

Imagining Yourself in Another's Shoes versus Extending Your Concern: Empirical & Ethical Differences

Eric Schwitzgebel

According to the Golden Rule, you should do unto others as you would have do unto you. Similarly, people are often exhorted to imagine themselves in another's shoes. A related but contrasting approach to moral expansion traces back to the ancient Chinese philosopher Mengzi, who urges us to extend our concern from those nearby to more distant people. Other approaches to moral expansion include attending to the good consequences for oneself of caring for others, expanding one's sense of self, expanding one's sense of community, attending to others' moral properties, and learning by doing. About all such approaches, we can ask the same questions: To what extent do people in fact (for instance, developmentally) begin and deepen their care for others by these different methods? To what extent do these different methods differ in ethical merit? And how effectively do these different methods produce appropriate care?

According to the Golden Rule, you should do unto others as you would have others do unto you. Similarly, you might imagine yourself in “another person's shoes”; or you might aspire to “love thy neighbor as thyself”; or you might sympathetically attempt to feel what another is feeling, coming thereby to want or loathe what they want or loathe. Considered as approaches to expanding or deepening our care or concern for others, all of these approaches share a core idea: They treat self-concern as a given and as the seed from which care for others might grow. You model others upon yourself and treat them as you would like to be treated.

A different approach treats concern for nearby others as given and as the seed from which care for more distant others might grow. If you'd care for a nearby child, so also should you care for more distant children. If you'd want something for your sister, so also should you want something similar for other women. This approach to moral expansion differs substantially from Others' Shoes / Golden Rule thinking, both in its ethical shape and in its empirical implications.

The two approaches can complement each other. They needn't compete. And other approaches are also possible, as I'll discuss, including noticing alignments

between self- and other-interest, expanding one's sense of self, expanding one's sense of community, attending to ethically relevant properties, and learning by doing. About all such approaches, we can ask three questions: To what extent do people in fact (for instance, developmentally) broaden and deepen their care for others by these different methods? To what extent do these different methods differ in ethical merit? And how effectively do these different methods produce appropriate care? The answers, of course, aren't simple.

In this essay, I focus on the contrast between the first and second approaches: that is, Others' Shoes / Golden Rule thinking versus extending one's concern from nearby others to more distant others. The latter approach has been relatively less explored and theorized, and so I begin by tracing its roots in ancient Chinese Confucianism, specifically in the philosopher Mengzi. I suggest that Mengzian Extension as I call it, is both ethically and empirically attractive. I also suggest how ethicists and moral psychologists would benefit from more systematically exploring ethical and empirical differences among different approaches to the expansion of care.

Mengzi is the most prominent ancient Confucian after Confucius himself, flourishing near the end of the fourth century BCE. He is known especially for his doctrine that "human nature is good" (xìng shàn 性善). As he lays out in one famous passage:

The reason why I say that all humans have hearts that are not unfeeling toward others is this. Suppose someone suddenly saw a child about to fall into a well: Anyone in such a situation would have a feeling of alarm and compassion— not because one sought to get in good with the child's parents, not because one wanted fame among one's neighbors and friends, and not because one would dislike the sound of the child's cries (Book 2, Part A, Chapter 6, 46).¹

ing that we see the child as like us, or that we imagine how we would feel if we were the child or the child's parents, or that we would want to be saved in a similar situation. Etymologically, "compassion" (cè 惻) in classical Chinese does not suggest co-passion, or feeling together. If it etymologically suggests anything (and there's reason to be cautious about over-etymologizing), it is instead that compassion is something like the heart's pattern, rule, or logic.

In several other passages, Mengzi notes that a natural concern for those nearby can be extended into more general concern for distant others:

That which people are capable of without learning [xué 學] is their genuine capability. That which they know without pondering [lǜ 慮] is their genuine knowledge. Among babes in arms there are none that do not know to love their parents. When they grow older, there are none that do not know to revere their elder brothers. Treating one's parents as parents is benevolence. Revering one's elders is righteousness. There is nothing else to do but extend these to the world (7A15, 174–175; 無他, 達之天下也).

For Mengzi, the root of benevolence and righteousness is familial love and reverence, which people naturally possess without having to "learn" or "ponder." The moral developmental challenge is to extend these reactions beyond the family.

Mengzi served awhile as an advisor to King Xuan, despotic ruler of the powerful state of Qi. King Xuan's character is illustrated by the following episode: Aiming to acquire new territory, King Xuan invaded the neighboring state of Yan. The people of Yan, apparently eager to be free from their own terrible king, welcomed the invaders with baskets of food and pots of soup. Nevertheless, King Xuan bound and killed them, destroyed their ancestral temples, and plundered their goods (1B11, 28).

In one recorded dialogue, Mengzi recommends that King Xuan "care for the people" (1A7, 8). King Xuan replies skeptically, asking if someone like him could care for the people. Mengzi relates an episode he had heard from an attendant:

While the king was sitting up in his hall, an ox was led past below. The king saw it and said, "Where is the ox going?" Hu He replied, "We are about to ritually anoint a bell with its blood." The king said, "Spare it. I cannot bear its frightened appearance, like an innocent going to the execution ground." Hu He replied, "So should we dispense with the anointing of the bell?" The king said, "How can that be dispensed with? Exchange it for a sheep" (1A7, 8).

The king couldn't bear the suffering of the ox, though if it was really animal suffering he cared about, then his decision was confusing, since the sheep presumably also suffered. A puzzle! His subjects thought he was merely being cheap.

Mengzi politely refrains from mentioning the absurdity of the king's compassion for an ox because it looks like an innocent person being led to execution, given that—I think we can guess—the king probably sometimes ordered the execution

of innocent men. What Mengzi does suggest is that if the king can be moved by the suffering of an ox, he can care for his people. For the king to say otherwise would be like his saying he could see the tip of a hair but not a cartload of firewood.

To care for the people, the king must extend (tu 推) his kindness, favor, or mercy (•n 恩):

Treat your elders as elders, and extend it to the elders of others; treat your young ones

Imagining Yourself in Another's Shoes versus Extending Your Concern

ble (Matthew 7:12; Luke 6:31) and subsequent Christian tradition, its etymological and sometimes explicit connection with “sympathy,” and its connection with “simulation theories” of our understanding of others’ minds.⁴

We might model Others’ Shoes / Golden Rule thinking as follows:

-

feel in hypothetical situations that differ from their own.⁵ In general, Others' Shoes thinking, at least in its mature form, appears to require combining a relatively sophisticated "theory of mind" with relatively sophisticated hypothetical thinking. You must hypothetically imagine being in another person's situation, typically with different beliefs, desires, and emotions, and you must assess what you, in that hypothetical situation with that transformed psychology, would probably want. Such sophisticated hypothetical cognitive and affective perspective-taking is likely to be challenging for the typical preschooler.⁶

One well-known problem for Others' Shoes thinking is what we might call the Cherry Pie Problem.⁷ Suppose you love cherry pie. I loathe cherry pie. I'd rather have chocolate cake. When planning a party for me, you shouldn't ask yourself what dessert you would want at the party, if you were in my shoes. You should ask what I would want. You shouldn't actually do unto me—cherry pie—what you would want to have done unto you. You should instead give me the dessert you know that I prefer. The Cherry Pie Problem has a cognitive, an epistemic, and a conceptual dimension.

Cognitively, it's clear that Others' Shoes thinking, to be effective, requires building a hypothetical change of desires into the cognitive exercise. Assume, hypothetically, that you had my dessert preferences: what would you want if the party was for you and if your favorite dessert was whatever is in fact my favorite dessert? But this is a needlessly complex cognitive operation compared with a simpler rule to give people the dessert they prefer.

Epistemically, Others' Shoes thinking also presents a needless challenge: you now have to figure out what dessert you would want if you were in my position and if you had such-and-such different desires. But how do you figure out which desires (and beliefs, and emotions, and personality traits, and so on) to change and which to hold the same for this thought experiment? And how do you know how you would react in such a hypothetical case? By routing the epistemic task of choosing a dessert for someone else through a hypothetical self-transformation, it potentially becomes harder to know or justify a choice than if the choice is based directly on knowledge of the other's beliefs, desires, or emotions.

Conceptually, the problem is that there might not even be facts to track. Consider an extreme case: what treat would you want if you were a prize-winning show poodle? The hypothetical might be so remote and underspecified that there is no determinate fact about what "you" would want in that case. Better just to go straight to bland generalizations: if you want to delight a prize-winning show poodle, just figure out as best you can what treats that sort of dog tends to like.

Mengzian Extension presents a different range of developmental, cognitive, epistemic, and conceptual challenges. Developmentally and cognitively, Mengzian Extension requires recognizing what one wants for nearby others, and then reaching a judgment about whether more distant others are relevantly similar.

This requires an ability to generalize one's ethical knowledge beyond immediate cases based on an assessment of what do and do not constitute differences that are relevant to the generalization. Although this is potentially complex and demanding, it is not quite as convoluted as the hypothetical situational and motivational perspective-taking envisioned in Others' Shoes thinking. In principle, it resembles other instances of generalization beyond nearby cases: The bottle here breaks when I smash it, so other bottles are probably similar. The teacher said it was wrong for Emily to copy answers from Omar, so it's probably also wrong for Tanseem to copy answers from Miranda. My four-year-old sister loves when I play Clue with her, so other four-year-old girls would probably also love to play Clue. As this last example suggests, such inferences have risks.

We might hybridize Mengzian Extension and Others' Shoes reasoning: If you know what your sister would want, you can assume that is what other girls her age would want. Do unto the distant innocent person as you would do unto the nearby innocent person. If the targets more closely resemble each other than you resemble them, the epistemic and conceptual challenges inherent in Others' Shoes thinking would be mitigated.

The ethical character of Others' Shoes / Golden Rule thinking also differs from that of Mengzian Extension. Except in the simplest consequentialism, the thought behind an action is relevant to the moral evaluation of that action. The thought if that was *me*, what I would want, reflects a different style of thinking than I want *A* for my daughter, so *A* for *other*. Others' Shoes thinking grounds moral action in displaced self-concern while Mengzian Extension grounds moral action in displaced other concern. While there's something ethically admirable about seeing others as like oneself and thus as deserving the types of treatment one would want for oneself, I'd also suggest that there's also something a bit . . . self-centered? egoistic? . . . about habitually grounding moral action through the lens of hypothetical self-interest. Mengzian Extension assumes, more appealingly, that concern for nearby others requires no reasoning—no “learning” or “pondering,” no imaginative transportation or analogizing to the self—and that broader concern can be grounded in a way that doesn't require imaginative consideration of one's own interests.

Recent Western depictions of “circles of concern” typically put the self at the center, close others as the next ring out, and more distant others in ever-expanding circles.⁸ Confucians accept a somewhat similar picture of “graded love” from family to neighbors to others in one's state to the world as a whole. But there's a crucial difference: the starting point and inmost circle in Confucian conceptions of graded love is always concern for near family. It would be antithetical to the spirit of Confucian graded love to place self-concern at the center of one's moral thinking, with one's parents and children in the second ring out.

There's an implicit me-first-ism in models of moral concern that put oneself at the center, which Confucian approaches generally lack. Inner-ring me-first-ism invites the idea that self-concern is the inescapable hard nut from which concern from others must always grow. Rousseau, for example, in *Emile* an extended work of fiction that appears to be describing an idealized form of moral education, endorses the foundational importance of the Golden Rule, writing that "love of men derived from love of self is the principle of human justice."⁹ Mengzi or Confucius would never say such a thing.

Now it is true that Confucius does twice appeal to a negative version of the Golden Rule, sometimes called the Silver Rule: "Do not impose upon others what you yourself do not desire."¹⁰ I certainly don't think that Confucians must reject thoughtful applications of the Golden Rule. As I mentioned earlier, approaches to moral expansion can complement each other. But in Mengzi, this is at most a secondary strand.

Let me mention another ethically appealing feature of Mengzian Extension: it can be turned back upon oneself. It can be adapted to justify and motivate self-care or self-concern among those who are too self-effacing. This requires modifying or reinterpreting the assumption that extension is always to more "distant" others, and it is not something that Mengzi explicitly discusses, but it strikes me as a natural adaptation. If you would treat your father or sister in manner M, treat yourself, to the extent you are relevantly similar, in the same manner. If you would want your father to be able to take a vacation, recognize that you might deserve a vacation too. If you'd object to your sister being publicly insulted by her spouse, recognize that you also shouldn't accept such insults. We can benefit, sometimes, by generalizing back to ourselves. In such cases, Others' Shoes thinking seems to give exactly the wrong answer: because if you wouldn't take the vacation or object to the insult, your father and sister also shouldn't.

We can also ask which way of thinking is more effective in leading us to expand our care appropriately to others to whom we are too indifferent. If you would not comfort a sister in a crop (or) 1000 other people, is it more effective to encourage him to reflect on what he would want if he were a peasant, or is it more effective to highlight the similarities between people (or animals) he already cares about and those who are farther away? If you want to encourage donations to famine relief, is it better to ask people what they would want if 1, ofV1 0 0 11 124.3666 214.2 Tm[ent. If511)0.5 (or)/T1Q a Tfn-(10dyout mr)-7 (th161 4945

Imagining Yourself in Another's Shoes versus Extending Your Concern

In the second phase of the study, we tested all ninety arguments. The best performing in this phase was the following:

HEAR ME

ignorance reasoning or other perspective-taking thought experiments?”). Eight of the ninety arguments were identified in this category. The average donation after those arguments was \$3.29 (out of \$10), versus \$3.43 for the remaining arguments—obviously not suggestive of an effect.¹⁵ Unfortunately, we didn't preregister a coding scheme for Mengzian Extension. However, an independent coder classified six of the ninety arguments post-hoc as involving Mengzian Extension, enabling a post-hoc analysis. The average donation of the Mengzian Extension arguments was \$3.86 versus \$3.38 for the remaining arguments, comparable to the largest effect sizes among the preregistered predictors (\$0.40–\$0.60).¹⁶

Self to other is a giant cognitive, metaphysical, and moral divide. Nearby other to more-distant other presents a much smaller gulf. If, as Mengzi thinks and as generally seems plausible, virtually all ordinary people already care about some nearby others, then Mengzian Extension presents what appears to be a relatively smooth path to the expansion of that concern, a path grounded not in displaced egoism but rather in the good impulses that we all already possess.

T

ably, there's a sense in which a mother might think of her baby as literally part of herself, so that in pursuing her baby's interest, she is pursuing self-interest— not indirectly, through expected benefits that will later come back to her (as in *Virtue Is Rewarded*), but directly. In the Chinese and other traditions, radical versions of this approach invite us to regard ourselves as “at one” with others, or with the entire world.¹⁷ Less radically, suppose that being a spouse, or a parent, or a classicist, or a Luxembourger is central to your self-conception. The death of the loved one, or the collapse of your academic field or country, might be experienced as a direct blow to who you are. Social and personality psychologist William Swann's work on “identity fusion” attempts to quantify people's feelings of oneness with others and examine its correlates: for example, with expressed willingness to engage in extreme self-sacrifice.¹⁸ There is, perhaps, something beautiful and admirable in feeling at one with others. However, oneness or identify fusion might be a demanding cognitive or motivational achievement that is unlikely to extend very far in practice except in unusual people or circumstances. And as with *Virtue Is Rewarded*, it is unclear how much ethical merit there is in acting from self-concern, even if the “self” is expanded.

Expanded In-Group In-group– out-group or us-versus-them thinking appears to be pervasive across time and cultures. Though often associated with ethically troubling devaluation of those perceived as the out-group, in-group– out-group thinking can also plausibly be grounds for expanding concern and care, if the boundaries of the in-group can be expanded or if one can build up a conception of others as belonging to groups to which one also belongs. For example, one might start to think of friends as “like family,” or one might embrace a cosmopolitan worldview that values citizens of other nations similarly to citizens of one's own nation. One might remind oneself that one's town, university, or subdiscipline is a community, an interacting group of “us” to which one owes concern. Like *Mengzian Extension*, Expanded In-Group thinking grounds ethical expansion directly in concern for others, but the basis is shared group belonging rather than relevant similarity.

Ethically Relevant Proper Philosophical arguments often invite us to expand our concern by attending to ethically relevant properties of others. Classical utilitarianism, for example, treats people and animals as targets of moral concern to the extent they are capable of pleasure and suffering, and recommends acting so as to maximize the balance of pleasure over suffering regardless of whose pleasure or suffering it is.¹⁹ Kantian deontology treats people as targets of moral concern in virtue of their rational capacities, arguing that we must not treat anyone as “mere means” to our ends rather than as an “end in themselves.”²⁰ Expanding our concern for others by noticing that they have such ethically relevant properties as the capacity for suffering or rationality seems pure and admirable. However, a potential disadvantage to this approach is that it's empirically unclear to what extent relatively abstract philosophical thinking actually induces behavioral change.²¹

Learning by Doing One might be pressured or enticed into performing acts of care for other people and, as a consequence, come to actually care for those people. This could operate through any of a variety of mechanisms. For example, in accord with cognitive dissonance theory, if the pressure or enticement is sufficiently subtle that one regards the action as voluntarily chosen, one might shift one's attitude about the value of the action, rather than regard oneself as having voluntarily done something for insufficient reason.²² Or in accord with self-perception theory, one might observe that one is in fact performing acts characteristic of caring and conclude that one does in fact care.²³

endnotes

- ¹ Bryan W. Van Norden, trans. *Mengzi: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Hackett, 2008), 46. All Mengzi citations are to this edition.
- ² Kwong-loi Shun, "Moral Reasons in Confucian Ethics," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 16 (1989): 317–343; Bryan W. Van Norden, "Kwong-loi Shun on Moral Reasons in Mencius," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 18 (1991): 353–370; Philip J. Ivanhoe, "Confucian Self Cultivation and Mengzi's Notion of Extension," in *Essays on the Moral Philosophy of Mengzi* ed. Xiusheng Liu and Philip J. Ivanhoe (Hackett, 2002), 221–241; David Wong, "Reasons and Analogical Reasoning in Mengzi," in *Essays on the Moral Philosophy of Mengzi* ed. Xiusheng Liu and Philip J. Ivanhoe (Hackett, 2002), 187–220; Emily McRae, "The Cultivation of Moral Feelings and Mengzi's Method of Extension," *Philosophy East and West* 61 (4) (2011): 587–608; and Myeong-Seok Kim, "Moral Extension and Emotional Cultivation in Mèngzǐ." *Dao* 21 (3) (2022): 369–388. Contra Van Norden and Ivanhoe, and in accord with Shun and Kim, I am assuming that recognizing the need for consistency with one's reactions to nearby cases is central to Mengzian Extension. Either interpretative approach is probably consistent with Mengzi's sparse remarks; and Van

Imagining Yourself in Another's Shoes versus Extending Your Concern

