This paper begins with the Thomas Nagel’s investigation of the possibility of altruism.¹ Altruism, by Nagel’s definition, is “merely a willingness to act in consideration of the interests of other persons, without the need of ulterior motives.” (Nagel 1970, 79) The fundamental question at issue is: how is altruism possible? When the pursuit of the gratification of one’s own desires generally has an immediate causal efficacy, how can one also be motivated to care for others and to act towards the wellbeing of others? In this paper, I shall investigate the motivational basis for altruism towards the wellbeing of others. The paper will begin with an exposition of Nagel’s proposal, and see where it fails. I will then introduce the views of two traditional Chinese philosophers, Zhang Zai (1020-1077) and Wang Fuzhi (1619-1692), and see which one could offer a better solution to the problem of the possibility of altruism. Zhang Zai’s approach is closer to Nagel’s rationalist approach: the primary justifiable motivation for altruistic act is reason. Wang Fuzhi, on the other hand, seems closer to the sentimentalist’s approach in his assigning motivational force to emotions and sentiments. All three moral theories can be categorized as what Michael Slote calls “agent-basing” moral theory: “An agent-basing approach to virtue ethics treats the moral or ethical status of acts as entirely derivative from independent and fundamental aretaic”² (as opposed to deontic) ethical characterization of motives, character traits, of individuals.” (Slote 2001, 5) In other
words, for agent-basing moral theory, moral justification lies not in the consequences of
the action, but in the agent’s character and his motivation for action. The paper focuses
on what each of the three theories takes to be *ethically justified* motives for altruism.

The reason why we need to investigate the possibility of altruism is exactly that
altruistic act is not readily exercised; it requires some effort on the part of the agent.
Nagel discusses various cases of “motivational interference,” such as weakness of the
will, cowardice, laziness, panic, etc. (Nagel 1970, 66). In addition, we can also imagine
that attitudes such as procrastination, apathy, consideration for one’s future self,
inconsistency and fickleness all pose an obstacle to the causal efficacy of altruistic
motivation. Therefore, a successful motivational theory of altruism must explain how
altruism is possible under all these motivational interferences.

I take it that any motivational theory for altruism must be able to successfully
address the following questions:

(1) The Question of Justification: One can be motivated to take up moral acts in
different ways, but not all motivations are ethically justified. What kind of
motivations for altruism is ethically justified?

(2) The Question of Causal Efficacy: How can the motivation be deep and causally
efficacious such that it will overcome other motivational interferences and
lead to altruistic acts?

(3) The Question of Causal Persistency: How can the motivation be consistent and
long lasting?

(4) The Question of Accessibility: How can the motivation be prevalent and readily
available to everyone?
In my explication of these three theories, I shall explain how they each would provide an answer to these questions. At the end, I will offer my support for Wang Fuzhi’s theory over the other two theories. My main argument will be that the other two theories fail in all three aspects of causal efficacy, causal persistency and accessibility. As Owen Flanagan and Amélie Rorty point out, “traditional moral theories have recently been criticized for being indefensibly utopian, enjoining an impossible reconstruction of our psychologies.” (Flanagan & Rorty, 2) I shall argue that Wang Fuzhi’s moral theory does not have such a utopian bent and is supported by a reasonable explication of human psychology.

I. Nagel’s Rational Altruism

Nagel takes altruism to be a fundamental requirement of human rationality, and it is “not to be confused with generalized affection for the human race. It is not a feeling.” (Nagel 1970, 3) Nagel says, “The general thesis to be defended concerning altruism is that one has a direct reason to promote the interests of others — a reason which does not depend on intermediate factors such as one’s own interests or one’s antecedent sentiments of sympathy and benevolence.” (Nagel 1970, 15-6) His position is that of internalism, “the view that the presence of a motivation for acting morally is guaranteed by the truth of ethical propositions themselves.” (Nagel 1970, 7) On this view, moral justification, or merely believed moral justification, provides motivation for ethical action: Reason motivates.

Nagel argues that the foundation of ethics must be sought in reason, in particular, in our practical reason. A practical reason is “a reason to do or want something,” as opposed to a theoretical reason that is “a reason to conclude or believe something.”
Nagel constructs a system of practical rationality in which the interests of others pose a rational requirement on all moral agents. On Nagel’s rationalist conception, it is simply inadequate to appeal to our moral sentiments such as sympathy and benevolence to explain the possibility of altruism. One’s sympathy for others may indeed propel one to act altruistically in certain occasions, but it is too weak in contrast to the motivation based on self-interest. Furthermore, such an appeal is superfluous. Nagel believes that there is such a thing as pure altruism: “It is the direct influence of one person’s interest on the actions of another, simply because in itself the interest of the former provides the latter with a reason to act.” (Nagel 1970, 80) When an agent judges an act to be justified or accepts the justification for an act, according to Nagel, she already has a reason for doing it. The justification itself provides the “motivational content” for the act. (Nagel 1970, 65)

The Constraint of Objectivity

Nagel’s rational altruism not only places emphasis on reason alone, but also adds further constraints on justifiable reasons. To be ethically justified, the motivating reasons must meet the constraint of objectivity. Nagel says, “The thesis which I propose to defend is simply that the only acceptable reasons are objective ones; even if one operates successfully with a subjective principle, one must be able to back it up with an objective principle yielding those same reasons as well as (presumably) others.” (Nagel 1970, 96) By “objective reasons,” he means that the reasons given must “assign objective value to a certain kind of behavior, rather than to any goal of that behavior. Such reasons apply both to the behavior itself and to what will promote it, whether in oneself or in others.”
This is a way to ensure that the motivation is not target-relative: it does not change its strength simply because the person in need is a loved one or a stranger.

Nagel claims that a subjective principle “can justify only a desire for things bearing a certain relation to oneself: one’s interest, the interests of one’s family or country, etc.” (Nagel 1970, 117) The subjective principle leads to the problem of practical solipsism: the problem of “an inability to draw fully-fledged practical conclusions about impersonally viewed situations.” (Nagel 1970, 114) Nagel thinks that the subjective principle is an obstacle to altruism because it leads to the “disassociation” between the personal standpoint and the impersonal standpoint, and such a disassociation will nullify the purely altruistic act. What he proposes instead, is objective principles: “Only objective principles warrant either willingness to promote an end, or a desire for that end, when a reason is seen to apply to that end impersonally conceived.” (Nagel 1970, 119) In other words, only through embracing the objective principle can one arrive at what Nagel accepts as an ethically justified concern for the interests of others.

The Reality of Others

According to Nagel, rational altruism “depends on a recognition of the reality of other persons, and on the equivalent capacity to regard oneself as merely one individual among many.” (Nagel 1970, 3) This requirement has two elements, one is to elevate the status of others’ existence in one’s scale of values; the other is to reduce the self-importance of oneself and to regard oneself impartially. I shall call this Nagel’s “constraint of impartiality.” According to Nagel, for one to gain this recognition, one needs to cultivate two other psychological traits:

1. Empathetic Imagination
Nagel asks us to begin with this question: “How would you like it if someone did that to you?” If our reaction should be that we would not only dislike it, but even resent it, when someone else treated us in that way, then the judgment we would naturally (by the rational requirement on us) derive on how we should act is clear: refrain from doing what one did to others. This imagination places us in others’ shoes and allows us to consider ourselves as the possible recipient of others’ acts. The role-playing imagination should generate an understanding of what is expected from us.

(2) The Impersonal Standpoint

Nagel argues that for one to accomplish a vivid recognition of oneself as merely a person among others, “one must be able to regard oneself in every respect impersonally.” (Nagel 1970, 102) The impersonal standpoint “provides a view of the world without giving one’s location in it.” But it does not mean that everyone is placed behind the veil of ignorance, without any knowledge of his or her own situation. According to Nagel, the impersonal description of the world “will include a description of the person who is ‘I’ in the personal description, and will recast in impersonal terms everything that can be said about that individual in the first person.” (Nagel 1970, 101) For example, we might see that our own situation is that our house was destroyed by a wild fire and we did not have any insurance to cover the loss. We now see the situation as “someone’s house was destroyed while the house was not covered by any insurance.” With this shift of standpoint, we can assess objectively whether the situation is one that calls for others’ assistance. In contrast, a personal standpoint takes the view of the world “from a vantage point within it” and the subject is “the locus of that vantage point.” (ibid.) When one is stuck with one’s vantage point, then one’s concern and one’s need become the most
urgent demand on one’s attention. Such a consideration cannot bring us out of our self-concern.

In a nutshell, what Nagel claims to be a proper supplement to the agent’s empathetic imagination is the impersonal consideration of the agent’s need — not as his needs but as someone’s needs. Others should act to assist him not because he is in need, but because someone is in need. Following this way of conceiving the reason for action, one would recognize that if others should act when someone is in need, then one should also act when someone is in need. What is required for others to do by my own reason is also required for me to do. The agent would thus be rationally motivated to take altruistic acts.

We could suppose that a rational Nagelian moral agent would reason as thus:

1. **Imagination:** I would not only dislike it, but also resent it, if others did nothing while I am in need.

2. **Self-conception:** I am merely an individual among many, and the reality of other persons is as vivid as my own.

3. **Impersonal Standpoint:** I would want others to take actions because someone is in need.

4. **Rationality:** By principle of parity, I would want myself to take actions because someone else is in need.

Let us imagine that an individual, T. N., is such a rational agent, with logical acuity and vivid empathetic imagination, who also embraces the principle of objectivity. He would be someone with a “detached” self-conception, viewing himself as merely someone among many. By reasoning that if he were that someone in need, he would
want others to take actions to assist him, he comes to the conclusion that he should take actions to assist others in need. But what would motivate him to actually take actions in real situations? If reason can motivate, as Nagel claims, then the motivational content of reason could be explained in either of the following ways:

(i) I should do what is a rational conclusion of my practical reasoning.

(ii) I should perform what my rational judgment concludes as a true ethical proposition.

Nagel thinks that “ordinary first-person practical judgments possess motivational content already” (Nagel 1970, 110); however, to derive

(iii) I will do what I judge to be the right thing to do.

either from (i) or (ii) seems to ignore all the practical problems of “moral interruptions”: weakness of will, laziness, cowardice, inertia, etc. People do not always do what their practical reason judges to be the right thing to do, even when the rationally concluded action is in their own best interest to perform. This is the well-known paradox of irrationality. Even if reason provides motivational content, it does not seem to have sufficient motivational power by itself. Reason cannot overcome such moral failings as procrastination, inertia, apathy, etc., which all lead to inaction. The causal efficacy of reason as motivation is highly questionable.

Furthermore, even if we agree with Nagel that the rationality of T.N. is a basic condition of human rationality, Nagel’s rational altruism is founded on the rational agent’s being motivated by his reason alone to take altruistic act, and doing so consistently. Such a Nagelian agent would have to be someone who has a detached sense
of the self and a vivid imagination of others’ plight, who has no moral frailty, no
temporal lapse between thinking and action. Such a person must be rare.

Granted, Nagel does acknowledge that there is no necessary connection between a
person’s acknowledging the reason, and her taking the action or even her wanting to take
the action. He says, “All I wish to claim is that such an acknowledgement is by itself
capable of providing a motivation in the appropriate direction.” (Nagel 1970, 111,
original italics) His theory can be seen to have a very limited goal: Given that agent A
behaves altruistically, A could be motivated completely by her acknowledgement of her
reason, and her action could be completely explained by her justification of her reason.
However, such a theory seems to be retroactively tracing the altruistic agent’s behavior
back to the motivation, to identify a justifiable motivation for the agent’s behavior. If we
want to have a successful motivational theory, we need to see what kind of mental state,
be it belief, desire, or sentiment, does motivate. In other words, we want to know what
makes altruism possible.

A further problem of Nagel’s theory has been pointed out by Brian Powell.
Powell argues that Nagel’s argument fails to show that “one must commit oneself to a
requirement of altruism.” (Powell 2005, 257) Powell presents the possibility of
consistent egoism: an egoist can accept Nagel’s demand for the recognition of the reality
of others, without also embracing the commitment to make the following claim: “My
needs and interests provide others with reasons merely in virtue of being someone’s
needs and interests.” (Powell 2005, 259) Such an egoist could be either thinking that
everyone should be self-help only and thus her own needs and interests should not be the
concern for others, or that she herself is special and hence that only her own needs and
interests should provide others for reasons to act. I think what Powell’s egoist would reject is either the first step of a Nagelian agent’s reasoning: *I would not only dislike it, but also resent it, if others did nothing while I am in need*, or the last step of the reasoning: the principle of parity. Only the first scenario could preserve the kind of consistency that a rational agent would have. Under this scenario, a rational egoist believes that everyone should care only for himself, act for his own self-interest; furthermore, the world would be better off when no one relies on others for assistance. With this form of self-help egoism, assistance for others is not only unnecessary, but also immoral. If a rational Nagelian agent embraces this view, then such a person would still place himself among others and yet desist altruism. Reason alone does not compel altruism, all things considered.

In conclusion, under Nagel’s rational altruism, the only ethically justified motivation for altruism is reason. But this motivational content is empty and disassociated from one’s own desires and sentiments. Even though Nagel thinks only reason can be an ethically justified motivation for altruism, his motivational theory fails the test of *causal efficacy* and *prevalence*. It can be seen as a form of *utopian* ethical theory.

**II. Zhang Zai’s Theory of Moral Sense and Moral Motivation**

Zhang Zai’s theory of moral motivation combines both reason and desire, while employing reason as the guiding principle for desire. Zhang Zai asserts a universal moral essence in human beings, which he calls “the nature endowed from Heaven and Earth” (*tian-di-zhi-xing*). This moral essence is exemplified in human reason, and it is shared by
all human beings by birth. However, there are also multiple variations in everyone’s biological existence, such as one’s temperament, will, intelligence, capacity, personality traits, emotions and physical desires. Zhang Zai calls the latter “the nature endowed from Qi and Quality” (qi-zhi-zhi-xing). Morality, for Zhang Zai, consists in employing reason to guide emotions and desires, in transforming one’s biological existence into a moral existence and in elevating one’s physical desires into a form of altruistic desire.

Altruistic Desire

Zhang Zai calls this altruistic desire “the desire of the sage and the wise” (sheng-xian-zhi-yu). The object of this desire is the wellbeing of others. The desire for one’s own wellbeing as well as the wellbeing of one’s loved ones comes naturally, while the desire for the wellbeing of strangers needs to be cultivated. What Zhang Zai proposes is also an imaginative empathy. Zhang Zai says, “The sage is virtuous and the wise is gracious. They think to themselves: I take everyone in the world who is handicapped, poor, childless or widowed to be my siblings who are suffering and having no one else to turn to. I will protect and shelter them in a timely manner.” (Zhang 2006, 62) We might interpret Zhang Zai’s moral precept of sagehood as an ideal metaphysical conception of oneself. This kind of moral theories emphasizes ideal personality, a goal that one aspires to reach in one’s lifetime. According to Flanagan & Rorty’s explanation of ideal personhood, “These ideals may be characterized by a life plan or a ground project, by an unfolding array of projects that change over the course of a life, and by a range of personal commitments.” (Flanagan & Rorty, 4) For Zhang Zai, the ideal personhood is the sage, and the moral goal one should strive for is to think, desire and act like a sage would.
By Harry Frankfurt’s classic distinction, “someone has a first-order desire when he wants to do or not to do such-and-such,” and “he has a second-order desire when he wants to have (or not to have) a certain desire of the first order.” (Frankfurt 1971, 7) The first-order desire has the direct causal efficacy on action. The desire that Zhang Zai presents under the phrase “the desire of the sage and the wise” should be categorized as a second-order desire. A moral agent, according to Zhang Zai, would want to have the desire to alleviate the suffering of strangers, and she would not want to have the desire for her own self-gratification — what Zhang Zai calls “selfish desire.” If this desire is turned into a will, then it inherits the causal efficacy from the first-order desire. Frankfurt calls the enhanced second-order desires “the second-order volitions.” (Frankfurt 1971, 10) The second-order desire needs to be combined with volition to have causal efficacy. Zhang Zai thinks that the way for a moral agent to be motivated by his or her desires of the sages is to read books written by them, to learn to think as they think and to learn to feel as they feel. It is a process of moral transformation through education. From intellectual transformation and assimilation, one can eventually develop this volition.

**The Understanding of Universal Kinfolk**

What Zhang Zai asks from moral agents is to transform their first-order desire for the wellbeing of themselves, as well as of their family members, by adopting this belief: *all people are related to me as my family members*. This method helps one recognize the *reality of others* (in Nagel’s terms), by placing others in the imaginative field of one’s loved ones. We can say that the sense of desire in this context is not the descriptive sense of “what I naturally desire”, but the evaluative sense of “what is worthy of being desired” and the prescriptive sense of “what ought to be desired.” The content of this desire, in
Zhang Zai’s moral schema, would be such goals as achieving world peace, giving universal humanitarian relief, etc.

To cultivate this form of second-order desire, one needs to form the belief that strangers *are* akin to family members. Here Zhang Zai emphasizes the important role of the intellect. He distinguishes two forms of human intellect — one is based on sensory perception and is the foundation of our knowledge of the external world; the other is based on moral sense (or moral perception) and is the foundation of our moral knowledge. Zhang Zai calls the former kind of knowledge “the knowledge derived from perception” (*jian-wen-zhi-zhi*) and the latter kind “the knowledge based on moral essence” (*de-xing-zhi-zhi*). He thinks that the first kind of knowledge is restricted to what one perceives, but the second kind of knowledge has no limitation in its range. Through moral reflection on the common origin of humankind, one imagines that all human beings are descendents of Heaven and Earth and there is thus a universal kinfolk relationship among human beings. Zhang Zai says that we should understand the universe as our “father” and our “mother”; hence, “every human being is simply my sibling and all things are under my care.” (Zhang 2006, 62) Once one gains this understanding, one would no longer have merely desires based on self-interest, but would develop an extended care for all sentient beings. This understanding is, under Zhang Zai’s moral theory, what makes altruism possible.

We could perhaps formulate the moral reasoning of a Zhang Zai’s moral agent as follows:

1) **First-order desire**: I naturally desire the wellbeing as well as the alleviation of suffering for my family members and myself.
2) **Imagination**: I imagine that everyone in the world is related to me as my parents, siblings or children.

3) **Reason**: If I desire the wellbeing as well as the alleviation of suffering for my family, then I must also desire the wellbeing as well as the alleviation of suffering for everyone in the world.

4) **Second-order desire**: I rationally desire the wellbeing as well as the alleviation of suffering for everyone in the world.

In summary, under Zhang Zai’s view, reason gains causal efficacy in moral motivation when it is mediated through a second-order desire to care for the wellbeing of strangers. Reason alone does not motivate; it is conditional on the motivational force of desire. At the same time, Zhang Zai’s moral theory tries to collapse humane, altruistic sentiments into family love, and to generate a second-order desire on the basis of one’s natural desire for the wellbeing of family members. This second-order desire must be cultivated by adopting the belief that everyone is related to one another as family members and that the whole world is just one large family under Heaven. Zhang Zai believes that this cultivation can only be accomplished through education; in particular, through studying what the sages write and learning to assimilate how they think. With the aid of moral education, one eventually transforms one’s natural tendencies (the nature from Qi and Quality) and becomes a purely virtuous moral agent as a sage.

However, such a purely altruistic moral agent must also be rare. If altruism must be parasitic on the stronger motivation for one’s own wellbeing and the wellbeing of one’s family members, then this form of altruism cannot have sufficient motivational force. The imaginative empathy requires adopting the belief that strangers and family
members should both be objects of my care. In the case of moral conflicts, when the wellbeing of my family members and the wellbeing of my intellectually adopted family members (the strangers) both demand my utmost attention, Zhang Zai’s theory cannot explain how altruistic sentiments could defeat my inclination to care only for my family members. Granted, such a preferential treatment is not immoral, and maybe totally morally pertinent, but such a preferential treatment violates the whole spirit of Zhang Zai’s universal empathy. His theory may have provided an explanation of the moral motivation of purely altruistic moral agents, and yet it fails to provide a practical strategy of realizing altruism in human society. We can perhaps apply Nagel’s criticism of other desire-based motivational theory of altruism to Zhang Zai’s theory as well: “if one wishes to guarantee its universal application, one must make the presence of reasons for altruistic behavior depend on a desire present in all men.” (Nagel 1970, 28) It is hard to believe that ordinary people all have the ideal metaphysical conception of themselves that they will all want to cultivate the desires of sages. Zhang Zai’s theory would fail to address the question of accessibility, to say the least.

III. Wang Fuzhi’s Theory of Moral Sense and Moral Motivation

In contrast to both Nagel and Zhang Zai, Wang Fuzhi’s moral theory is a form of sentimentalism. He takes morality to be rooted in moral sentiments, which are distinguished from our natural emotions; furthermore, he thinks that moral sentiments should serve as the moderator for emotions. The combination of both moral sentiments and natural emotions, with the further requirement of reflection, is what makes altruism possible under his theory.
Four Moral Sentiments

Wang Fuzhi embraces the moral essence theory of Mencius, according to which human beings have four innate moral sentiments and moral senses:

(1) The sentiment of sympathy — this sentiment is separate from the love one has for one’s family members because the object is not necessarily related to oneself in any personal way. It is a sentiment of commiseration for the misery of strangers as well as of close ones. It is different from empathy in that one does not need to place oneself in the position of another to feel sympathy for the other. However, it can be argued that the two sentiments are closely related.

(2) The sentiment of shame and disgust — this sentiment includes both the sense of shame for one’s own wrongdoing or one’s failure to do the right thing, and the sense of disgust for others’ wrongdoing. A milder but associated sentiment of “shame” might be likened to what Bernard William calls “agent-regret” — “It indicates that thought one may not be at fault for failing to meet a claim, one nonetheless fees some degree of responsibility.” (Sherman 1990, 151) A milder but associated sentiment of “disgust” might be considered as “disapproval” upon seeing another’s wrongdoing.

(3) The sentiment of awe and deference — this sentiment includes a sense of awe and reverence for the social context in which one finds oneself, as well as a sense of respect for others and a deference in one’s attitude towards those with authority. It can be viewed as the psychological basis for humans’ social cooperation and civil compliance.
The sense of right and wrong — this form of moral sense can hardly be called a “sentiment”, but Mencius as well as Wang Fuzhi thinks that we naturally have a moral perception of right and wrong, which constitutes part of our moral sensibility. It is part of our natural endowment, not socially conditioned. In contemporary terminology, this moral sense could be interpreted as moral conscience or moral cognition.

In addition to these moral sentiments, we also have natural emotions, which include the seven modes of emotion typified in Chinese culture: joy, anger, sadness, pleasure, love, resentment and craving. These emotions are “amoral” according to Wang Fuzhi; they are simply how human hearts naturally respond to people and things. A mother’s love for her baby, for example, is an emotion, not a moral sentiment. Emotions are biologically based and are generally shared by humans and other animals. But Wang Fuzhi thinks that these emotions can serve as the motivational foundation for morality, because they have the strongest motivational force for human conduct. For example, when we see people starving to death, we spontaneously feel sorrowful for them. This is one of our inborn moral sentiments. And yet most people would simply feel sympathetic without taking any action to assist. If those starving people were their family members, on the other hand, then most people would immediately try to alleviate their hunger. This reaction is prompted by our natural emotion of love. What is needed for altruistic behavior is thus the extension of natural emotions for the loved ones to the enhancement of moral sentiments towards strangers. Another example is the connection between the emotion of resentment and the moral sentiment of shame and disgust. If we can combine the emotion of resentment with the moral sentiment of shame and disgust, then we will be
more likely to be prompted to take actions to alleviate our sense of shame or disgust. There is a moral distinction between the motivational force of natural emotions and the motivational force of moral sentiments — Only conduct motivated by moral sentiments can be considered ethically justified.

**Self-Concern and Others-Concern**

Wang Fuzhi does not advocate the kind of universal empathy based on the imaginative universal kinship among human beings that Zhang Zai attributes to purely altruistic moral agents (the sages). His theory of moral motivation begins with what Michael Slote calls “self-concern” — “concern about one’s own wellbeing.” (Slote 2001, 77) Morality begins with the recognition of one’s natural desires to the recognition of the desires of others. Wang Fuzhi defines desire as the mind’s interaction with that which is desirable: “Things like sounds and colors, goods and wealth, power and authority, achievement and success, anything that is desirable such that I would desire it, is called ‘desire’.” (Wang 1974a, 6: 369) As long as we are alive, we cannot avoid interacting with objects; once we interact with objects, we cannot avoid the generation of our desires. Therefore, “to expect one to completely rid oneself of human desires is an impossible demand.” (Wang 1974a, 6: 371)

Wang Fuzhi has a fundamental affirmation of what is essential to human existence: the need to survive. To survive, one must deal with one’s physical needs. A moral agent is first and foremost a biological being; hence, there is nothing shameful or immoral about wanting to gratify one’s physical needs and material desires. To reject human desires is to isolate human beings from the natural world and to cut them off from their biological nature. Self-concern and the gratification of one’s own desires have the
most immediate motivational force. From motivation to moral motivation, however, the required step is to recognize others’ equal claim to the gratification of their desires. If one’s self-gratification interferes with, or even deprives others from, others’ self-gratification, then such a pursuit of self-interest is not morally permissible. If one can no longer satisfy one’s desire in a morally permissible way, then it is no longer good to satisfy one’s desire. In this sense we can say that natural desire for Wang Fuzhi is a “conditional good.” We will formulate the reasoning of a Wang Fuzhi’s moral agent in this way:

1) If I desire $x$, then others might also desire $x$.

2) If my pursuing $x$ eliminates or interferes with others’ pursuit of $x$, then my pursuing $x$ is not good.

3) Therefore, my pursuing $x$ in this case is not good.

4) I desire (or wish) to not do the morally wrong thing.

5) Therefore, I shall refrain from pursuing $x$ in this case.

The Role of Reflection and the Notion of Fairness

Wang Fuzhi says, “Fairness lies in everyone’s getting a share of his own.” (Wang 1967, 141, emphasis mine) In other words, the moral precept is not to depreciate each individual’s personal desires to aim for absolute altruism. One simply needs to check one’s own pursuit of happiness so that it does not obstruct others’ pursuit of happiness. One also needs to balance one’s self-concern with the concern for others’ fair share of their wellbeing. This self-examination is what Wang Fuzhi calls “reflection.” Reflection is a function of reason, but reflection is also closely related to the four moral sentiments with which one is born.
Under Wang Fuzhi’s moral theory, this self-check and self-balance come from (1) one’s sentiment of sympathy for others’ deprivations, (2) one’s sentiment of shame for lack of altruistic acts to relieve others’ suffering, (3) one’s sentiment of respect for others and deference to others’ practices, and (4) one’s moral perception of the right and one’s sentiment of wanting to do the right thing. These four moral sentiments should be considered as a “complex” — they jointly constitute the foundation for one’s moral behavior. Sympathy alone cannot be sufficient for altruism, because it is often defeated by other moral failings such as procrastination, inertia, laziness, etc. Shame and disgust alone cannot be sufficient for altruism either, since it could be accompanied by total apathy for others’ suffering. Both of them need the supplement of the moral perception that a total self-concern to the neglect of others’ misery is wrong, and hence one can be motivated by the sense of shame to act on the sentiment of sympathy for others. Finally, in a social environment in which altruistic acts are the norm of its members’ conduct, every capable member may be propelled by their sentiment of respect and deference to adopt the same behavior. These moral sentiments in conjunction, further enhanced by the function of reflection on the notion of “fairness,” are what make altruism possible in Wang Fuzhi’s moral schema.

If a moral agent does not have personal desires, then she is not able to relate to others and feel empathy for others’ deprivation. The foundation for altruism lies in understanding that one is a biological and social being, sharing the same basic physical needs and material desires as others. This is why Wang says, “Sages have desires too; their desire is the principle of heaven” (Wang 1974a: 4:248). He takes this view from Mencius, who advised the king that if he loved material possessions and sexual
gratification, he should just share his desires with the people. Wang explains, “In these sights, sounds, fragrance and tastes, one sees the shared desires of everything, and this is exactly the common principle of everything” (Wang 1974a: 8:520). What sages have achieved is the perfect harmony of reason and desire, such that they can “follow their hearts’ desires and never deviate from the right path.” For the rest of the people on the path to moral cultivation, what is required is the guidance of reason to eliminate selfishness and to extend the gratification of one’s personal desires to the gratification of others’ desires. As expressed by Wang: “Once one fully realizes moral principle, one is in accord with human desires; once one extends (tui) one’s desires, one is in concord with the principle of heaven” (ibid.). This “extension of desires” is the key to transforming one’s natural emotions to the realization of one’s moral sentiments.

In the final section of this paper, I shall explain why I think Wang Fuzhi’s theory provides the best analysis of the possibility of altruism, as well as the most effective strategy for realizing altruism. I shall further develop his theory to give my view on how to make altruism possible in contemporary human society.

IV. From the Possibility of Altruism to the Realization of Altruism

It is commonly conceived that the major obstacle of altruism is egoism and self-interestedness. We are primarily self-interested animals; hence, it is difficult for us to put aside our self-interest to perform acts that are primarily for the interests of others. However, according to Gilles Deleuze, egoism itself is not the problem. What has been the major mental block of altruism is that we conceive society merely as a collection of self-interested individuals in competition to maximize our own interest, and that the
public good is always in conflict with immediate private goods. To remove this mental block, we need to abandon this conception of society and consider it as a positively integrated totality instead. Deleuze says, “What Hume criticizes in contractarian theories is precisely that they present us with an abstract and false image of society, that they define society only in a negative way; they see in it as a set of limitations of egoisms and interests instead of understanding society as a positive system of invented endeavors.” (Deleuze 2001, 39) In other words, Deleuze thinks that egoism is not necessarily the obstacle to altruism; rather, a false sense of society as a forced unit of negative limitations to one another’s pursuit of self-interest is why pure altruism is hard.

Nagel’s conception of society consists of isolated rational individuals relating to one another as of equal moral worth; Zhang Zai’s conception of (ideal) society consists of individuals relating to one another as members of a larger family. Deleuze would probably reject both conceptions. He says, “What we find in nature, without exception, are families; the state of nature is always already more than a simple state of nature. The family, independently of all legislation, is explained by the sexual instinct and by sympathy — sympathy between parents, and sympathy of parents for their offspring.” (Deleuze 2001, 39) If the state of nature is family structure, then the individual’s consideration from his point of view as a member of his own family is a natural human trait. If Nagel’s moral project asks moral agents to eliminate first-person-point-of-view, then it would be an unnatural project and we can certainly question its legitimacy as well as its accessibility. On the other hand, Zhang Zai’s moral project is based on an idealistic and yet impractical conception of human relations as within a larger human family. As Deleuze points out, “Of course, families are social units; but the characteristic of these
units is that they are not added to one another. Rather, they exclude one another.... The parents of one family are always the strangers of other families.” (ibid.) What Zhang Zai takes to be the highest achievement of moral cultivation — having the sages’ desires — turns out to be a suppression of human’s natural tendency to serve first and foremost one’s own family. Wang Fuzhi’s theory seems to be the only one of the three that does not deviate from the conception of individuals as members of their own family, with their immediate love and care for family members. But how does one go from this natural emotion to the development of humane sentiment? The important step is to develop “others-concern.”

All the above three theories stress the importance of “recognizing the reality of others,” but with different modes of imagination: Nagel asks the moral agent to imagine herself as merely someone; it is an agent-neutral approach that encourages the moral agent to abandon her first-person point of view. Zhang Zai asks the moral agent to imagine others’ being related to oneself as one’s siblings from the common source of life — Heaven and Earth. It is an agent-centered approach that aims to extend one’s love for immediate family members to a form of humanitarian care for all human beings. Wang Fuzhi asks the moral agent to imagine others as being similar to oneself, having similar needs and desires as oneself does. It is also an agent-centered approach, which asks the moral agent to extend his self-concern to the adoption of fair consideration for others.

We might conclude that the possibility of altruism lies in the recognition of the reality of others. Nagel’s theory allows reason to play the dominant role and assigns the causal efficacy to reason itself. It falls into the category of an agent-neutral theory of value, “according to which the reasons for an action are a function of its value,
impersonally construed." (Flanagan & Rorty, 11) Both Zhang Zai and Wang Fuzhi combine belief/reason and desire/emotion as the motivation. Zhang Zai’s theory acknowledges the motivational force of emotion and desire, but employs reason as the guiding principle of emotion and desire. It is a version of the ideal personhood theory, setting up *sagehood* as the ideal personality. Wang Fuzhi’s theory treats desire as the primary motivation for action, and advocates the balancing of one’s self-concern and one’s others-concern to achieve *fairness*. The sense of fairness is rooted in reason’s function of *reflection*. Hence, his theory of moral motivation is a form of sentimentalist theory with reason serving as the ultimate monitor for action. We might express the difference between the latter two moral motivation theories as building motivation either on reason-based desire (Zhang Zai) or on desire-based reason (Wang Fuzhi).

Reason-based altruism can easily be seen as just another form of prudent egoism, and I think Nagel’s theory is no exception. Practical reason calculates the means to the desired goal, and it has often been suggested that the foundation of altruism is simply calculated self-interestedness, or that “altruism can ultimately be explained in terms of egoistic, self-serving motives.” (Hoffman 1980, 125) Nagel’s first step of reasoning for altruism requires the moral agent’s imagining: “I would not only dislike it, but also resent it, if others did nothing while I am in need.” This kind of imagination begins with one’s calculation of one’s self-interest and desires. Such an imagination can easily fail to generalize. For example, those on the higher socioeconomic ranks, before giving charity to those in need, would either not consider themselves to ever fall into a similar plight, or would not consider those needing help from them now as having the potential to give back one day. Furthermore, if one acts altruistically solely for the long-term calculated
self-interest, then one would be less inclined to give to those in distant countries, whose interests are less intertwined with one’s own self-interest. I believe that altruistic behavior is most often a spontaneous reaction to others’ present suffering or the potential harm that will come to them. As psychologist Martin Hoffman cites from Hogan’s definition, an altruistic behavior “is behavior that promotes the welfare of others without conscious regard for one’s own self-interests.” (Hoffman 1981, 124). Such spontaneity is a manifestation of sentiments such as sympathy or empathy. Hoffman cites many empirical data from studies that demonstrate people’s natural empathic arousal upon observing another person in distress. He concludes:

The findings in these studies, taken as a group, suggest that (a) empathic arousal precedes helping, (b) the more intense the pain cues from the victim, the more intense the observer’s empathic arousal, and (c) intensity of empathic arousal is systematically related to subsequent behavior. (Hoffman 1981, 131)

Such empirical data shows that prudential self-interest or egoistic reasoning is not necessarily the foundation for altruism. Many, if not most, altruistic acts are prompted by altruistic sentiments.

Based on Mencius’ theory of moral sentiments, Wang Fuzhi lays out a psychological schematism for the possibility of altruism. Wang Fuzhi does not ask the moral agent to abandon his first-person-point-of-view; he does not impeach the moral agent to elevate himself to the moral status of a sage (or a saint) who is motivated by his universal humanitarian care for all sentient beings. Wang’s theory of moral motivation begins with the simple recognition of the self and the self’s desires, aided by (1) the sentiment of sympathy for those whose basic needs and rights are gravely deprived, (2) the sentiment of shame when one does not act upon what one’s sentiments call for, (3) the sentiment of conformity to what others consider to be the proper (situationally
appropriate) thing to do in the given scenario, and (4) the perception of altruistic act as the right (morally good) thing to do in the given context. These four sentiments are not independent of one another; they jointly form the morally justifiable motivational force. The mental complex of these four moral sentiments extend one’s self-concern to a humanitarian concern. These four sentiments include not just one’s own sentiment of sympathy and one’s own perception of the moral good, but also the one’s respect for, and one’s desire to conform to, interpersonal practices in one’s society, and the sense of shame one incurs from failure to perform what is socially expected of oneself. On the ground that Wang Fuzhi’s theory of moral sentiments is not an atomistic theory of emotion that focuses only on the individual’s subjective sentiment, I argue that it does not lead to a subjective theory of ethics.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that this sentimentalist theory of altruism is not based merely on the sentiment of sympathy. According to Deleuze, “All the elements of morality (sympathies) are naturally given, but they are impotent by themselves to constitute a moral world.” (Deleuze 2001, 40, emphasis mine) I agree with Deleuze that the mere sentiment of sympathy would be morally impotent, since it cannot defeat common moral frailties such as inertia, procrastination, weakness of will, inconsistency, etc. Sympathy may be a necessary condition for altruism (if I don’t even care about other people’s suffering, then I would not be motivated to assist in the first place), but it is not sufficient. What is further required, I argue, is a social context (or what Deleuze calls “the moral world”) in which altruism is the norm rather than the exception. When others (in my society or in distant countries) are suffering, I may be moved by the sentiment of sympathy to desire the alleviation of their suffering, but such a sentiment is transient,
forgettable, and thus often causally impotent. However, if I am situated in the society where others like me all take the act to alleviate the suffering of strangers, then I am further propelled by my sense of shame, my desire to do the right thing, and my reverence for what is considered “proper” in my social context, to take the action. These senses of shame, reverence, and rightness are also roots of morality, and as Mencius/Wang Fuzhi argues, together with the sentiment of sympathy, they constitute our four innate moral sentiments. If I am correct in my assessment, then the possibility of altruism cannot be founded solely on the individual’s moral sense, but must also on the society’s moral expectations. If an individual feels morally bound to be altruistic, then this individual’s initial sentiment of sympathy gets the further enhancement that is needed to generate altruistic acts.

At the same time, the individual’s own moral sense and moral judgment play an important role in weighing whether the communal sentiments are worth respecting. This individual assessment is accomplished by what Wang Fuzhi calls “reflection.” Here we can add a further analysis of reflection on the basis of Owen Flanagan’s analysis:

“reflection is good in two respects: First, it can help ultraliberals to understand themselves in less atomic terms and thereby to see the grounds on the basis of which they incur communal obligations. Second, reflectiveness is good because it provides one with the critical tools needed to assess the content of one’s life form so that one can judge the ethical basis for such communal obligations.” (Flanagan 1990, 62) With the individual’s rational reflection on his moral sentiments, he is not likely to blindly succumb to the communal pressure, or to do simply what the Romans do. As Flanagan points out, “Having communitarian sentiments is good if one’s community is good, but it is
obviously not good if one’s community has bad values, values that one is motivated to sustain and maintain because of these sentiments. This is where the second, content-sensitive aspect of reflectiveness becomes important.” (Flanagan 1990, 62-3)

In conclusion, I think that to construct a moral project that realizes altruism, it is not enough to focus only on the moral agent’s isolated moral conscience or moral motivation. The conscience or motivation has to be integrated into the whole society, such that altruism is no longer considered supererogatory — acts that are “nice” but not morally required. When altruism is integrated as a shared moral conscience in the social culture, then it is no longer an idealistic feat that only the saints or the sages could accomplish. We have seen how members of particular social groups or religious organizations perform altruistic acts with fewer mental struggles, and I think it is because how others act affects how individuals act. Social culture is affective. After all, humans are social animals!

References:


Notes:

2 Slote explains ‘aretaic’ as derivative from the Greek word for excellence or virtue. His examples of aretaic ethical terms are ‘morally good,’ ‘admirable,’ ‘virtuous’, etc. (Slote 2001, 4)
3 The taxonomy of emotions here is a common conception in Chinese folk psychology. It does not, of course, exhaust all human emotions, nor is the taxonomy scientifically based.
4 This term is derived from a Kantian notion of “unconditional good”: “A thing is unconditionally good if it is good under any and all conditions, if it is good no matter what the context. In order to be unconditionally good, a thing must obviously carry its own value with it — have its goodness in itself (be an end in itself).” (Korsgaard 1996, 257)
5 Martin Hoffman also cites others’ (Darley and Latané 1968, Latané and Rodin 1969) as well as his own experiments, showing that people usually don’t think much before lending a helping hand to another in distress. He says, “When I asked people what went through their minds when they helped someone in a real-life situation, the typical response was that they acted without thinking or because the other person obviously needed help.” (Hoffman 1980, 134)
6 This defense is inspired by Marcia Lind. Lind argues that Hume’s theory of moral sentiment should be considered a complex theory, rather than an atomistic theory, of sentiment. She claims, “I argue that emotion in Hume can be analyzed as a complex.... I then apply this particular idea of emotion as a complex to *moral* emotion in Hume and show that this analysis allows Hume to avoid at least the standard objection that he is committed to a radically subjective moral theory.” (Lind 1990, 133. Italics original.). I think that the same interpretation and argument can apply to Wang Fuzhi’s theory of moral sentiment as well.