

HARMONY: ORIGIN OF TOTALITARIANISM OR PATRON OF PLURALISM?

Introduction to the Special Issue

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Harmony is a central notion in Asian culture. It appears as a symbol on the Korean national flag; it is one of the names that the Japanese people used to call their nation; it is a justificatory principle in Chinese politics and policymaking. Harmony is a core idea in many intellectual traditions—in Asia, where it played a key role in especially Confucianism, but also outside of the Asian continent, where it appears for example in African Ubuntu and American Anishinaabe traditions. Harmony is also elaborately discussed in various strands of ancient Greek philosophy and fulfills a bridging function in Kant's understanding of the workings of the human mind. Indeed, few reject harmony outright as a bad thing or as something utterly worthless. However, in contemporary mainstream philosophy the concept of harmony is hardly given serious consideration. There may of course be good reasons for this. It is possible that harmony is grounded in or expressive of a thick metaphysics of the natural-cosmic order that denies the laws of science; it is possible that harmony articulates or constitutes a vision of social conformity that opposes humanist commitments to freedom and individuality. But it is also possible that there are no good reasons why harmony has been forgotten in the transition from pre-modern to modern philosophy in the West. If that is so, then a continued dismissal of the concept constitutes not merely an unjustifiable disregard for non-Western philosophical traditions. Mainstream philosophical discourse could be dismissing out of hand an idea that has the potential to make important contributions to human understanding and self-understanding. The current world is full of disharmonies. Perhaps harmony should be taken seriously as a philosophical, political, and social concept, as an important human value.

This special issue of the *Journal of East-West Thought* collects a set of papers that provide the reader with material to consider harmony and the question of whether it ought to be given more attention on the world stage of philosophy. The papers examine harmony as it appears in different intellectual traditions and analyze its meaning and use in varying contexts of interpretation and application. Before we give the floor to the contributors to this special issue on harmony, we want to briefly explore two dangers associated with harmony as a philosophical concept so that we can bring into view what appears to constitute the reasons

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underlying the striking absence of harmony in contemporary philosophical discussions.

I. Harmony as Origin of Totalitarianism

One of the dangers associated with harmony, which could help explain why the latter seems to have become forgotten in the transition from pre-modern to modern philosophy in the West and in mainstream contemporary philosophy, lies in the suspected thick metaphysical underpinnings of harmony as a philosophical idea. We find such worries for example in Max Weber's work on China:

The cosmic orders of the world were considered fixed and inviolate and the orders of society were but a special case of this. The great spirits of the cosmic orders obviously desired only the happiness of the world and especially the happiness of man. The same applied to the orders of society. The "happy" tranquility of the empire and the equilibrium of the soul could and should be attained only if man fitted himself into the *internally harmonious cosmos*. (Weber 1959, 152–53 our italics, CL&DD)

On Weber's reading, the idea of harmony reflects a view on the way the cosmos is organized in a fixed order. In this view, harmony derives from the divine—from the "great spirits"—and as a pre-given and pre-determined model to which humanity must attune its existence. Harmony, on Weber's view, is thus a thick metaphysical concept with religious connotations that precludes any possible pluralism in interpretations of the natural-cosmic order as well as the status and role of humanity therein. If Weber is right, then there may be good reasons to be suspicious of harmony and to refrain from giving it a place in the spotlight on the world stage of philosophy. Harmony, after all, would then seem to deny the laws of science: as it supposedly posits the natural-cosmic order as pre-given from the divine and fixed, it is incompatible with the practice of open questioning, exploring, and examining the organization of the natural world as well as ourselves insofar as we are natural beings. And because the latter are the drivers behind the scientific project, the concept of harmony therewith seems at odds with science—in Weberian terminology, we might say that harmony is a remnant of an "enchanted" worldview that no longer has a place in a "disenchanted" world. (see Weber 2004)

A second danger associated with harmony lies in the opposition in which it is taken to stand to humanist commitments to individuality and freedom. Such concerns have been voiced by, for example, Martha Nussbaum and Karl Popper. Nussbaum writes:

Moral objectivity about the value of a person ... requires, evidently, the ability to see that item as distinct from other items; this in turn requires the ability to see it not as a *deep part of an innocent harmony* but as a value that can be contrasted or opposed to others, whose demands can potentially conflict with other demands. (Nussbaum 1990, 131 our italics, CL&DD)

On Nussbaum's view, harmony—or at least "innocent harmony"—implies that persons or things to which the former pertains are characterized by a lack of distinction or individuation. Harmony, rather, is taken to denote conformity or

sameness: on Nussbaum's reading, the presence of harmony seems to imply the impossibility of contrast. Popper makes a similar, albeit more elaborate point in his analysis of Plato's theory of harmony as the origin of totalitarianism. He argues that harmony, considered as a practical concept, revolves around the virtue of "keeping one's place":

For the cogs in the great clockwork of the state can show virtue in two ways. First, they must be fit for their task, by being of the right size, shape, strength, etc.; and secondly, they must be fitted each to its right place and must retain that place. The first type of virtues, fitness for a specific task, will lead to a differentiation, in accordance with the specific task of the cog. Certain cogs will be virtuous, i.e. fit, only if they are large; others if they are strong; and others if they are smooth. But the virtue of keeping one's place will be common to all of them; and it will at the same time be a virtue of the whole: that of being properly fitted together—*of being in harmony* ... This procedure is perfectly consistent and it is fully justified from the point of view of totalitarian morality. If the individual is nothing but a cog, then ethics is nothing but the study of how to fit him into the whole. (Popper 1947, 94 our italics, CL&DD)

On Popper's view, harmony does not imply the impossibility of contrast *per se*: persons or things that stand in harmony to each other can very well be distinguished or individuated (and maybe must even show such differentiation). The point is that they do not distinguish or individuate *themselves*: when harmony obtains, Popper holds, the persons or things involved are fitted together by an *external force*. If he has it right, then harmony would indeed seem to contradict humanist commitments to individuality and freedom: as harmony seemingly denotes an externally imposed form of social order or conformity, it appears to be incompatible with the normative commitment that every human should be respected in their freedom to individuate themselves. If that is so, then Nussbaum and Popper may have a point in suggesting that there are good reasons to exclude harmony in philosophical discourse—then harmony appears as enemy of the open society and as origin of totalitarianism.

These two perceived dangers are internally related. Indeed, the Weberian concern that harmony denies the laws of science derives its normative significance from the concomitant violation of freedom and individuality—often considered key principles of humanism—that this is suspected to entail. Weber's suggestion that harmony posits a pre-given and fixed view on the organization of the cosmos that is incompatible with the project of open scientific questioning and exploration is above all else a charge that harmony assumes a form of *epistemic tyranny*. Harmony, on Weber's view, is epistemically tyrannical in the sense that it posits a view on the natural-cosmic order that withholds contending (e.g. scientific) views the right to challenge the tenets of its doctrine. This is problematic because it not only opposes science but also entails a form of *ethical tyranny*. When one epistemic perspective on the organization of the cosmos achieves hegemony to the extent that disagreement is no longer a material possibility, those who adhere to the former and thrive because of its dominance gain absolute power over those who do not or cannot subscribe to the doctrine. And because the epistemic tyranny that harmony is suspected to assert is thus taken to entail a form of ethical tyranny, the Weberian worries are internally

related to those articulated by Nussbaum and Popper. The perceived denial of the laws of science by harmony is intrinsically related to the denial of the principles of humanism, and by its very nature seemingly brings forth the totalitarian forms of ethics and politics that world history has given us good reasons to fear.

These are of course just two dangers associated with harmony and possible reasons underlying its absence in contemporary philosophical discussions; there may very well be others, but these are important ones. If the above-discussed suspicions are well-founded, then harmony may indeed seem a very dangerous idea—an idea with the potential to give a mask of innocence or even beauty to a force that is nothing other than totalitarian. The question, however, is whether these suspicions *are* well-founded, and this is not so self-evident as it may at first appear.

II. Harmony as Patron of Pluralism

As mentioned, Popper expounds his view of harmony in the context of a critique of Plato. His view appears even more plausible when one considers Weber's and Nussbaum's critical analyses of their interpretations of the concept. Insofar as Plato is concerned, there are good reasons to be suspicious of the concept of harmony. Plato holds that real harmony exists strictly in the realm of Forms and material harmony is (at best) an approximation of a pre-given and fixed Idea of harmonious relation. There is a sense in which Plato's philosopher-king impacts the citizens of the city-state as an external force when he attempts to inspire them to "keep one's place" in the harmony of the State as a whole. (Plato 2000, secs. 519–20; however see Shani in this issue) But Plato's view on harmony is not the only game in town—and working from such a presupposition would, ironically, be expressive of the same epistemic tyranny that was here placed under scrutiny. We already find in ancient Greek thought views on harmony that do *not* understand the latter to imply conformity to a fixed and pre-given model. In the philosophy of Heraclitus, for example, harmony is understood as the "concordance of opposites": it denotes the cosmic concord (*logos*) of opposite forces that unifies material multiplicity. (Stamatellos 2012, 22–23) Notably, in Confucian philosophy we also find visions of harmony that *contrast* rather than identify the latter with conformity or sameness. In order to place the above-discussed suspicions of harmony in a context in which these can be critically and constructively assessed on their plausibility, we want to briefly say a few words about the latter.

The Chinese counterpart term for "harmony" is "和" (romanized as *he*), and the first thing that is important to note is that this concept of harmony mostly means a *process*. "*He*" thus has more the character of a verb than a noun and would perhaps more adequately—albeit less elegantly—be translated as "harmonization" rather than "harmony". This already gives some indication that the Chinese understanding of harmony as a philosophical idea is rather different from that of Plato. This becomes more obvious when we have a closer look at how "*he*" is used in the Confucian tradition. Confucius himself famously stated that the person of virtue seeks "harmony but not mere agreement" (*he er bu tong* 和而不同). (Confucius 2003, sec. 13:23) "*He*" is here defined through contrast with "*tong*", which can be translated as "agreement", "conformity", or "sameness". "*Tong*" is applicable to both things and actions: things (e.g. sounds,

ingredients) can show sameness, but so can people—they can conform to each other in what they say and what they do. Harmony is thus characterized by the *absence* of such conformity. Indeed, the Confucian understanding of harmony describes the coming together of things, persons, or actions in a process of unification that *preserves* their differentiation. Harmony takes place through mutual adjustment, accommodation and transformation. When harmony is achieved, things thrive, people flourish and society prospers. (For a more detailed account see Li 2014, 7–22)

Insofar as harmony denotes an idea of cosmic or cosmological order, Confucianism understands it to describe the triadic unity between heaven, earth, and humanity. All are complex concepts with various meanings. “Heaven” can have both religious and secular connotations: it can denote something like a divine force, the source of morality, the space above the earth, and even the natural processes on the earth. “Earth” can also have different meanings: it can refer to Mother Earth, but it can also mean the soil that we use to produce things. And “humanity”, as a self-reflexive concept, is perhaps the most complex of all. In the words of the Confucian thinker Xunzi:

Water and fire have vital energy (*qi* 氣), but not life (*sheng* 生); plants and trees have life; but no consciousness (*zhi* 知); birds and beasts have consciousness, but no sense of appropriateness / rightness (*yi* 義). Humans have vital energy, life, consciousness, and, in addition, a sense of appropriateness / rightness. This is why human beings are the most valuable beings under the heaven. (Xunzi 1990, sec. 9.16a)

Much more can be said about this (and for a more detailed account see Li 2020), but it is clear that Weber’s supposition that harmony posits the natural-cosmic order as pre-given and fixed is not at all evident insofar as the Confucian idea of harmony is concerned. The latter’s view on the cosmic order is constituted by an idea of a coming together of three forces in a process that does not consider humanity as passive recipient that must simply attune itself to the cosmos as it is given, but assigns humanity a special role and responsibility because the latter has the moral capacity to transform it. This notion of triadic harmony is not expressive of a form of epistemic tyranny, incompatible with the practice of open questioning, exploring, and examining the organization of the natural world. All of the three forces already have complex meanings, which are open for different interpretations when taken on their own; insofar as the possible ways of understanding their coming together in triadic unity is concerned this is even more so the case. Triadic harmony does not posit a singular pre-given and fixed view of the cosmos: it rather structures our thinking about the latter without imposing any determinate and pre-given view. If anything, such harmony is expressive of a form of *epistemic openness*—and there seem no compelling reasons to assume why that would exclude rather than affirm the laws of science.

Nor is the Confucian concept of harmony in tension with the principles of humanism. On the contrary, the idea of *he er bu tong*—of harmony but not sameness—considered in practical terms centrally involves a commitment to pluralism. This is nicely illustrated in the classic dialogue between the Duke of Qi and the philosopher Yanzi in the Confucian canonical text *Zuo Commentary on Spring and Autumn Annals*. In the dialogue, the duke of Qi claims that his

minister Ju is always in harmony (*he*, 和) with him. Yanzi replies that what happens between them is mere agreement (*tong*, 同) rather than harmony. Yanzi explains as follows,

Harmony is like making soup. Water, fire, vinegar, mince meat, salt, and plum are used to cook the fish and meat. These are heated using firewood and brought into harmony by the chef, who uses the different flavors to achieve a balance, providing what is deficient and releasing what is excessive. (Yu 2010, 17)

Yanzi further elaborates:

The relation between a ruler and his minister is the same. When the ruler's judgment is basically right, there may still be some reasons for opposing it. The minister offers the opposing reasons, in order to complete the rightness of the ruler. When the ruler's judgment is basically wrong, there may be reasons for his thinking so. The minister offers the reasons for thinking so, in order to reject the ruler's wrong judgment. In this way the governance is balanced and there is no dispute, and the people have no intention to strive. (Ibid.)

Insofar as harmony pertains to social relations, Yanzi here explains, it requires that persons relate to one another in a manner that preserves their differences while managing conflict.¹ Indeed, it is precisely the difference or diversity between persons, as well as their judgments or actions, that creates a balance between them in the first place. There cannot be harmony when there is just *one* person, *one* judgment, *one* perspective—just as one cannot make soup from just one ingredient. Harmony requires pluralism. To the extent that Confucianism is concerned, this cannot be the weak kind of pluralism that Popper is suspicious of: the kind in which different things are made to fit together by an external force. Confucian harmony is a dynamic process in which no singular force—not even the ruler—can claim the right to adopt a transcendent position from which he may externally impose a predetermined form of social order or conformity on others. Harmony is a process in which forces appear in balance, on the basis of their own internal drives. Although more can be said about this (for a more detailed account see Düring forthcoming) this makes clear that Confucian harmony does not involve a form of ethical tyranny, incompatible with the normative commitment that every human should be respected in their freedom to individuate themselves. If anything, the Confucian idea of harmony articulated a form of *ethical pluralism* that endorses, rather than denies, the humanist commitments to individuality and freedom.

This is of course but a brief excursion through the Confucian tradition. But it hopefully has provided some preliminary reasons to show that Plato's take on harmony is not necessarily the only game in town, nor even a representative view of the concept. There are other ways of understanding harmony that do not evidently invite suspicion of epistemic and ethical tyranny, and the Confucian tradition provides a strong contender here. This is reason enough to conclude that

¹ The Chinese word which Yu interprets as “dispute” is 干 (*gan*). The character originates from a symbol of an aggressive weapon.

the issue deserves more careful and elaborate consideration in mainstream philosophical discourse, as the concept of harmony has the potential to make important contributions to human understanding and self-understanding. Indeed, there are more reasons to think that harmony deserves the epithet “Patron of Pluralism” than there are to consider it as “Origin of Totalitarianism.”

This special issue collects seven papers that explore the concept of harmony and its implications in various perspectives, drawing on philosophical resources from both eastern and western as well as analytic and continental traditions. It opens with a study by Itay Shani, who elaborates a view on harmony as a dynamic organizing force that is characterized by the features of revitalization and self-surpassing. Next is a contribution by Jörg Löschke, which examines the relation between harmony and organic unity and situates these in the context of contemporary analytic philosophy. Löschke’s paper explores whether harmony rather than complex unity is the metaphysical grounds of intrinsic value. The third paper by Dascha Düring analyzes possible views on the connection between harmony and justice and ties these to considerations in contemporary feminist ethics and political theory. The fourth contribution by Tak-lap Yeung sets up a cross-cultural study of harmony in ancient Eastern and Western aesthetic traditions and argues that the two provide different models for interpreting the concept. The fifth paper by Shuchen Xiang develops the idea of harmony as a lens through which we may understand the historical development of China and the identity of the Chinese people. The sixth paper by Alice Simionato offers a comparative analysis of the concepts of harmony and coherence in Neo-Confucianism. The seventh contribution by Olivier Malherbe studies the idea of harmonious unity in relation to Gestalt quality in the thought of Roman Ingarden.

It is our sincere hope that the insights of these authors will inspire further studies of harmony and its related concepts and issues.²

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