

HARMONY AND INTRINSIC VALUE

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Abstract: The concept of harmony does not play a very important role in contemporary analytic philosophy. In this paper, I argue that this peripheral status of the concept of harmony in analytic philosophy is not warranted. In fact, harmony might be the central normative concept: some philosophers think that complex unity is the metaphysical grounds of intrinsic value: whenever something is intrinsically valuable, it is so in virtue of the fact that disparate elements are brought into complex wholes. In this paper I discuss the possibility that harmony, rather than complex unity, plays this pivotal role. I conclude that, while there are some considerations in favour of this view, there are also considerations that speak against it; nevertheless, analytic philosophers should be more concerned with the concept of harmony than they have been so far.

Introduction

The concept of harmony has traditionally played an important role in the ethical outlooks of many cultures. It is an important concept in Confucianism; it plays an important role in the philosophy of Native Americans and other indigenous cultures (Miller 2019); and it has been an important concept in the thought of many classical Greek thinkers. However, this interest in harmony as an ethical concept has hardly carried over into contemporary analytical philosophy. Harmony is sometimes mentioned in passing when philosophers talk about another concept that has gained quite some attention, namely the concept of organic unity.¹ The principle of organic unity says that the value of a whole need not equal the sum of the value of its individual parts²: for example, the individual brushstrokes of a painting have little or no value at all, but in combination, they can constitute great aesthetic value. An object exhibits organic unity to the extent that it is a “highly unified complexity” (Oddie 2005, 130): when individual entities form a new whole, then this constitutes organic unity, and this in turn means that the value of the new whole can be greater than the sum of the value of the individual parts when they are taken in isolation. Philosophers who talk about unified complexities sometimes mention the concept of harmony and treat harmony and unified complexity as identical. But other than that, harmony does not play a very important role in contemporary analytic philosophy.

In this paper, I will argue that this peripheral status of the concept of harmony in analytic philosophy is not warranted. Analytic philosophers should be more interested in harmony as an axiological concept. I will be especially concerned with the relation

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¹ See, for example, Nozick (1981) or Kelly (2014).

² The *locus classicus* for a discussion of organic unity is Moore (1903).

between harmony and organic (or complex) unity. If it is true that harmony and organic unity amount to the same thing, then this means that two objects that are brought into harmony constitute value over and above the value of the individual parts that are brought into harmony. This, by itself, would be a philosophically significant result. But there is another and possibly more far-reaching implication. Some philosophers think that organic unity is the metaphysical ground of intrinsic value: they think that the fact that an entity constitutes an organic unity not only explains how valuable the entity is, but also explains why the entity is valuable in the first place. In other words, the property of being an organic unity is the fundamental value-constituting property, and whenever something is intrinsically good, it is good because it is a highly unified complexity.³ If this view is correct, and if organic unity and harmony amount to the same thing, then this means that harmony grounds intrinsic value. This would certainly be a spectacular result. In this paper, I will be concerned with this possibly far-reaching claim in particular, and I will investigate whether harmony could be the metaphysical grounds of intrinsic value.

My paper will be structured as follows. Part I explains what it means for several objects to form an organic unity, and what it means for several objects to be in harmony with each other. I will argue that, while these concepts are similar in certain regards, they are nevertheless distinct concepts. Part II presents arguments in favour of understanding complex unity as the metaphysical grounds of intrinsic value, and I suggest that these arguments speak more in favour of understanding harmony as the metaphysical grounds of value. Part III discusses two interesting implications of understanding harmony as the metaphysical grounds of intrinsic value: it offers a new interpretation of consequentialism, and it possibly explains the overridingness of moral reasons. Part IV raises some worries about understanding harmony as the metaphysical grounds of value.

I. Organic Unity and Harmony

What is an organic unity? As I have mentioned above, the crucial feature of an organic unity is that it constitutes value over and beyond the sum of the value of its individual parts. Hence, one important way to characterize organic unities is in terms of value: a set of entities E_1 , E_2 , E_3 forms an organic unity of the individual parts, taken together, exemplify more value than the value of the sum of the individual parts. But we can also give more informative accounts of what organic unities are. Apart from generating additional value, an important aspect of organic unities is interdependence (Kelly 2014, 117): the individual parts of an organic unity are not just there simultaneously but respond to one another in some way. Take the example of the human body. The human body as a whole has great intrinsic value, but this value cannot be reduced to the value of its constituent parts – the left arm, the right

³ See, for example, Nozick (1981); Oddie (2005, 2014); Audi (2007); Davison (2012); Kelly (2014).

leg, the liver, the eyes, etc. All these elements have little value when they are taken in isolation, but the human body as a whole has great intrinsic value. And one important aspect of the body parts is the way how they interact – this just makes the body a living organism. Similarly, the individual brushstrokes of a beautiful painting must respond to one another in some way to create the aesthetic value that the painting has. In both cases, the constituent parts of the whole interact with one another. And, more importantly, by interacting in this way, the individual parts not only create new value, they also form a new entity. A human body not simply the sum of the individual bodily parts but forms a new entity; and a painting is also a new entity, not merely the sum of the individual brushstrokes. Neither the value of the whole nor the kind of thing that the whole is can be reduced to a mere sum of the individual parts when we talk about an organic unity. Hence, we can characterize organic unities in the following way: a set of entities E_1, E_2, E_3 etc. constitutes an organic unity if these entities form a complex whole, and they form a complex whole if they constitute a new entity that cannot be reduced to the sum of its constituent parts. And to constitute such a new entity, there must be meaningful relations between the constituent entities.⁴

This, of course, raises further questions. What does it mean for a set of entities to constitute a new and distinct entity? And what does it mean for the constitutive entities to stand in meaningful relations to one another? I will address these questions in turn. I will be able to give only tentative rather than satisfactory answers, but my brief discussion will be important for what follows.

Let me start with the first question. When does a set of entities constitute a new entity? The question here is not what makes it the case that a set of specific constitutive elements forms a specific new entity, but rather under which circumstances we recognize that a new entity has emerged from a set of constitutive entities. To see the difference, consider the case of friendship. A friendship is a distinct entity with the two friends as constitutive elements, but a friendship cannot be reduced to the friends – it is not as if a friendship is an aggregate of friend A and friend B. Something else is going on that makes it the case that there is not only friend A and friend B, but also the friendship between them. Now, it is one thing to ask what makes it the case that these two people form a friendship, and the answer will probably include things such as a common history between them, experiences that they have shared, mutual concern for one another's well-being, etc. But this does not explain why the friendship between friend A and friend B is a distinct entity. It presupposes it. Hence, the question what makes it the case that a set of entities constitutes a new kind of entity and the question what makes it the case that this specific set of entities constitutes this specific new entity are two separate questions, and I will be concerned with the first question here.

⁴ For the remainder of this paper, I will use the terms “organic unity” and “complex unity” interchangeably.

The question, then, is under which circumstances it is appropriate to say that a new entity has emerged from a set of other entities. I cannot give a satisfactory answer to this question here. But this does not seem to be necessary – humans have an intuitive grasp of when a set of entities forms a new entity. Often certain social background conditions play an important role in this regard: for example, an opera performance is a complex whole whose constitutive elements include singing, acting, an orchestra performance, etc., but it is only possible to say that these elements constitute a new kind of entity because the opera genre and the accompanying social practices have been invented and developed.⁵ But there might be at least a test whether a given set of entities constitutes a complex unity or whether it is a mere aggregate.⁶ Suppose that you have a set of entities and you want to determine whether they together form a complex whole or a mere aggregate. You already have an intuitive grasp on other cases of complex wholes – you know, for example, that an opera is a complex whole whereas a pile of stones is a mere aggregate. Now, one difference between complex wholes and mere aggregates seems to be this. If you remove a stone from a pile of stones, the remaining thing is still a pile of stone. It is simply a smaller pile of stones, or put differently, the remaining thing is less than it was before. This does not apply to the opera case. If you remove a constitutive part of the opera – say, the singing – it seems odd to say that the remaining thing is still an opera, but less than it was before. It seems more plausible to suppose that the remaining thing ceases to be an opera, or that it is a distorted kind of opera, or whatever. This suggests the following test for whether a set of entities forms an organic unity or a mere aggregate: a set of entities forms a new kind of entity if it is not possible to remove one entity from the set and say that the remaining thing is the same thing as it was before, but simply less; and a set of entities forms a mere aggregate if it is possible to remove one entity from the set and say that the remaining thing is the same thing as it was before, but simply less.⁷ And typically a set of entities forms a new kind of entity rather than a mere aggregate if there are meaningful relations between the constitutive elements of the new thing.

This brings me to the second question. I have said that a set of entities forms a complex whole if there are meaningful relations between the different parts that constitute the new entity. But what does it mean for entities to have meaningful relations? Again, I cannot offer a general account of meaningful relations that applies to all possible cases. But there are some ways in which it seems intuitively plausible to maintain that relations between different parts are meaningful. For example, Alexis Elder discusses the question when parts form unified wholes, and she identifies the following forms of meaningful relations between individual parts that are relevant here: the parts are mutually responsive to each other; they somehow work together;

⁵ See Raz (2003).

⁶ Thanks to Sebastian Muders for suggesting this test to me.

⁷ Note that I am not talking about the value of the thing in question here, but about the ontological or metaphysical question whether the thing is a complex whole or a mere aggregate. I thank Dascha During for helping me to clarify this.

and/or they mutually shape each other (Elder 2018, 42). Of course, these possibilities are not mutually exclusive: individual parts can relate to each other in more than one of these ways, and they can possibly relate to each other in all these ways at once. However, any of these ways seems sufficient for meaningful relations between individual entities to arise in the sense that is relevant here.⁸

With these considerations in mind, we are now in the position to see in what way harmony and organic unity are similar concepts and in what ways they differ from each other. They are similar in that things that are in harmony with each other also have meaningful relations between them. Consider typical examples of things that are in harmony. A dish can exemplify harmony if the ingredients are mutually responsive to each other: the taste of ingredient A complements the taste of ingredient B, the small amount of salt intensifies the taste of the vegetables, etc. Similarly, the tones of several instruments can be in harmony, and this means that they complement each other and work together to create a beautiful melody. Personal relationships such as marriages can also be harmonious, and if this is the case, then all of the aforementioned kinds of meaningful relations apply: the partners are responsive to each other in that they take their respective concerns seriously and care for one another's well-being; they work together in several joint projects, from raising children to organizing their lives together; and the partners shape each other in that they have an impact on one another's identity, taste, concerns, etc. These examples illustrate that harmony resembles organic unity in that entities that are in harmony exemplify the same kinds of meaningful relations as entities that constitute organic unities.

But these examples also illustrate an important difference between harmony and organic unity: unlike organic unities, entities that are in harmony do not necessarily constitute a novel entity. Consider again the case of a dish. A certain dish is a novel entity because the ingredients form a complex whole. But if the ingredients are in harmony, this does not mean that they constitute yet another entity over the already existing complex whole – dishes whose ingredients are in harmony are just as much dishes as dishes whose ingredients are not in harmony. If anything, you might think that the harmonious dish is a better dish – it is a better instance of its kind. Similarly, a marriage can be disharmonious in that the partners fight and argue constantly. In such a case, their marriage ceases to be harmonious, but it does not cease to be a marriage: disharmonious relationships are still relationships. Relationships are “enduring, substantive, mutually affirmed interactions between two or more people” (Seglow 2013, 28), and such enduring interactions can exist even if the relationship members treat each other in disharmonious ways. And again, if a disharmonious relationship turns into a harmonious one, we would not say that the harmony now constitutes yet another entity, apart from the already existing relationship – if

⁸ Another interesting proposal comes from Chris Kelly: Kelly argues that meaningful relations that constitute complex wholes are explanatory relations. See Kelly (2014, 122). I do not have the space here to discuss this view; in any case, the relations identified by Elder seem to be explanatory relations as well, so these two accounts are no rivals, strictly speaking.

anything, we would say that the relationship is a better one for being harmonious. Thus, a specific entity is not necessarily the specific entity that it is in virtue of harmonious relations of the constitutive parts; if anything, harmonious relations between the constitutive entities can make the new entity a better one of its kind. And this means that organic unity and harmony are not the same thing. If they were, then it would have to be the case that a composite object that ceases to exemplify harmony also ceases to be the object that it is. Hence, contrary to what some authors suggest, harmony and organic unity do not amount to the same thing.⁹ And this means that elements can have harmonious relations even if they are not an organic unity, that is: even if they do not form a distinct kind of entity.

Several authors have proposed to understand complex unity as a metaphysical account of value: intrinsic value supervenes on or is grounded in the fact that disparate elements are brought into complex wholes.¹⁰ Such views therefore understand complex unity as the *metaphysical grounds* of intrinsic value in the sense that the property of being a complex unity makes it the case that the relevant entity is intrinsically valuable. However, as far as I can see, no author in analytic philosophy has argued that we should understand harmony as the metaphysical grounds of intrinsic value. In the next section, I will argue that value theorists should take the idea seriously that harmony, rather than organic unity, should be understood as the metaphysical basis of value.

II. Harmony and Intrinsic Value

A first argument in favour of understanding harmony as the metaphysical grounds of intrinsic value is the observation that such a view has considerable explanatory depth. Philosophers who understand complex unity as the metaphysical grounds of intrinsic value support their view by the observation that it provides a unified explanation of the value of many things that do not seem to have very much in common.¹¹ Consider, for example, the following items: ecosystems, friendships, works of art, life courses, and true scientific theories. Each of these items seems to be a good candidate for something that is intrinsically good. Nevertheless, they do not seem to have much in common at first sight. In what way are works of art like friendships or scientific theories? One possible answer is that each of these items is a complex whole: ecosystems bring a variety of living organisms into a complex whole; friendships unify the desires, plans, and intentions of persons; works of art unify quite disparate elements into complex wholes, and scientific theories unify pieces of knowledge as well as principles of explanation. We consider all of these things to be intrinsically valuable, and they all have the property of being complex wholes. This is at least

⁹ Brief remarks that suggest that harmony and organic unity are the same thing, or at least very similar concepts, include Nozick (1981) or Kelly (2014).

¹⁰ See, for example, Nozick (1981); Oddie (2005, 2014); Audi (2007); Davison (2012); Kelly (2014).

¹¹ See, for example, Nozick (1981).

evidence that the property of being a complex whole is the value-conferring property, and that complex unity grounds intrinsic value.

While harmony and complex unity are not the same thing, the argument from explanatory depth also supports the idea that harmony is the metaphysical grounds of intrinsic value. The aforementioned items are all complex wholes, but it also seems intuitively plausible to say that in most cases, the constitutive elements of these entities stand in harmonious relation to one another – at least when they are good instances of their kind.¹² For example, it seems plausible to say that the different organisms in a well-functioning ecosystem are in harmony; we might also think that friendships are characterized by a certain harmony among the friends; etc. Of course, there can be disharmonious friendships. This simply follows from the fact that harmony and complex unity are not the same thing. But this might be taken as evidence that speaks in favour of harmony as the metaphysical grounds of intrinsic value: if we think that in many cases, a good instance of X is an instance of X that is characterized by harmony, then this might support the idea that the fact that X is harmonious makes it the case that X is intrinsically good. The harmony of the constitutive elements would then be the metaphysical grounds of intrinsic value, not the property of having the structure of complex unity. In this sense, the argument from explanatory depth could support the idea that harmony grounds intrinsic value.

In addition, there is a second and perhaps more important argument in favour of understanding harmony as the metaphysical grounds of intrinsic value. This is a variation of an argument that Robert Nozick has presented in support of the complex unity view but that seems to apply more to the harmony view.

Nozick distinguishes between different ways of responding to value, namely valuing and anti-valuing (Nozick 1981, 429–430). Both “valuing” and “anti-valuing” are umbrella terms that cover a large variety of actions and attitudes that could best be described as pro- or contra-attitudes to value. Valuing includes, among other things, “bringing about, maintaining, saving from destruction, prizing, contemplating, valuing” (Nozick 1981, 429) what is valuable, whereas anti-valuing includes, among other things, “destroying, blocking the realization of, impending, scorning, ignoring, demeaning, shunning, negating, opposing, thwarting, rejecting, avoiding” (Nozick 1981, 430) intrinsically good entities. Nozick argues that these ways of responding to value put an agent into a relationship with the valuable entity, and that these ways of standing in a relationship with a valuable entity are themselves valuable or invaluable. More specifically, it is intrinsically good to respond with pro-attitudes to what is intrinsically good, and it is intrinsically bad to respond with contra-attitudes to what is intrinsically bad. Similarly, it is intrinsically good to respond with contra-attitudes to what is intrinsically bad, and it is intrinsically bad to respond with pro-attitudes to what is intrinsically bad.¹³

¹² Admittedly, this does not seem to apply to the case of scientific theories.

¹³ See also Hurka (2001). Other authors who accept this so-called recursive account of value include Chisholm (1986); Lemos (1994); Zimmerman (2001); Oddie (2005); Wedgwood (2009); Way (2013); Bradford (2013).

Nozick goes on to argue that a theory about the metaphysical grounds of value should be able to explain this independently plausible idea that a correct valuing of what is of value is itself valuable – and of course, the theory should be able to do so by its own standards. It would be quite unconvincing to argue that all value is to be explained in terms of X, and then go on to explain the goodness of appropriate value responses in terms of Y. This seems to be a problem for hedonist accounts of value, for instance. Not all forms of pro-attitudes towards intrinsic values are pleasurable, and the hedonist therefore seems to be committed to say that only some, but not all kinds of appropriate value responses are themselves intrinsically good, or to say that all kinds of appropriate responses to value are intrinsically good, but that the goodness of appropriate value responses is to be explained in some non-hedonist way. Both options have considerable theoretical cost.

Nozick thinks that the complex unity account of intrinsic value fares better in this regard. An agent who responds appropriately to value stands in a specific relationship with value, and this means that the responding agent and the value form an organic unity: “The [valuing] verbs are verbs of unification; the relationships they specify establish and embody complex unities of the person with (what realizes) the values. The situation when these relationships hold will have some (positive) degree of organic unity, and so be ranked as valuable by the dimension of organic unity as underlying value” (Nozick 1981, 432). Thus, Nozick argues that the complex unity view has the important advantage that it can explain by its own standards why it is intrinsically good to respond appropriately to value.

I think that Nozick is correct in thinking that it is a desideratum for a theory of value that the theory can explain in its own terms why it is intrinsically good to respond with pro-attitudes to intrinsically valuable entities. However, it is less clear whether the organic unity view fulfils this desideratum. To form a complex whole, the constitutive elements must form a new kind of entity that cannot be reduced to an aggregate of its constituent parts. But it is not clear in what sense there is a novel and distinct kind of entity that is constituted by the agent and the valuable entity.¹⁴ Furthermore, as Thomas Hurka (2001, 39) has pointed out, Nozick’s theory faces problems explaining why contra-attitudes to intrinsically bad entities are intrinsically good: a paradigm example of an appropriate contra-attitude to intrinsically bad entities consists in hating what’s intrinsically bad, but Nozick himself understands hating as a state of disunity (Nozick 1981, 433). But if unity is the grounds of intrinsic value, if hating what’s bad is intrinsically good, and if hating consists in a relation of disunity, then it is difficult to see how Nozick’s own account extends to such contra-attitudes to disvalues.

The harmony view seems to fare better in these regards. While it is implausible to think that the valuing agent and the value form a novel kind of entity, it seems more

¹⁴ Much depends here on how the metaphysical question as to when different elements form a novel entity. I will not be able to discuss very complex question in the detail it deserves in this essay.

plausible to maintain that an agent who responds appropriately to value stands in harmony with the valuable entity that she responds to. The attitudes and actions of the valuing agent respond to and match the value of the valuable entity, and in this sense, there are meaningful relations between the valuing agent and the valuable entity, even if they do not form a new kind of entity. And these meaningful relations also exist in cases in which the agent responds with contra-attitudes to intrinsically bad entities: in such cases, his attitudes match the disvalue of the object, and therefore they are also in harmony. Hence, the harmony view seems better equipped than the organic unity to explain the intrinsic value of appropriate value responses by its own lights, and this is certainly an advantage of the view.

If one accepts the claim that harmony is the metaphysical grounds of intrinsic value, then several interesting implications seem to follow. Among these is that the harmony view offers a new interpretation of the consequentialist core intuition, namely the idea that morality is in some to be specified manner concerned with the impersonal good. And the harmony view might even offer a new account of understanding the overridingness of moral reasons. I will discuss these two possible implications in turn.

III. Harmony, Consequentialism, and the Impersonal Good

The first interesting implication of the harmony view is that it offers a new understanding of consequentialism. Consequentialists are concerned with the impersonal good. In other words, consequentialists think that morality is about making the world as good as possible, and what counts as the best possible state of affairs is not to be determined from anyone's perspective in particular, but rather from an impersonal point of view, or the "point of view [...] of the universe," as Sidgwick famously wrote (Sidgwick 1907, 382). Derek Parfit has expressed this idea by characterizing consequentialism as an "agent-neutral theory": it "gives to all agents common moral aims" (Parfit 1984, 27). This also means that, as many authors have noted, consequentialism only allows for agent-neutral reasons for action.¹⁵ Consequentialists think that the overarching moral goal is to make the world as good as possible from an impersonal point of view, and this means that morality requires every agent to work towards this common goal. As a result, a society of perfect consequentialist agents is a society in which the individual ends of individual agents are in harmony: all agents aim at the same goal, namely making the world as good as possible, and this means that there can be no conflict between their individual ends.^{16,17} By contrast, a deontological theory does allow for morally justified conflict

¹⁵ See, for example, McNaughton and Rawling (1995); Zong (2000); Wallace (2009).

¹⁶ That consequentialism is a theory with the upshot that the ends of individual agents are in harmony has been noted by several authors. See, for example, Forcehimes and Senrau's (2019: 153) "Principle of Moral Harmony" according to which a "consequentialist theory must be such that the agents who satisfy it are guaranteed to bring about the best complete state of affairs collectively available to them." Now, one might in what sense I am using the term

between ends because it allows for agent-relative reasons: your goal and my goal need not be the same if we are both fully committed deontologists (for example, my goal might be that my children fare well, and your goal might be that your children fare well, and this might lead to morally justified conflict between our goals if we both want to acquire a good that we both need for our respective children to fare well).

Consequentialism thus has the following structure. All moral agents ought to have the same aim, namely, to make the world as good as possible. This means that we all have reasons to bring about as much value as possible. If we do so, we promote the impersonal good; and as a side effect, our ends are in harmony. In other words: consequentialists maintain that our ends are in harmony if and because they are all directed towards the impersonal good. The impersonal good is prior, and the harmonizing of our ends is a result of aiming at the antecedent impersonal good.

The harmony view offers a new interpretation of consequentialism and the claim that consequentialism only allows for agent-neutral reasons as moral reasons for action. Proponents of the harmony view can maintain the consequentialist claims that reasons for action are grounded in value and that moral agents should be concerned with the impersonal good. Additionally, they can claim that the best state of affairs is identical with the state of affairs in which things exemplify harmony to the greatest degree – after all, if harmony grounds intrinsic value, then it seems plausible to think that the more harmony, the more value. Of course, the question is what “greatest harmony” means here. And proponents of the harmony view can argue that the greatest harmony is established if as much elements as possible are brought into harmony. In the practical realm, this means that the greatest harmony is achieved when the ends of all individual agents are brought into harmony – if, in other words, they are all directed towards a common goal, and if there is no conflict between them.

This means that the harmony view can maintain that we all have reason to promote the impersonal good, which means that we have reason to harmonize our individual ends and direct them towards the same aim, and this in turn means that our moral reasons are all agent-neutral reasons. The difference between classical consequentialism and the harmony view is that the classical view holds that agents are required to promote the impersonal good, that they therefore only have agent-neutral

“harmony” here. In a sense, it just seems intuitive to say that, if a group of agents are all working towards the same goal, then their ends are in harmony. However, we can also use the brief characterization of harmony that I offered above to back up this claim. I have argued that, when elements are in harmony, there must be meaningful relations between them, and this is certainly the case when all agents are working towards the same common goal: the fact that their individual ends contribute to a common goal already establishes meaningful relations between the individual ends, since the successful pursuit of my end depends at least partly on whether others also successfully pursue their ends. For more on this, see Löschke (2019).

¹⁷ Note that this understanding of harmonizing individual ends does not rule out diversity. After all, there is a lot of diversity in this kind of harmony, namely the diversity of the individual persons and their contributions to the overarching aim.

reasons, and that this means that their ends are in harmony when they act on their reasons, whereas the harmony view holds that agents are required to promote the impersonal good, that they are therefore required to harmonize their ends, and that they therefore only have agent-neutral reasons for action. Harmonizing their ends is not something that follows from aiming at realizing the greatest good: aiming at realizing the greatest good consists in harmonizing their individual ends. Or, to put it somewhat differently, the harmonizing does not follow from an antecedent understanding of what the impersonal good and the agent-neutral reasons for action are; the good that agents aim at consists in their individual ends being harmonized. Of course, the practical upshot will often be the same, but the order of explanation is reversed. And the important point is that, if the harmony view is correct, then this means that consequentialism does in fact follow from what value is. Once we understand what value is, we also understand that the greatest good consists in harmonizing our ends. Contrary to what some authors assume,¹⁸ a proper understanding of value will then lead quite naturally to some form of consequentialism.

IV. Harmony and Overridingness

The second interesting implication of the harmony view is that it seems to offer a new explanation of a claim that many philosophers find attractive, namely the idea that moral reasons are overriding. To say that moral reasons are overriding is to say that they win if they conflict with non-moral reasons. If a moral reason speaks in favour of action A, whereas a non-moral reason speaks in favour of action B, then the overridingness thesis holds that you ought to do A, rather than B. Those philosophers who accept the overriding thesis find it attractive because it illustrates the importance that we usually assign to morality. Moral concerns do seem to trump self-interested concerns in many cases – it would be strange to develop a moral theory that tells you what you morally ought to do and then go on to say that the moral ought is conditional on not conflicting with your self-interest. If moral reasons were not overriding in this sense, then it would be difficult to explain why it is wrong to steal, tell a lie, murder a person, etc., in cases in which doing so would benefit you the most. The overridingness thesis is controversial, and I do not have the space to defend or reject it in this paper. Rather, what I want to show is that the harmony view provides a novel explanation of the overriding character of moral reasons. Thus, to the extent that one finds the overridingness thesis plausible (or implausible), one should also find the harmony view plausible (or implausible).

The idea is this. We have already seen that the harmony view provides a novel account of the consequentialist concern with the impersonal good. As moral agents, we aim for the greatest good, and according to the harmony view, the greatest good is the state of affairs in which the individual ends of all agents are in harmony. Moral

¹⁸ See, for example, Anderson (1993) or Wedgwood (2016).

reasons should be understood along these lines: they are reasons to act in harmony with the other members of the moral community. This means that an agent who acts on her self-interested reasons, rather than her moral reasons, disrupts the harmony between her ends and the ends of others: she makes it impossible to realize the greatest possible good. Of course, the agent who acts on her self-interested reasons also realizes value, namely value in her own life. But that value is always less than the value that she could realize by harmonizing her ends with others. The important point is that, according to the harmony view, there is no value pluralism, no incommensurability, and therefore no dualism of practical reasons.¹⁹ Furthermore, the separateness of persons plays no important role. And these are the most convincing possible reasons to reject the overridingness thesis. Hence, if the harmony view is true, then the overridingness thesis also seems to be true.

To repeat, I am not arguing for the overridingness thesis, nor do I argue that the explanation that I have provided is the best possible explanation of the overridingness thesis. My point is that the overridingness thesis dovetails quite naturally with the harmony view. This again shows that the harmony view has interesting implications.

Let me briefly sum up. The harmony view has several attractive features. It has explanatory depth and explains the intrinsic value of many things that we intuitively judge to be intrinsically valuable and that do not seem to have much in common at first sight. The view also explains by its own standards why it is intrinsically valuable to respond appropriately to the good. And it provides a novel account of the consequentialist idea that morality is concerned with the impersonal good, as well as a possible defence of the overriding thesis, which some find attractive. Hence, understanding harmony as the metaphysical grounds of intrinsic value is an interesting view that certainly deserves attention. However, there are also some problems with the view, and I will address some of them in the following section.

V. Harmony as Intrinsic Value – Some Worries and Objections

A first worry with the harmony view is that it might have oppressive implications, especially when applied to personal relationships or the political realm. We do not value harmony over everything else – sometimes conflict can be quite useful or even desirable. For example, too much emphasis on harmony in friendships, family relationships, or romantic partnerships can make people hesitant to voice their needs

¹⁹ When I say that according to the harmony view, there is no value pluralism, I mean that proponents of the view do not think that there are several values that are irreducible to one another, but that whenever something is valuable, it is because the constitutive elements of the thing are in harmony. This simply follows from the assumption that harmony is the (sole) metaphysical ground of intrinsic value. But that, of course, does not rule out that there is diversity and pluralism among the constitutive elements of the entity in question. Harmony presupposes variety among the things that are put in harmony; however, according to the harmony view, these things are not necessarily valuable before the harmonious relations are established.

or desires, and as result, they might feel that their needs are not met or taken seriously. Too much emphasis on harmony can then even lead to stronger and more disruptive conflicts down the line. Or take the case of social harmony. The hazards of too much emphasis on harmony seem even graver here. Too much emphasis on harmony within a society can lead to anti-liberal tendencies; in fact, we do not expect harmony within a democratic society, but rather conflicts that are nevertheless resolved in a peaceful manner. Hence, the objection goes, we value other things than harmony in our personal relationships or democratic societies, and this shows that harmony cannot be the grounds of intrinsic value.

There are actually two worries here. The first worry is that too much emphasis on harmony might lead to bad results in the long run, as cases of personal relationships show. In other words, harmony can be instrumentally bad. This worry does not seem to be very damaging for the harmony view. On many accounts of intrinsic value, intrinsically valuable things can be instrumentally bad, and vice versa. Take pleasure as an example. Most accounts of intrinsic value include pleasure as an intrinsic good, but pleasure can obviously be instrumentally bad in many ways. For example, the pleasure that a heroin addict feels after taking her drug might be intrinsically good (since it is a case of pleasure), but it can lead to more pain and other disastrous consequences in the long run. Hence, the mere fact that individual instances of harmony might have bad consequences and lead to greater disharmony in the long run does not refute the claim that harmony is intrinsically good.

The second worry poses a more serious challenge to the harmony view. The worry is that not only can harmony have bad consequences; it might even cease to be a valuable thing. The society that is described in *Brave New World* might seem harmonious, but it certainly does not seem to be intrinsically good. And neither do other societies that might appear harmonious – for example, totalitarian regimes might appear harmonious in the sense that everybody works for the same goal (say, win a war, or please the dictator, or whatever), but this is certainly not intrinsically good. And if this is true, then harmony cannot be the metaphysical grounds of intrinsic value.

Against this worry, proponents of the harmony view can respond that harmony does not mean conformity. The greatest harmony is not only achieved when several elements are as conformable as possible, but when there is a wide variety of elements among which meaningful relations are established. Take a harmonious piece of music as an example. Two instruments can create great harmony if harmony is understood solely in terms of conformability. But the harmony that an orchestra can create seems to be greater, even if it is less harmonious when viewed merely in terms of conformability: the variety of the elements that are brought into harmony is greater, and this establishes more harmony overall. If this is correct, then the harmony view does not imply that we ought to value social homogeneity. In fact, it might actually speak in favour of a certain degree of pluralism and diversity, as this allows for more disparate elements among which harmonious relations can be established.

However, it is not entirely clear whether this answer succeeds. It presupposes that the diversity of the elements among which harmony is established contributes to the overall degree of harmony of the entity in question. Such a similar claim certainly

seems reasonable in the case of complex unity: the more elements are unified, the greater the complexity of the entity in question, and hence the greater the degree of complex unity, all else being equal. But it is less clear whether this also applies to the case of harmony. If 100 voices are perfectly in sync, then the harmony that they establish seems to be greater than the harmony of 2000 voices that are slightly out of sync. And this suggests that in the case of harmony, what is important is the kind of relations that exist between the constitutive elements of an entity, rather than the degree of diversity of the elements between which the harmonious relations are established. I cannot discuss this matter in detail here, but I only want to point out that the worry that the harmony view supports social oppression when applied to the political realm cannot be as easily dispelled as in the case of complex unity.

Another worry is this. We sometimes judge things to be intrinsically valuable despite or even in virtue of being disharmonious; hence, harmony does not seem to ground intrinsic value. Take the twelve-tone technique as an example. Modern music that is composed in the twelve-tone technique is aesthetically valuable, but the sounds often do not sound harmonious. This seems to be a kind of value that cannot be explained in terms of harmony. Now, some readers might object that the twelve-tone technique does exemplify harmony – it is simply a non-traditional understanding of harmony that is at work here. Music that is composed in the twelve-tone technique has a certain architectonical structure, and this means that there *are* meaningful relations between the individual tones.

The problem with this possible response is that it makes the notion of harmony appear too wide. As I have argued above, harmony is not identical with complex unity. Stretching the notion of harmony in the way described lets harmony appear identical with complex unity. And even if a case can be made that in the end harmony and complex unity amount to the same thing, then this means that the harmony view is less interesting than it initially appeared: it simply collapses into the complex unity view, instead of being a novel account of the metaphysical grounds of intrinsic value.

Nevertheless, harmony does not seem to be identical with complex unity, and the complex unity view has certain advantages over the harmony view as a result. Take personal relationships as an example. The harmony view implies that personal relationships are only valuable if they are harmonious. Now, as I have argued above, it seems plausible to suppose that, all else being equal, personal relationships are *better* if they are more harmonious – if the marriage between A and B is harmonious, whereas C and D are married and tend to fight all the time, then most people would probably agree that the marriage of A and B is better than the marriage of C and D. But it is less clear whether relationships are *only* valuable if they are harmonious ones. Even if C and D fight all the time, you still might think that there is some value in their relationship. For example, historical accounts of love argue that the value of a relationship consists largely in its historical character and in the common history of the relationship's members, and this means that the relationship of C and D can be of

value due to their common history, even if it is not a harmonious one.²⁰ Now, the complex unity view seems well equipped to take such historical facts into account: it can very well claim, for example, that such historical structures are among the constitutive elements of a relationship, so that the history that two people have contributes to the existence of the relationship between them. In other words, common history establishes a novel entity and therefore complex unity.

By contrast, it is less clear whether the harmony view can accommodate such historical considerations in a similar manner. When we talk call a relationship harmonious, we usually ascribe them an attribute that applies to them at the present time, rather than talking about them in a historical perspective. What matters is the relation between the constitutive elements as they are now, regardless of their history. Now, it is perhaps possible to give an account of the historical dimension of relationships – perhaps there is some harmony between the individual ends and desires of the relationship members in a diachronic perspective. However, the more plausible such explanations are, the more they seem to resemble the complex unity view – and as a result, the harmony view appears less interesting, as it once again collapses into the complex unity view.

Conclusion

Harmony is an underappreciated concept in Western analytic philosophy. This is perhaps an unfortunate situation: perhaps Western analytic philosophy should give the concept of harmony more attention. After all, it might play the most pivotal role in ethics: it might be the metaphysical grounds of intrinsic value. As I have argued, such a view has several advantages: it has explanatory depth and gives a unified explanation of the value of many things that do not seem to have much in common. Furthermore, it can explain by its own lights why it is intrinsically good to respond appropriately to intrinsically valuable entities: an agent who responds with pro-attitudes to intrinsic values stands in a harmonious relation to value. And the view has interesting implications, as it provides a new interpretation and justification of consequentialism, as well as the overridingness thesis, according to which moral reasons trump non-moral reasons in cases of conflict.

However, as we have seen, the harmony view also faces considerable challenges. It might have oppressive implications when it is applied to the political realm, and it is vulnerable to counterexamples. Furthermore, the harmony view seems to have problems accommodating the historical dimension of personal relationships. Of course, I have not argued decisively for or against the harmony view; there might be many other aspects and implications of the harmony view that are worthy of

²⁰ As an example for such a historical account of love, see Kolodny (2003).

discussion. In any case, harmony seems to be an underappreciated notion that deserves more scrutiny from analytic philosophers.²¹

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