Chapter 40: ZHU Xi on Self-Focused vs. Other-Focused Empathy[1]

Published in *The Dao Companion to the Philosophy of Zhu Xi*, edited by Yong Huang and Kai-chiu Ng

Justin Tiwald

1. Introduction

This chapter is about issues in ethics and moral psychology that have been little explored by contemporary philosophers, ones that concern the advantages and disadvantages of two different kinds of empathy. Roughly, first type is what is sometimes called "other-focused" empathy, in which one reconstructs the thoughts and feelings that someone else has or would have. The second type, "self-focused" empathy, is the sort of emotional attitude someone adopts when she imagines how *she* would think or feel were *she* in the other person's place. Both are variants of empathy, for both have to do with having thoughts and feelings that are more apt, in the relevant senses, for someone else's circumstances than one's own. But they differ with respect to how much one makes substantial reference to oneself in order to elicit those thoughts and feelings. In cases of self-focused empathy, we imagine ourselves facing predicaments relevantly similar to those of the person with whom we sympathize, and we achieve our empathetic response by doing things like recalling equivalent experiences or noting similar interests and desires that may bear on the situation. A little reflection on this distinction shows that it can in fact have profound implications

for care, compassion, love, human motivation, and the sense of oneness or unity with others that matters so much for ethics and the well-rounded human life, but there is not yet a body of literature in contemporary moral psychology or western philosophy that really wrestle with these implications. Some influential philosophers and psychologists have taken note of the distinction,[2] but none have engaged the issues as thoroughly as did ZHU Xi and his students in 12th century, largely in a series of commentaries and conversations that have yet to be translated into Western languages.

The aim of this chapter is to explicate Zhu's view about self- and other-focused empathy as he characterized them, reconstruct his arguments for his view, and then discuss some of the implications for ethics and moral psychology more generally. Zhu's position in brief is that self-focused empathy is—for flawed moral agents like ourselves—a necessary and useful means by which we can better understand and care for others, but that ultimately it is the ladder we must kick away in favor of purely other-focused empathy. Only purely other-focused empathy is compatible with *ren* 仁 (humaneness, benevolence), which is in a crucial respect the most important and all-encompassing virtue. I begin with some discussion of self- and other-focused empathy in contemporary philosophy and psychology. Next, I turn to some historical background to explain how the distinction between self- and other-focused empathy became philosophically important in Song dynasty China. I then describe Zhu's account of the two types of empathy and put forward what I take to be the two main arguments that Zhu either made or presupposed for seeing other-focused rather than self-focused empathy as the necessary constituent of humaneness. In unpacking these arguments I will probe both strengths and weaknesses and draw some more

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[2] Batson 2009, Hoffman 2000: 54-59, Coplan 2011: 9-15, and perhaps Darwall 2002: 63-65.

general conclusions about their philosophical significance for contemporary ethics and moral psychology.

2. Self-Focused vs. Other-Focused Empathy in Contemporary Moral Psychology

For purposes of this chapter, "empathy" refers to that which consists in reconstructing the salient features of another's psychological state, variously understood as something that one does in one's imagination, by simulation, or by vicarious experience of the other's thoughts and feelings—all overlapping permutations of what's sometimes called "role-taking" or "perspective-taking." But most of the discussion will be about what I will call empathetic *concern,* which consists of both the perspective-taking as well as care or concern for the person in question. We sometimes use empathy to understand or imagine what's going on inside other people's heads, so to speak, but without much concern about their welfare (consider an empathetic sadist) (Nussbaum 2001: 329-33). Other terms are often used to refer to the sort of phenomenon I am calling empathetic concern, including "sympathy," "sympathetic understanding," "compassion," and "pity." I have found that there is no consensus about how these terms are understood and distinguished in philosophy, psychology, or natural language. At present, the best we can do is define by stipulation and try our best to pick natural language terms that get the point across.[3]

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[3] One final clarification. We do not always need to reconstruct someone's actual psychological state in order to have adequate empathetic concern for her. It is often more appropriate to imagine successfully how she *would* feel under certain circumstances, and sometimes the best way to empathize with someone is by imagining a somewhat better informed or idealized version of her. If Zhang goes about his days blissfully ignorant about the nasty and unfounded rumors circulating about him, there is not much empathetic concern in vicariously experiencing his blissful ignorance. An empathetic person feels sorrow and embarrassment for Zhang instead. For a brief review of contemporary philosophers on the use of empathy to construct counterfactual psychological states see (Huang 2016: 226-27).

In most contemporary discussion of empathy and overlapping phenomena, there is a tendency to conflate two kinds of perspective-taking. One is the sort that I deploy when I envision or simulate how others feel under certain circumstances, the other is the sort that I engage when I imagine how *I* would feel if *I* were under the same or relevantly similar circumstances. If I imagine how Meihua would feel about being falsely accused of stealing from her employer and fired from her job, and in so doing I imagine myself being falsely accused and fired from my job, this is an instance of the second type, which the early pioneer in empathy research Ezra Stotland called "imagine-self" empathy, and which psychologists have more recently called "self-focused." These are contrasted with "imagine-other" or "other-focused" empathy, respectively (Stotland 1969, Hoffman 2000: 54-59, Batson 2009: 7). The psychologists who have taken note of this distinction take themselves to be testing it when they instruct subjects to imagine themselves in another person's place (Hoffman 2000: 55-56, Batson, Early, and Salvarani 1997).

One of those psychologists, Martin Hoffman, seems to count as "self-focused" instances of empathy in which one's concern or distress is elicited in part by memories of personal experiences with similar circumstances (Hoffman 2000: 57). An inveterate logic-chopper might insist that this particular variant of self-focus—where one's empathy is elicited in part by memories of similar experiences to oneself—is different from the sort of self-focus that psychologists are testing when they ask subjects just to imagine themselves in another person's place. But as we will see in the next section, it is useful to generalize about a range of self-focused perspective-taking processes, for the sort of self-focused empathy that interests ZHU Xi highlights the process of making analogies or noticing likenesses to one's own feelings, desires, and personal experiences. Let us say, then, that empathy is self-focused just in case thoughts about one's self play a substantial and direct causal role in eliciting the empathetic response. Thoughts about one's

self play a substantial and direct causal role when, for example, my feeling of sorrow and frustration for Meihua is elicited by asking myself "how would *I* feel if I were falsely accused of stealing and fired for it?", or by any recollection of being falsely accused of stealing and fired myself, or even by memories that are relevantly similar to being falsely accused of stealing and fired, as in a memory of being falsely accused of some other wrong and of being fired without due cause or justification. Thoughts about one's self do not play a substantial and direct causal role if, for example, I have some fleeting recollection of similar experiences but they do not enlarge or enhance my feelings of sorrow and frustration for Meihua, or if the thoughts seem to me incidental to what makes Meihua's situation worthy of sorrow and frustration (e.g., perhaps I note in passing that Meihua's employer shares my name). Adam Smith's most memorable account of what he calls "sympathy" is a powerful formulation of self-focused empathy, one in which thoughts about one's self clearly have a prominent and perhaps multi-faceted causal role:

> By the imagination we place ourselves in [the other's] situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them. (Smith 2009: 13-14)

As the psychologist Daniel Batson has observed, many philosophers and psychologists tend to conflate these two types of empathy, although some empirical studies (the few that track the distinction between the two types) suggest that they have different consequences for human motivation and behavior (Batson 2009: 7). The principal difference seems to be that self-focused empathy elicits more "empathic distress"—we tend to respond more strongly, and experience more alarm and uneasiness about another person's difficulties when we imagine ourselves in her position

(Hoffman 2000: 55-56; Batson, Early, and Salvarani 1997). However, this greater propensity to experience empathic distress also appears to make self-focused empathizers more liable to experience *personal* distress—that is, more likely to start worrying about themselves and their own interests, leading them to want to flee or remove reminders of the distressing situation rather than render aid (Hoffman 2000: 56, Coplan 12-13). As we will see, this is just a start on much larger and more consequential debate about the comparative advantages and disadvantages of the two types.

3. ZHU Xi's Distinction in Historical Context

To understand the philosophical significance of the distinction between self- and other-focused empathy for ZHU Xi, it is helpful to look at the context in which the distinction arose. Two of the founding figures of orthodox Neo-Confucianism (*Daoxue* 道學), the brothers CHENG Hao 程顥 (1032-1085) and CHENG Yi 程頤 (1033-1107), were interested in the connections between the virtue of humaneness or benevolence (*ren*) and a certain kind of empathetic state described in ancient texts as *shu* 恕. By their time, *shu* had long been associated with Confucius' formulation of the Golden Rule: "Do not do to others as one would not want done to oneself" (*Analects* 15.24). On its face, this description might appear to suggest that *shu* is just a decision procedure or principle of action, but most Confucians, including the Cheng brothers, also understood it as the emotional process or attitude that positions us to better understand and simulate the feelings of others. On most readings, that emotional process requires that we imagine what it is like to be someone else, such that we can know and simulate feelings that are more apt for the other's situation than our own. For this reason, many have translated *shu* as "sympathy" or "empathy."

It is clear from the recorded conversations with the Cheng brothers that they saw *shu* as the means by which we can acquire the virtue of humaneness. But it is also clear that they saw it as deficient in crucial respects, so that it must be either superseded or transformed before one can have humaneness proper. On their view, *shu* is the method by which humaneness can be implemented (*ren zhi fang* 仁之方), and comes close to true humaneness (*jin hu ren* 近乎仁), but does not enable us to achieve a state of oneness, which they characterized as forming one body with Heaven, Earth and the myriad things (Cheng and Cheng 1981: [2A] 15 and [7] 97). Multiple generations of disciples were intrigued by the suggestion that *shu* fell short of true humaneness, but there was not a wide consensus as to how and in what respects it fell short. The Cheng brothers evidently thought that true humaneness comes easily, whereas *shu* is, for the agents that adopt it, more like an imperative (*wu* 勿 "do not!") and this implies that *shu* takes effort or feels forced (Nivison 1996: 69-70). But this did not clearly or obviously explain what *shu* is, such that effort would be required, nor why it is experienced as an imperative, nor why *shu* would inhibit or stand in the way of becoming one with the world.

Almost a century later, ZHU Xi arrived at an interpretation of *shu* which seemed a promising explanation of how *shu*-type empathy differs from the virtue of humaneness, one that he thought was not explicitly articulated by the Cheng brothers but nevertheless consistent with their view (Zhu 1986: [33] 850-51). Briefly put, Zhu sees the principal difference between *shu* and proper humaneness as turning on the issue of how much it depends on drawing inferences from one's own self—one's own feelings, dispositions and experiences—in order to instantiate the appropriate empathetic feelings for the other. When we use *shu,* he suggests, we need to compare others to ourselves in order to elicit the right feelings and motivations. In the case of proper humaneness, this is not required. Zhu sometimes elucidates this distinction by building on a

famous passage from the *Analects,* which describes someone who, "desiring to establish himself, helps to establish others; desiring to succeed, helps others to succeed" (*Analects* 6.30). Here is how Zhu says that it works when using *shu:*

> One takes that which he finds nearby in himself and draws analogies to that of other people….One desires to succeed, comes to fully understand that others also desire to succeed, and *only then* assists others in succeeding. (Zhu 1986: [27] 690, my emphasis)

And here is how it works for the humane (*ren*) moral agent:

> Just by wanting to succeed, one helps others to succeed, and does so without applying any additional effort. (Zhu 1986: [33] 846)

Another bit of technical terminology that Zhu used to distinguish *shu* as a special sort of empathetic perspective-taking called attention to the role that "drawing analogies" (*tui* 推) plays in simulating or constructing the thoughts and feelings of the other. Zhu underscores this point by sometimes referring to *shu* as "extending to the other by inferring from the self" (*tui ji ji ren* 推己及人). Here I take Zhu (following predecessor Confucians) to mean "drawing analogies" in a double sense: first, one sees resemblances between the psychological states and dispositions of the two parties (e.g., that the other person's desire for recognition or success is similar to one's own); second one sees how for both oneself and for the other, the feelings under consideration stand in a similar relation to other contextual elements (e.g., the circumstances under which the desire is most acute or how it is counter-balanced with other habits and inclinations). With a coherent appreciation for the analogous parts, one can then (if necessary) imagine things from the other's point of view.

In contrast to "extending to others by inferring from the self," Zhu suggests that the other form of empathy achieves the apt thoughts and feelings more automatically and directly. In this case, one does not need to look for analogies to one's own feelings and experiences and so one does not need to imagine oneself in the other person's situation. Zhu calls this method "extending

to the other by means of one's self" or "taking one's self and extending it to the other" (*yi ji ji ren*
以己及人).[4] For ease of reference, I will abbreviate "extending to the other by inferring from the
self" (*tui ji ji ren*) as "inference extension" and "extending to the other by means of one's self" (*yi
ji ji ren*) as "direct extension." Zhu sums up the distinction between the two types of empathy in
these two recorded conversations:

> When mature it is *ren,* when growing [*sheng* 生] it is *shu. Ren* is spontaneous, *shu* takes
> effort. *Ren* is uncalculating and has nothing in view, *shu* is calculating and has an object in
> view.[5]

> Someone asked about the distinction between [extending to others] "by means of the
> self" and [extending to others] "by inferring from the self."

> ZHU Xi responded: "[extending to others] 'by means of the self' is spontaneous;
> [extending to others] 'by inferring from the self' requires the application of effort.
> 'Desiring to establish oneself, one establishes others; desiring to realize oneself, one
> helps others to realize themselves'—these are [extending to others] 'by means of the
> self.' 'One takes that which he finds nearby in himself'[6] and draws analogies to that of
> other people. One desires to establish oneself, comes to fully understand that others also
> desire to establish themselves, and only then assists others in establishing themselves.
> One desires to succeed, comes to fully understand that others also desire to succeed, and
> only then assists others in succeeding—these are 'extending to others by inferring from
> the self." (Zhu 1986: [27] 690)

In both phrases, the term that is translated as "extending" (*ji* 及) is evocative of someone reaching

out across a gap between herself and the other person. In the first case, perhaps, she reaches the

other by drawing lines of comparison between the two of them, while in the second case her

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[4] ZHU Xi's most explicit accounts of these two types of perspective-taking appear in fascicles
(*juan* 卷) 27 and 33 of the *Zhuzi Yulei* (Zhu 1986). His use of the terms "inferring from the self"
(*tui ji*) and "by means of the self" (*yi ji*) is self-consciously adopted from the recorded lessons of
the Cheng brothers. Zhu suspects that CHENG Hao was the brother who used the terms to
distinguish between *shu* and *ren* (Zhu 1986: [27] 691).
[5] Zhu 1986: [6] 116. My translation of the third sentence closely follows Wing-tsit CHAN's
(Chan 1963: 633).
[6] A reference to the "Great Appendix" (繫辭) commentary on the *Classic of Changes* (易經),
B.2.

reaching is more direct and personal, so that she feels the other's psychological states as if there were no gap at all.

As Zhu sees it, both inference extension and direct extension require that we have some of the same basic emotional dispositions as the people whose perspectives we adopt (Zhu 1986: [16] 361-62). Most notably, we can achieve little empathy for the ordinary hardships of others if we lack desires for nourishment, companionship, or progeny. But presumably the collection of necessary overlapping desires is both more fine-grained and more sophisticated, including such things as desires for a stable livelihood, for the love and respect of one's children, for kindness from strangers, and so on. Zhu assumes that we can care humanely or benevolently about a friend or student's success in some career even if we do not have any personal interest in that particular line of work. So it seems a safe assumption that the set of shared desires can be characterized at a fairly general level of description, but not so general that they would have little motivational power. To empathize with a friend's desire to excel as a tax collector, I would not necessarily be required to desire a career in revenue collection for myself. It would be enough that I have desires for stable livelihood, a variety of interests in having a social impact or making a social contribution, aversions to various afflictions that a meaningful administrative career helps one to avoid (e.g., tedium, physical exhaustion), and so on.

It is important not to overstate the degree to which direct extension bypasses the self. Just as for inference extension and *shu,* direct extension and *ren* also require that the psychological states that we reconstruct on behalf of others draw on similar feelings and desires that we have in ourselves. It is *my* disposition to feel hungry when deprived of food that enables me to empathize with those who starve, and *my* strong preference for a stable livelihood that allows me to imagine the relief of a friend upon securing a permanent position. Just as for *shu,* my own relevantly similar

feelings and desires play a causal role in bringing about the appropriate response. What makes *shu* different is that thoughts and feelings about selfhood *as such* play a significant causal role in generating the empathetic response: we first compel ourselves to consider how we would feel or have previously felt when similarly situated, then compare this imagined or recollected scenario with the new one to determine whether they are analogous, and then (insofar as this act is supposed to motivate empathetic behavior) act accordingly. By contrast, in the case of direct extension, we do not force ourselves to consider (and compare) the other's situation and feelings. And tellingly, we do not *need* to imagine ourselves in the other's place in order to empathize, nor do we need to imagine ourselves in the other's place in order to be moved to act on the other's behalf.

As noted earlier, Zhu thinks that cashing out the distinction between *shu* and *ren* in terms of self- and other-focus helps to explain some more widely accepted features of the two, most notably that *shu* requires effort and is experienced as a kind of imperative or obligation. It is worth saying a bit more about how he understands the imperative and the effort that it requires to fulfill it. Zhu takes it that people who use inference extension are self-consciously trying to approximate humane (*ren*) behavior, and frequently also trying to strengthen and refine the character traits that make for durable virtue. An essential feature of humane behavior is that it is "fair" (*ping* 平) to the interests or desires of others. It is this commitment to fairness that we tend to see as a moral imperative, and Zhu implies that we apply conscious effort just at the moment when we determine ourselves to proceed in a fair way (Zhu 1986: [16] 361). On my somewhat speculative interpretation, Zhu thinks there is a psychologically necessary connection between *self-consciously* seeking fair and humane treatment of others and experiencing the act of perspective-taking as obligatory: if someone is concerned with "being a humane person" under that description, and she understands being fair as a requirement for being humane, she will necessarily regard

fairness to others as an obligation. Arguably, Zhu posits a further necessary connection between regarding extension of self as an obligation and the need to exert conscious effort or force in order to take up another's point of view. When people take a course of action that they represent to themselves as something they "must" or "should" do, it will require some exertion to undertake it.

A final note about the sense of "fairness" in play here. Zhu does not exclusively have in mind fairness in resources or privileges (for instance, he is not exclusively concerned with equal or meritorious distribution of goods). Rather, he intends fairness in the sense of not living by double standards or excepting oneself from the expectations that one normally has of others. More specifically, being fair is a matter of treating a person relative to her position vis-à-vis you as you would want others to treat you relative to your position vis-à-vis them. You treat your subordinates as you want your superiors to treat you, your equals as you want your equals to treat you, your parents as you want your children to treat you, and so on.[7] When Zhu discusses inference extension as a method of ensuring fairness, he often refers to it as the way or method of the "measuring tape and carpenter's square," likening a neat symmetry of desire and treatment to lines or areas measured to equal lengths (Zhu 1986: [16] 361, 363-64).

4. Zhu's Criticisms of Self-Focused Empathy

In this section, I will explicate two arguments for the view that inference extension is inferior to direct extension, in the sense that the former is less virtuous than the latter. The essential components of these two arguments are stated or implied by ZHU Xi. As we will see, both arguments characterize inference extension's focus on the self as problematic, either because of

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[7] Zhu takes this "relational" version of inference-extension from the Confucian classic, the *Great Learning* (大學)*,* part 10, paragraph 2.

its psychological effects on the feelings and behavior of the inference extender or because it is itself an indication of ethical shortcoming. The two criticisms of inference extension are thus criticisms of self-focused empathy as well.

4.1 The Problem of Continence and Internal Conflict

In Zhu's analyses of inference extension, he often singles out the moral agent's need to apply conscious effort as an indication of its inferiority to the (more spontaneous) process of direct extension. Much like Aristotle and other Western virtue ethicists, many Confucians consider it an indication of less-than-complete virtue if an agent finds he must overcome countervailing inclinations to act, even if he regularly prevails over those inclinations, as in the case of the merely continent or *enkratic* person (Aristotle 1998: III.1). For ZHU Xi, resistance to virtuous behavior typically reflects internal division or disharmony, as though some parts of the moral agent are not fully "on-board," not sharing the enthusiasm for some virtuous end or practice. If one finds it difficult to help one's own children, doing so may be good or useful but not particularly admirable. The same goes for someone who finds it difficult to resign from a company that turns out to be irredeemably corrupt. A person should be so "at ease" in her virtue that she does not find it a struggle to behave virtuously. When Zhu highlights the fact that inference extension is usually forced, he thus evokes a widespread worry about the inherent shortcomings of forced moral behavior in general.

Confucians in ZHU Xi's era often marked behavior and psychological states that fall short in this way by saying that they lack the quality of *cheng* 誠, variously translated as "sincerity," "authenticity," or "integrity." Zhu says that when one reflects on one's other-directed behavior and

sees lack of *cheng* in oneself, that indicates that one must apply oneself to *shu* (self-focused empathy) (Zhu 1986: [60] 1436-37).

Let me pause briefly to highlight another thing that can make forcing virtue problematic: self-consciousness about being good. As we saw in section 3 of this chapter, Zhu thinks that we find inference extension difficult because we typically see it as an imperative, and we see it as an imperative not because we want to do things that happen to be virtuous, but rather because we want virtue or humaneness as such. By contrast, the truly humane or benevolent person does not help her friend for the sake of being humane or virtuous; she does it for reasons more concerned with others than with her own goodness—e.g., for the sake of keeping her promise to the friend or out of concern for the friend's feelings. To borrow Zhu's imagery, a person who is truly "at ease in humaneness" (*an ren* 安仁) is so comfortable in the virtue that she is not even aware of her own humaneness, just as someone wearing supremely comfortable belts or shoes forgets that she is wearing them.[8]

I see three major worries about Zhu's invocation of the problem of continence and internal conflict to show that other-focused empathy is superior to self-focused empathy. The first (and probably most obvious to people familiar with 20th and 21st century normative ethics) is that it is based on a controversial presupposition about the inherent moral shortcoming of mere continence. After all, there is at least one major normative ethical theory—namely, consequentialism—which says, roughly, that the sum total contribution to the good provided by a course of action is the only thing that matters about it intrinsically, and motivations do not matter in themselves. And even if

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[8] Zhu 1986: [26] 643. Some might take issue with the suggestion that Zhu can sidestep the problem of egoism so easily, for it could be the case that Zhu (like many ethical thinkers who see virtue as central to both morality and personal well-being) builds his egoism into the doctrinal foundations of his philosophy. For a persuasive response to this objection, see (Huang 2010).

one is not a thoroughgoing consequentialist who denies that *any* motives as such ever have intrinsic moral significance, one might still be circumspect about the *particular* motives to which Zhu is paying close attention. If a child is drowning, it might seem that it should be enough that the child is saved, whether I first need to imagine myself in the child's place or not.

This worry may appear to go right to the heart of ZHU Xi's philosophical enterprise, and indeed to the heart of virtue ethical traditions the world over. I myself am sympathetic to the presupposition that better moral behavior is generally more wholehearted and not grudging or reluctant. Among other things, it better coheres with broader historical and demographic scope of people's moral intuitions. It is also easier to reconcile a theory that accepts this presupposition with widespread objections to would-be moral demands that run deeply against the grain of human psychology. For example, most people object to the suggestion that we have duties to harvest the organs of healthy people to save a few more who are sick, or duties to execute the innocent for some marginal gain in social order. It may be that these sorts of putative moral demands are wrong because we could never embrace them wholeheartedly (Tiwald 2018b: 181). But Zhu's argument does not depend on a full-blown defense of one of the basic premises of virtue ethics to get traction. Even if one thinks that it makes little intrinsic difference to the quality of people's pro-social behavior if it is grudging or reflects internal division, most will readily admit that, in terms of instrumental goods or extrinsic outcomes, it is generally better to have people whose pro-social behavior is wholehearted. We have a tremendous number of other-directed moral obligations and life is a lot easier for those who do them automatically and lovingly. As nearly all of the well-known Confucian philosophers are fond of pointing out, wholeheartedness in one's virtuous behavior is far more conducive to a virtuous person's own happiness (Tiwald 2018b: 179-80). Furthermore, wholehearted empathy seems to be a necessary condition for a range of indispensable

human relationships, from close friendships to romantic partnerships to the relationships between parents and children.

A second concern about Zhu's appeal to the problem of continence and internal division is that it might appear to single out one of the two forms of empathy unfairly. Why does self-focused empathy always take effort and why does other-focused empathy usually come more easily? There is not room to develop a full response to this concern, but briefly, I think we will find Zhu's view plausible if we assume that most instances of moral failure or moral shortcoming arise because of deep-rooted, self-serving desires, desires that not only directly countervail our pro-social inclinations but operate in multifarious ways on decision-making processes, through cognitive biases or motivated reasoning. Scholars of ZHU Xi and Song Confucianism more generally will recognize this is a widely-shared assumption about moral failure—that at the bottom of each instance is some intransigent selfish inclination (*siyi* 私意) or selfish desire (*siyu* 私欲). My own understanding of moral failure is more nuanced, but I still think it basically correct that in most cases where I fall short in any given day, I fall short because some sort of self-serving disposition either stopped me from doing as I should or shrewdly found some way to sidestep or ignore reasons or considerations in favor of doing what I ought to have done. Or at least selfishness and self-serving motivated reasoning have a great deal more explanatory power than, say, a lack of the basic aptitudes of moral judgment. Most daily instances of moral failure are things like exaggerating one's own achievements or contributions, winning someone's trust through speculative gossip about a mutual acquaintance, and simple failure to respond to people with problems that, from any reasonable third-person perspective, obviously warrant assistance and relief. There's a sense in which we have all of the cognitive and emotional equipment we need to recognize that these things are wrong, but we do them anyway, and that is due to the influence of

selfish inclinations and desires. Accordingly, when we fail to empathize, selfishness is more often than not the likely culprit as well. I take Zhu's reasonable suggestion to be that the nearest and most readily available tool with which to overcome that selfishness is self-focused empathy. If self-serving desires and intentions predispose one to ignore or discount the distress of a colleague who has been ostracized by malicious gossip, or the suffering of an acquaintance in desperate need of medical care, it is quite possible that the best of the available remedies is to imagine oneself in their place.

A final worry about Zhu's invocation of continence to downgrade self-focused empathy comes from one of Zhu's great historical critics, DAI Zhen 戴震 (1724-1777). Dai does not single out this particular worry about perspective-taking for criticism. Nevertheless, he does have a line about the importance of relying on conscious effort in moral agency more generally. Dai, who is generally grumpy about his Confucian predecessor's love affair with spontaneity, works hard to separate notions of ease in moral deliberation from notions of ease in execution. The true mark of virtue, he thinks, is not the ability to resolve a moral quandary without concerted effort, but the ability to *carry it out* without concerted effort, once one has come to a full understanding of the various reasons and contextual considerations in its favor. If we want to be entirely "on board" with a morally challenging course of action, it is even to our benefit to force ourselves to consider whether and why we should take it. In the virtuous person, a more deliberate process of reflection—especially when it helps us see more vividly the underlying reasons or considerations in favor of a course of action—makes it possible to perform virtuous acts *more* wholeheartedly, and also to take greater joy in their execution.[9] Applying this to empathetic perspective-taking, we

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[9] See Dai 1996: 328-31 (section 41). For an English translation see Ewell (1990: 392-398). I discuss this feature of Dai's virtue theory in Tiwald (2010: 409-11).

can insist that a fully virtuous agent should find it easy to refrain from malicious gossip, even if it in fact requires some extended, self-focused reflection on the considerations that make malicious gossip wrong.

I find this to be a more powerful objection to Zhu's downranking of self-focused empathy, although I also think that Zhu's ethics offers ample resources with which to formulate a response. On my reading, Zhu—like many Song and Ming Confucians—tends to see protracted, effortful reflection as rife with opportunities for selfish inclinations and desires to develop one-sided, biased, or fabricated justifications for self-serving courses of action. He recognizes that some particularly complex, high-stakes cases (say, matters of complex public policy or trials for capital crimes) cannot be given due consideration without a certain amount of effort expended on thinking things through, but on the whole and for most purposes he thinks we are better served by finely-attuned spontaneous reactions, and he thinks this in part because it does not give cognitive biases and motivated reasoning a point of entry (Angle and Tiwald 2017: 169-70; Tiwald 2018b: 182-83). He also has a deep-seated belief in the fundamental, well-formed capacity for goodness in all human beings just by their nature. My own hunch is that Zhu is probably right about the tendency of selfish desires to assert themselves and influence (to bad effect) our deliberative processes, at least where the object of deliberation is some course of action that has obvious implications for our own interests. But I think he is probably wrong to suggest that we in some sense have sufficiently well-formed, morally good dispositions by nature. I am thus of two minds about problem of continence and internal conflict.

4.2. Incompatibility with the Experience of Oneness and Unity

For ZHU Xi, ideal virtuous activity makes possible a certain kind of experience and way of seeing the world that he characterizes as "forming one body" (*wei yi ti* 為一體) with others. At its most profound, we join together with "Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things" (*Tiandi wanwu* 天地萬物), but the experience permits of smaller-scale merging, such as between one's self and a family member or close friend. On this way of understanding the self's relationship to other people and things, the others are in some sense extensions of ourselves a vice versa, sharing a mutual identity in roughly the say that hands and eyes that belong to the same body share a mutual identity. Some other Song Confucians (especially CHENG Hao and YANG Shi 楊時 [1053-1135]) tend to emphasize and wax ecstatic about this experience of oneness more than Zhu, but it undeniably plays a central role in Zhu's ethics, as it does for most orthodox Neo-Confucians of the Song and Ming.[10]

In the *Classified Conversations of Master Zhu,* ZHU Xi makes it clear that he thinks only *ren* and other-focused empathy are compatible with the experience of unity or "oneness of body" with others. Much of the discussion focuses on his reading of an intriguing passage in the *Mencius,* which Zhu takes to suggest a clear incompatibility between experiencing oneself as unified with the world and self-focused empathy or *shu.* Let us start by looking quickly at the passage from the *Mencius* itself.

> The myriad things are all complete within me. There is no greater joy than to discover sincerity (*cheng*) upon examining oneself. If one must seek out humaneness nothing will bring one closer than forcing oneself to exercise *shu* in one's actions. (*Mencius* 7A4)

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[10] See (Zhu 1986: [6] 117) and Chapter 19, "Zhu Xi and the Idea of One Body" in this volume. For an important and innovative work that brings to light the significance of this neglected thread of Song-Ming Confucian philosophy see (Ivanhoe 2017).

On Zhu's interpretation, this passage is a kind of *locus classicus* for reasons to prefer *ren* over *shu:* only through *ren* will one form a complete whole with the myriad things and experience the greatest of joys. Furthermore, only *ren* is wholehearted or sincere (*cheng*). If one finds that one lacks sincerity and thus cannot achieve *ren* directly, then the next best option is "forcing oneself to exercise *shu* in one's actions" (*qiang shu er xing* 強恕而行), which is how we best acquire the traits and aptitudes that enable us to become *ren* ("seek out *ren*" *qiu ren* 求仁) when we currently lack them (Zhu 1983: *Mengzi jizhu* 7A4).

One can think of a variety of reasons why Zhu might believe self-focused empathy interferes with the experience of oneness or unity with others, but it is worth looking at the finer points of Zhu's psychological account of *shu* to see wherein he thinks the real problem lies. As noted in section 3, Neo-Confucians before Zhu thought that *shu* falls short of humaneness in part because it requires exertion. But the crucial issue for Zhu is not so much the fact that exertion is required, but the specific activity or function the exertion is applied to. Zhu says that the "point at which effort is applied" (*zhuo li chu* 著力處) is when one exercises one's "ability to take that which one finds nearby in himself and draw analogies [to that of other people] (*neng jin qu pi* 能近取譬)."[11] Put more succinctly, it is the work of projecting ourselves into others that wearies us. My modest proposal is that Zhu believes that once we have started thinking about our own concerns and needs, we will resist thinking about how others would feel when similarly situated. Having elicited concerns about oneself, it becomes a burden to care about others.

The psychologist Martin Hoffman has studied a phenomenon that might seem to be a close approximation of the one that Zhu is concerned about. He describes a tendency in self-focused

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[11] (Zhu 1986: [33] 850-51); cf. (Zhu 1986: [33] 845).

perspective-taking that he calls "egoistic drift." When subjects start to relate the experiences and concerns of others to their own, eliciting feelings about themselves, the "image" of the other person "fades away, aborting or temporarily aborting the empathic process" (2000, 56). I think Zhu has something different in mind. He is not worried that the image of the other will fade away. Rather, he is worried that we will see the other's concerns as making demands on us, so that we will start to see our interests as being at odds with theirs. When one starts to see one's own interests as being at odds with another's, one has already shut the door to oneness, and foreclosed the possibility of forming one body with the other.

Zhu makes another observation about *shu* that bears this out. As we saw earlier, he says that when people apply *shu,* they act out of a sense of obligation or commitment. The obligation in question is the imperative to be "fair" (*ping* 平) to others, understood as giving each his or her due (Zhu 1983: *Daxue* 16); Zhu 1986: [16] 364-65). Here again the labor in *shu* appears to arise from the expectation that, having dwelled for a moment on one's own needs and interests, one then must take an interest in someone else's welfare.

By appealing to the ideal of caring for others as different parts of a larger whole, Zhu offers up an argument for other-focused empathy that is rich in philosophical and religious significance. Some may have doubts about the value of this sort or care, or may find it too abstract, unrealistic, or implausible to make for a worthy aim in one's moral psychology. On the other hand, so many of the world's great philosophical and religious traditions put a tremendous premium on the experience of unity or oneness with the larger world, so that it seems like an aim whose value and significance we not dismiss too quickly. Rather than try to settle some of the issues raised by Zhu's appeal to the value of experiencing unity or oneness, then, I will instead simply note what I take

to be some of the most likely objections and then highlight some of the resources Zhu provides for answering them.

It is likely to strike some contemporary readers that there are dangers and excesses in caring about others as though they were (or are) extensions of oneself. We might worry that aspiring to this sort of care inhibits awareness of a distinct sense of self. We might be concerned that people who regard others in this way will become enmeshed in their lives, investing too much thought and heartache in the affairs of someone else. It is easy to imagine a variety of misjudgments, confusions, or outright delusions that might arise if someone regularly took herself to *be* the people with whom she empathizes, and one wonders whether it could rightly be called empathy in such cases.

These are serious and legitimate concerns, but it would be unfair to Zhu to just assume that he has the sort of vague and metaphysically confused notion of oneness or unity that they seem to suggest. Zhu essentially takes the experience of "forming one body" to be a distilled version of the sort of other-directed care that we learn though all manner of ordinary human relationships. He emphatically rejects accounts of "forming one body" with others that are so vague as to allow for perverse or psychologically unrealistic forms of other-directed care. In his widely-read "Treatise on Humaneness" (*Renshuo* 仁說)*,* he frequently juxtaposes his own account of *ren* with that of the lineage of Song dynasty Confucians that he associates with YANG Shi. One of the major differences between his view and theirs is that his provides content and texture to the notion of forming a whole with others where Yang and his disciples are only able to offer vague guidelines and mysticism. Yang thinks that oneness is a fact about us that we discover in ourselves, in our nature at its most tranquil state or phase, but not something we can articulate. Zhu criticizes this account for providing too little guidance and leading to confusion and recklessness, apparently because it

says too little about the particular types of things we should realize and do in order to become one.[12] By contrast, Zhu's account of "forming one body" says that we become one with others by caring about and contributing to others' life and growth (*sheng* 生), and uses natural pro-social behaviors as starting points or guidelines as to how much we should care.

Zhu also argues somewhat elliptically that the mystical account of oneness leads people to another error, which is "to regard other things as oneself" (*ren wu wei ji* 認物爲己).[13] It is not clear why this counts against the mystical view and not Zhu's own. As one of Zhu's major twentieth-century critics has pointed out, Zhu himself also allows that we can form one body with others, so it is difficult to see how he avoids making the same mistake (Mou 1968: 249-52). My hunch is that Zhu is paying close attention to different ways and senses in which we could be one with other things, some of them apt and others not. I can share a mutual identity with, say, a monkey or tree, in roughly the same way that my eye and my hand share a mutual identity with one another—they are not numerically identical nor qualitatively identical, but they belong to the same body. Perhaps Zhu's point is that his account provides enough content to help us see how we can be "one" in the sense of having a mutual identity but "not one" in the sense of being numerically and qualitatively distinct, whereas the mystical view tends to blur the latter distinctions.[14]

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[12] Zhu 1996, 3543-44 (cf. Chan 1963, 595-96).
[13] Zhu 1996, 3544 (cf. Chan 1963, 596).
[14] Zhu's Neo-Confucian predecessor Hu Hong 胡宏 (1105-1161) raises doubts about the stronger, more mystical reading of "being one" in a passage that Zhu discusses in his "Misgivings about Master Hu's *Understanding of Words*" (胡子知言疑義). See Zhu (2002: 3560-61).

As the contemporary psychologist Martin Hoffman has argued, there is ample evidence that empathy develops in young children alongside a robust sense of oneself as a distinct person. The lives of young children are so full of vivid reminders of how they differ from others that a distinct sense of self is virtually unavoidable and found in every culture (Hoffman 2000: 275-78). We should not, therefore, expect Zhu to endorse a vision for other-focused empathy in which people become deeply confused about their numerical individuality, nor one in which they lose sight of the fact that they are people of different needs, character, and stations in life. [15],[16]

5. Conclusion

In this chapter, we have examined an area of inquiry that is well-developed in the ethics of ZHU Xi but relatively under-developed in contemporary philosophy and moral psychology, one that has implications for moral motivation, virtue, the psychological foundations of human relationships, and conceptions of self. This is the role of thoughts and feelings about the self in empathizing with others. As we have seen, both Zhu and a small number of contemporary philosophers and psychologists attend to an important distinction between the sort of empathy that allows us to

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[15] Yong HUANG has made the interesting point that self-focused empathy might lend itself to paternalistic ways of thinking, causing empathizers to want for others things which they may not want themselves. He offers a creative solution to the problem of empathetic paternalism in the context of WANG Yangming's thought (Huang 2016: 227-30). On my reading of Zhu, he is not particularly concerned about empathetic paternalism. He thinks that both *shu* and *ren,* when used rightly, draw on feelings and desires that are basic, potentially widely shared, and correct. No doubt there will be variations in proclivity and preference—e.g., some people may like the taste of wine more than others—but we can empathize with people whose proclivities and preferences differ from ours by drawing on certain basic ones that we should have in common—e.g., the strong, natural preference for liquids that are not repugnant in flavor or texture. In point of fact, I think, empathetic paternalism is a thornier problem than Zhu assumes.

[16] In an earlier paper I discuss two additional arguments by Zhu against inference extension, the "defective desires problem" and the "deficiency of care problem" (Tiwald 2011: 667-70). I pass over the first problem because is not clearly linked with self-focus and pass over the second because it overlaps substantially with the problem of continence and internal conflict.

imagine, reconstruct, or simulate the thoughts and feelings of others directly and the sort in which thoughts and feelings about the self play a significant and direct causal role. A little reflection and debate reveals that the distinction between purely other-focused and more self-focused variants of empathy is a weighty and consequential one, and I hope that Zhu's considerable reflection and analysis helps to lay bare its significance. Contemporary psychologists have attended primarily to the effects that self-focused empathy has on empathic distress and egoism. Zhu raises broader and more explicitly philosophical questions about the advantages and disadvantages of self- and other-focused empathy.

In the final analysis, Zhu's position on this matter are nuanced. He thinks both self-focused and other-focused empathy are good, although the latter is a constituent of full and complete virtue while the former is something like a necessary expedient, inferior to other-focused empathy but useful when we lack the motivation and capacity to care for and empathize with others outright. Zhu calls attention to two major shortcomings of self-focused empathy. First, he proposes that it indicates internal conflict about contributing to the lives of others, a less-than-wholehearted investment in doing what should, for the truly benevolent or humane person, come more naturally and effortlessly. Second, he suggests that self-focused empathy interferes with the ideal experience of oneness or unity with others, so that its practitioners see themselves and their interests as being at odds or in competition with others. This, then, threatens to inhibit not just one of the profound and important sorts of human experience but also one of the best of human bonds, the feeling of connection and mutual identity with others. And we have seen that Zhu's reflection and analysis in this area anticipates several major objections to his line of argument as well. The claims and arguments that I have reconstructed here are hardly the last word in the matter, but they should be

enough to get a glimpse of the richness and moral significance of the debate about self- and other-focus in empathy, a debate which would do well to start with Zʜᴜ Xi.

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