it is only a coarse analogy, for without the determining power, parts like the hand and the foot do not think or make their own decisions. It is just to show that within the “large body,” i.e., the world, there are different parts, namely different people and things.
- 43 – See note 42 above.
- 44 – See note 12 concerning the plausibility of empathizing with plants and things.
- 45 – Huang 2016, which is precisely on the issue of “empathy with devils,” takes Wang Yangming’s thought as an illustration. That article helps elaborate a typically Confucian idea that Cheng would also champion.
- 46 – Huang explicates Wang Yangming’s empathy and discusses the nature of empathy. I find this stimulating, although I have some disagreements with it.
- 47 – Seemingly, one may wonder whether such help in the case of “C helps for the sake of C” is egoistic. But such a view is pointless, as the self is relative to the other, and in this case the body (i.e., C) is not relative to any other (i.e., C is not on the same level with A and B). It is only when there is something, say, X, outside C that we can regard C as a self to be in opposition to the “other,” and thereby think that, in an empathic relation between C and X, C’s motivation is egoistic when C’s action to relieve X’s pain is merely for the sake of C. But this is another scenario (see Huang 2014).

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