

# THE LURE OF BEAUTY: HARMONY AS A CONDUIT OF SELF-TRANSCENDENCE

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*Abstract: The paper begins with the assumption that in order to explain the efficacy of harmony as an organizing force in human and natural affairs we must pay attention to the dynamic features characteristic of the growth and maintenance of harmonious forms. Two dynamic features are highlighted for their especial significance: revitalization, and self-surpassing. It is then argued that the two are substantively connected through the agency of creativity which, when given free reign, tends to preserve and fortify harmony by surpassing existing harmonious configurations. It follows that the impetus towards self-transcendence is a vital aspect of the growth, the sustenance, and the flourishing of harmony. I then argue that this urge towards self-transcendence can be broadly identified with Plato's notion of Eros. Nevertheless, I also argue that this affinity does not commit us to a rigid Platonic scheme of the sort criticized by Chenyang Li (2014) as harmony by conformity.*

"But we have to ask whether nature does not contain within itself a tendency to be in tune, an Eros urging towards perfection" (A.N. Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, 251).

## Introduction

The present paper takes its cue from the reasonable assumption that insofar as harmony is an efficacious organizing force in human and natural affairs it must be thought of as a dynamic phenomenon. It then proceeds with the claim that a consideration of the dynamic nature of harmony, and in particular, of the sustenance and growth of harmonious forms, points to the significance of two complementary factors: revitalization and self-surpassing. Rather than being merely parallel determinants, however, I argue that the two are substantively connected through the agency of creativity. For when creativity is given leeway the preservation of harmony is often affected by courtesy of an active search for novel, perfected harmonies — beyond the reach of past achievement. Once realized, such harmonies are, in turn, conducive to further leaps beyond extant conditions. Ultimately, then, the argument leads to the conclusion that harmony is reciprocally entwined with the urge towards self-transcendence. Assuming that the notion of self-transcendence plays an important role in an adequate dynamic conception of harmony, the general thrust of the paper is that the task of explicating the connection between harmony and self-transcendence can be carried out using the resources of an unexpected ally, namely, Plato's notion of

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*Eros*, or the erotic impetus. It is Eros, the love of beauty, that drives us to seek harmony in the first place; and it is Eros, too, that prevents us from being permanently content with hitherto established harmonies, enticing us to fix our gaze upwards in search of loftier experiences and more exalted harmonies. Nor is this erotic impulse an external supplement which must be affixed to the concept of harmony artificially. Rather, beauty, I argue, is an essential feature of harmony; and where there is love of harmony there is, therefore, love of beauty. Thus, the potential for self-transcendence, enshrined in the lure of beauty, is an integral aspect of harmony.

In the following pages, I will clarify and motivate this alliance between harmony and Eros. Section II begins with a discussion of the reciprocity of harmony and self-transcendence. Section III then focuses on the integral connection between harmony and beauty. My contention that harmony enjoys an irreducibly aesthetic flavor is illustrated by comparing it to the kindred concept of *coherence*, which despite bearing certain striking similarities to the concept of harmony is nevertheless devoid of the aesthetic connotations evoked by the latter. Section IV follows up with a brief discussion of the imputation that harmony is an essentially conservative form of order aiming at, and consisting in, the enjoyment and maintenance of stability. Rejecting this idea, I then return to the question in what manner, or manners, might we hope to explain the transformative and creative aspects of harmony. In section V I turn to the main hypothesis of the paper, laying down the idea that something like Plato's notion of Eros, broadly conceived, is not only consistent with a sound conception of harmony but may also prove rather useful in addressing and articulating the transformative, and even transcendent, aspects of the dynamism characteristic of the growth and sustenance of harmonious forms. Finally, in section VI, I anticipate and address two major objections to the proposal to ally harmony with Eros: first, that such union is ill-advised insofar as it makes harmony conform rigidly to a static pre-set order; second, that it makes our conception of harmony irreconcilable with naturalism, thereby undermining its plausibility and attractiveness.

### I. Harmony, Change, and Self-transcendence

Harmony, as identified in exemplary domains such as music, bodily health, personal relationships, or social affairs, is predicated upon proper balance between interacting components endowed with contrasting tendencies. Yet balance is oftentimes a delicate affair. An exquisite concord may easily turn to discord, and concurrence may quickly cede its possessions to strife. Apart from such hazards of violent destruction there is also a peril of a more subtle sort, namely, of atrophy, stagnation, or staleness — the loss of effervescence, vitality, and creative energy. In short, harmony may decline peacefully just as much as it may succumb to active injury. In view of such vulnerability, it is clear that if harmony is nevertheless an effective force in human and natural affairs this can only be so due to the existence of dynamic factors that counteract such disrupting tendencies, enabling harmonious forms to maintain a significant degree of stability, resilience, and endurance amidst interference and decay.

Indeed, ensuring the stability and persistence of harmonious forms requires active maintenance, particularly one which involves regeneration and reinvigoration. Such revitalizing self-maintenance is characteristic of all life forms, where healthy functioning is contingent on metabolic recreation and a concerted effort to continuously adapt to changing circumstances through proactive regulation of one's commerce with the environment (Kauffman 2000; Ruiz Mirazo, Pereto, and Moreno 2004; Shani 2013). Clearly, when it comes to biological, psychological, and social phenomena such as bodily health, ecological sustainability, personal relationships, or social affairs, the persistence of harmonious patterns is contingent upon an auto-regenerative dynamics of this sort. Furthermore, when looking at such phenomena it becomes evident that the endurance of a cohesive harmonious whole is the endurance of an overall *pattern* secured through a steady succession of regenerated instances — each continuous with preceding instances in a variety of significant manners yet, at the same time, adjusted, refined, and constructively vivified with fresh sparks of energy. While revitalization has its limits too, as decline is inevitable to all concrete forms, it is nevertheless a *sine qua non* for *enduring* harmonies.

Another fact which calls for attention in addressing the question of the efficacy and stability of harmonious forms is the tendency towards growth, ascent, and self-surpassing. Ours is an evolving and self-thrusting world. There is greater complexity, articulation, and sheer depth of being to the world we inhabit today than to earlier cosmic epochs (Bonner 1988; Chaisson 2001; Jantsch 1980). There were once neither atoms, nor galaxies, nor biospheres, or multi-cellular organisms; sophisticated forms of intelligence and self-awareness; mores and morals; socialization and political order; civilizations, cultural treasures, or global networks. This general trend towards increased structural complexity, informational richness, and depth (i.e., higher dimensionality) of existence applies also to the evolution and development of harmonious forms, be it in ecosystems, the arts, personal relationships, or social and political affairs. As this cosmic trend continues, fresh opportunities open up for emergent harmonies on higher, hitherto unavailable, plateaus.<sup>1</sup> On a more concrete level, each existing harmony is, potentially, a scaffold for the attainment of novel harmonies, often of a more advanced and exquisite nature. Taken together, our initial two observations suggest that to the extent that harmony plays an important role in human and natural affairs, that is, to the extent that harmonious forms make a mark in the world, this causal signature is traceable, in no small part, to two determining factors: first, that harmonies are susceptible to revitalization; and second, that there is a general pull towards novel and more elevated harmonies.

So far, we have treated these two factors — revitalization and self-surpassing — as largely independent of each other, but it is worth asking whether the connection between the two may not be more robust and organic. Consideration of the human

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to suggest, however, that such cosmic trend is strictly linear. Far from it, it includes many fluctuations and trade-offs. As the current climatic and environmental degradation clearly illustrates, the enrichment of some aspects of life can cause serious depletion of other aspects.

sphere of action suggests that the answer to our question may indeed be positive. For when it comes to us humans there is no denial that *creativity* plays a large role in the thrust forward of things, ideas, and conditions, throughout history. Nor are there good grounds to deny that such "going beyond" is, at least on occasion, a genuine act of self-transcendence. Moreover, when creativity is at play it tends to imbue renovation with the spirit of change. For it cannot rest content with the mere retainment of form but strives for novel excellences. Particularly, when humanity is at its creative best, individually or collectively, it actively pursues unexplored avenues in search for higher levels of perfection. Finally, the perfection of harmonious forms constitutes an especially important part of such constructive efforts since it is in the realization of novel harmonies that the creative drive for self-transcendence finds its most natural expression, and a temporary relief in affirmative satisfaction. In short, when creativity is at play renovation and self-transcendence merge into each other and harmonies are perfected and surpassed even as they are preserved.

It is, of course, considerably more controversial to maintain that something analogous to human creativity exists throughout nature at large, or that nature surpasses itself out of yearning (perhaps unconscious) for transcendence. Both of these cognate ideas, however, have deep roots in the philosophical and spiritual traditions of both western Europe and east Asia. Philosophers such as Schelling (1800), Hegel (1807), Bergson (1911), and Whitehead (1929), as well as the Indian philosopher-sage Aurobindo (1919), have stressed the universal — metaphysical and cosmic — significance of these two notions. More recently, renowned system theorist Stuart Kauffman has argued the case for creativity in nature (Kauffman 2016), albeit without explicit recourse to a telic urge towards self-surpassing. In respect of creativity (although, again, perhaps not with regard to the urge for self-transcendence), such outlook is also resonant with traditional Chinese philosophy and its employment of such central notions as *Qi*, or cosmic energy, *Dao*, or way, and *Taiji*, or supreme ultimate (Liu 2018; Perkins 2019).

While, from a metaphysical standpoint, the question whether nature is suffused with creativity and a telic urge for propulsion towards new summits is highly significant there is no need to adjudicate on this difficult matter here. For inasmuch as we think that harmony and the yearning for self-surpassing are intimately entwined in the human sphere there is already sufficient reason to conclude that an adequate account of harmony must address *self-transcendence* as an integral aspect of its sought out explanation. Earlier, I argued that creativity acts as a glue that connects the construction and maintenance of harmonious forms with the urge to rise above present conditions and to exceed one's boundaries; and moreover, that the quest for self-transcendence finds a natural outlet in the creation of newly formed harmonies. An especially important aspect of the connection between harmony and self-transcendence is that creativity and the impetus to rise above one's present predicament serve as important antidotes against stagnation and decline — and are therefore vital for the *preservation* of harmonious relationships as much as they are necessary for engendering novel harmonies. Finally, it may also be stressed that harmony is, in turn, a conduit for self-transcendence insofar as it opens our eyes to the

possibility of perfection and nourishes the appetite to propel towards new summits. This is a central theme of the present paper to which I shall return below.

## II. Aesthetic Character: Harmony vs. Coherence

In the preceding section I argued that a proper conception of harmony as an effective organizing force in human and natural affairs requires substantive appeal to the notion of self-transcendence. Earlier, I proposed that self-transcendence could be understood with reference to Plato's notion of Eros, or the love of beauty; for it is this love of beauty, in particular in its more sublimated non-sensual forms (see section V below), which furnishes the impulsion to transcend one's present state of existence in search of greater perfection. By weaving beauty into the fabric of harmony, this thread of reasoning affirms an internal connection between the two. Plotinus argued famously that beauty can exist apart from the symmetry of form (*Enneads* 1991, I.6.1), and in this vein we may concede that it can likewise exist apart from harmony. On the opposite side, however, it seems much more secure to maintain, as I have done above, that harmony implicates beauty.

Support for this claim could be garnered from the simple observation that in both ancient Greece and ancient China the concept of harmony originated in connection with music and the good ordering of musical notes (see Guthrie 1950/1975, 41; Li 2014, 31). This genetic observation is telling. Indeed, one could hardly think of something that better uplifts and entices the spirit, in a manner congruent with the notion of Eros, than the beauty expressed through music. But however important, this genetic observation does not itself establish that our current, and broader, application of the concept of harmony preserves its original aesthetic connotation. Nevertheless, critical reflection bears the point that the concept of harmony remains intimately entangled with aesthetic overtones. An effective way to illustrate this is to compare harmony with the partially analogous concept of *coherence*.

Coherence is a widely used concept. It has interesting applications in physical (or dynamical) contexts as well as cognitive (or conceptual) contexts, making it an object of analysis in both the natural sciences and the human sciences. In the natural sciences, it pertains to situations, or contexts, in which a multiplicity of lower-level variables coalesce into higher-level unity by being synchronized and closely correlated with each other. A simple example from daily life is that of a crew of rowers whose movements are coordinated in perfect unison, thereby giving rise to an integral pattern of team motion. Such integral pattern of movement is then described as coherent. A more theoretical stock example is that of coherent light waves. Two waves are said to be coherent when they manifest identical frequency, and zero or constant phase difference. Under such circumstances the waves interfere constantly, creating a single concentrated beam of light (Raymer 2017, 31-33). In contrast to such physical examples, in the human sciences the concept of coherence applies to conceptual entities such as ideas, thoughts, beliefs, theories, texts, discourses, and the like. As such, it usually does not involve reference to motion, or activity. Nevertheless, here too, we find that coherence pertains to the coalescence of lower-level variables into a higher-level unity, and that the latter is effected through positive

correlation of micro-constituents. What binds the micro-constituents together, congealing them into an integral whole, is not synchronized movement but, rather, reciprocal relations of epistemic support. A coherent discourse, for example, is one in which various components (sentences, clauses, etc.) are woven together by being mutually pertinent and enhancive: they depend on each other, respond to each other, and elaborate upon each other (see e.g., Halliday and Hasan 1976; Wang and Guo 2014). Consider, for instance, the following imaginary discourse: "I run into Jill.// She's upset.// She really thinks// her daughter might move,// so she won't see her anymore." (Langacker 2008, 487). According to Langacker, "Each expression in the sequence invokes the structure already assembled as the basis for its interpretation. The incorporation of its contents produces an updated structure invoked by the next expression" (Ibid.). For example, the expression "She's upset" refers back to Jill, mentioned in the previous expression, and is also connected to consequent expressions which explain *why* Jill is upset. In a likewise manner, a coherent belief system is comprised of beliefs that are not merely consistent with each other but involve each other actively, and offer each other support, thereby constituting a stable, meaningful, integral whole (Blanshard 1939, 265-266; Bonjour 1985, 93; Dancy 1985, 110).

Such characteristics make the concept of coherence similar, in certain important respects, to the concept of harmony. Both concepts convey the sense of an integral whole in which a plurality of elements are bound together internally, through relations of reciprocal sustenance and enhancement. Both sets of phenomena involve mutual resonance and responsiveness between parts which results in distinctively novel qualitative riches manifested at the level of the emergent collective. Moreover, in both cases the emergent pattern represents a triumph of order over chaos, randomness, or disarray. Finally, the similarity between the two concepts is also attested to by their etymology. *Coherence* is rooted in the Latin verb 'coharere' which means "to stick together", whereas the Greek etymology of *harmonia* connotes the notions of "joining", and of "fitting together".

Yet, despite this remarkable similarity there is also a noteworthy difference, namely, that of these two notions only harmony is suffused with *aesthetic* flavor. Coherent patterns may be beautiful — as evinced, for example, by the basalt columns of Giant Causeway in Ireland — but their beauty is accidental to their being coherent. In contrast, harmonious forms are not merely orderly, synchronized, and so on, but are such that their order is necessarily entwined with aesthetic attributes, of which perhaps the most common are pleasantness, gracefulness, gratification, and joy.

Such uncompromisingly aesthetic nuances are an essential aspect of harmony. This contention is evident when it comes to the harmonies of artistic creation, where variables such as colors, sounds, shapes, or movements are woven together into integral wholes wherein contrasts of detail operate synergetically to create enhanced *intensities* of gratification, joy, curiosity, awe, vividness of feelings, depth of

experience, and the like.<sup>2</sup> In a likewise manner, natural beauty, too, produces similar effects through analogous patterned contrasts of harmonious interweaving. But what about the less obviously aesthetic harmonies found in psychological, interpersonal, social, and political contexts, do they, too, betray the existence of aesthetic qualities? I think that, as a general rule, they do. However, we must also remember that the varieties of phenomena to which the concept of harmony is applicable constitute a wide spectrum, and consequently that we must not expect phenomena situated at the opposite poles of the spectrum to resemble each other in all respects.

Consider, for instance, an exemplary spiritually evolved person, a sage perhaps. Such a person is harmonized both in terms of his (or her) thoughts, feelings, and psychological inclinations, and in terms of his ostensible behavior. Discord and destruction are eliminated or minimized, and the inner tapestry of motivations, feelings, convictions, and thoughts operate in tandem, weaving together breadth of experience and depth of reflection into a powerfully manifest singularity of mind. Nor is such singularity of mind the blind thrust of a zealot, for it is grounded in sound judgment, high ideals, wholesome resonance with one's surroundings, and a vivid interest in the riches of one's inner landscape. In such a person there is, I contend, beauty and grace, and these are disclosed in his outward appearance and conduct — reaching out and inspiring others. Or consider spousal or family relationship in which a harmonious tapestry is weaved out of love, care, compassion, playfulness, humor, the complementarity of strengths and weaknesses, and so on. There is gracefulness, gratification, and joy in such relationships, and they are outwardly visible as they are inwardly present.

As we shift our attention to harmony in the context of large-scale social and political realities we move towards increasingly *abstract* and formal sets of circumstances and forms of engagement. It is therefore not surprising that in such contexts the presence of aesthetic qualities becomes progressively less visible and more difficult to identify. Still, is there no more beauty and grace in a harmonious reality marked by peace, decency, courteousness, and cooperation than in a discordant existence predicated upon strife, deceit, and boorishness? The ugliness of the latter, it would seem, is not merely moral but also aesthetic, and one need only consider the ruins of war in present-day Syria or Yemen to be reminded of that. In any event, given the wide spectrum of phenomena to which the concept of harmony is applied and the considerable degree of abstractness of some of these, it is not in the least surprising that the visibility of aesthetic contents gradually shades off as we move along the spectrum. Nevertheless, and despite these qualifications, I submit that beauty is an integral aspect of harmony.

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<sup>2</sup> I use the term *intensity* in a similar sense to that developed by Whitehead, roughly, as a correlate for the depth and richness of complex feelings (see Whitehead 1929/1978; Jones 1998).

### III. Harmony, Conformity, and Change

Assuming that harmony is suffused with aesthetic qualities does not yet demonstrate, however, an integral connection to self-transcendence. This can be seen by noticing that aesthetic attributes such as pleasantness, gracefulness, gratification, or joy hint at the notions of satisfaction, fulfillment, and consummation. The latter, in their turn, are indicative of states achieved rather than sought and, as such, may sustain the impression that harmony is a *conservative* form of order, one whose primary characteristics are stability and the enjoyment and maintenance of stability. Earlier, in section II, I made the observation that when harmonies are predominantly preservative, they face the perils of stagnation, staleness, and decline, which was then followed by an argument emphasizing the significance of creative adjustment, renovation, and surpassing. Naturally, this leads to the question what type of mechanism, or mechanisms, are operative in effecting adjustment, revitalization, and a going beyond one's present state of accomplishment. Before deliberating on my own thoughts in this regard I would like, first, to briefly consider an alternative perspective.

A prominent voice rallying against static depictions of harmony is Chenyang Li. Building on the Confucian philosophical tradition, Li argues that the Confucian conception of harmony is marked by the idea that harmonies are predicated on "difference and creative tension" (2014, 23); and that they are dynamic, "open-ended and continuously self-renewing" (Ibid., 32). Significantly, however, Li associates this dynamic portrait of harmony with a general cosmological outlook which he describes as *deep harmony* (Ibid., 1). On this view, harmonies need not conform to any pre-established order. In fact, all order is order through harmony, "a result of the harmonizing process rather than a precondition for harmony" (Ibid., 28).<sup>3</sup>

Li contrasts deep harmony to *harmony by conformity*, viz., a harmony based on "conformity to a static, pre-set, rational order imposed onto the world from outside" (Ibid., 33). The latter conception is distinctively Greek, traced, in particular, to Pythagoras and Plato. While Li doesn't argue systematically and explicitly against harmony by conformity it is nevertheless clear that he finds it wanting. For not only is the term 'conformity' implicative of conformism, we also find that harmony by conformity is portrayed as "idealistic and even dangerous" (Ibid., 8), while the alternative conception of deep harmony is described as "broader, richer, and more liberal" (Ibid., 34). Moreover, by situating deep harmony as a dialectical foe to harmony by conformity, and by stressing the quintessentially Chinese character of the former in contrast to the paradigmatically western profile of the latter, Li's discussion creates the impression that these two contrastive templates are the only viable alternatives at hand. Although it is not my purpose to argue against Li's theory of

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<sup>3</sup> Significantly, the Confucian concept of harmony applies to *nature* as well as *nurture*. As Li puts it "harmony is a metaphysical as well as a moral concept; it both describes how the world operates and prescribes as to how human beings ought to act" (2008, 427).

harmony (which I find attractive in various respects), I nevertheless believe that the dichotomy presented here is somewhat too stark. In particular, it seems to me that the opposite poles of, on the one hand, bottom-up self-organizing deep harmony, and, on the other hand, rigid conformation to a pre-established static order, are not necessarily exhaustive of the options available for exploration. Consequently, nor must we presuppose that addressing the challenge of "harmonizing" harmony and change, requires us to adopt in full the perspective of deep harmony. In the next section I turn to discuss the idea that a reexamination of the platonic notion of Eros may prove useful for understanding the interrelationships between harmony and change, in particular in respect of the impulse for self-transcendence. In the final section I address some concerns related to this proposal and it is there that we shall meet deep harmony again.

#### IV. The Erotic Ascent

In Plato's dialogue the *Symposium*, the seeress Diotima memorably describes Eros to Socrates as a personification of the love of beauty, and more precisely as "the love of generation and birth in beauty" (1871/2018, 207). As a personification of love, Eros is essentially incomplete. Born out of the nuptial union of wealth and poverty, he is constantly moved by a sense of privation as well as an insatiable appetite for the pursuit of wisdom. His temperament, we are told, is that of a restless philosopher and a seeker. The dialogue then shifts focus from the persona of Eros to the erotic drive, the impetus that moves the philosophically minded in their search for the true, the good, and the beautiful. The erotic drive is quintessentially aesthetic. It is a love of beauty, a seeking of consummation and affirmation in beauty and harmony. In its most basic and familiar form it is straightforwardly sensual: a love of outward beauty and fine physical form. Yet, Eros (or, at least, the erotic impulse of the philosophically minded) cannot be so easily satisfied. The final and most famous part of Diotima's speech ends with an exalted description of a grand procession of erotic ascent, moving towards ever more sublimated forms of beauty and reaching its climax in ecstatic apprehension of divine, absolute beauty.

This beatific vision has inspired a good many thinker down the line of the western philosophical and theological tradition (Lovejoy 1936/1964, chap. 2; Tillich 1967, 6). Many of these, however, did not subscribe in full to Plato's metaphysics, let alone to the letter of his theory of forms. I mention this rather obvious observation because I wish to argue that it is possible to find value in Plato's notion of Eros without committing ourselves to the details of his theory of forms and to the image of a preexisting rigid order to which one must strictly conform (whether this judgment is fair with respect to Plato himself is an issue I shall not enter). That is, I wish to argue that Plato's discussion of Eros in the *Symposium*, as well as in the *Phaedrus*, captures in timeless prose an idea whose resonance goes far beyond the specific coordinates of Plato's own metaphysics. Moreover, and more specifically, I wish to argue that this idea may prove itself valuable for understanding the dialectics of change and stability operative in the creative process of forming, maintaining, and transforming harmonies.

The insight that Plato's notion of Eros captures so well is that the human predicament is that of restless suspension between heaven and earth, between "wealth" and "poverty". In other words, that we are driven by an inherent sense of incompleteness and a primal impetus to seek completion through self-transcendence. The erotic quest is, in essence, a quest for wholeness and completion. The path taken along this quest, and the distance covered, depend, of course, on the particularities of personal and social circumstances, and Plato makes it very clear that there are substantive qualitative differences between those whose nature is coarse and those who are more attuned to the life of the spirit. But all are united in being incomplete and in seeking (knowingly or unknowingly, wisely or foolishly) greater completion. The erotic impulse is, therefore, "the impulse of man's higher nature towards the good and virtue" (Copleston, 1962/1993, 198); "the "pull" of all things to actualize their own highest potential" (Wilber 1995, 356); or, in the words of A.N. Whitehead, "the urge towards the realization of ideal perfection" (1933/1967, 275).

The above description, however, does not yet complete the picture. For if erotic ascent is more than mere illusion then there must be a source of meaning and value greater than ourselves with which we may come into contact, and toward which we may move in our erotic pilgrimage. This, again, is quite clear in the *Symposium* where the journey culminates in a direct apprehension of absolute beauty which is, at the same time, absolute goodness and wisdom. But the point generalizes beyond Plato himself. For Plato's notion of erotic ascent makes good sense only against the background assumption that there is a supreme (or at any rate transpersonal) source of meaning and value towards which one could gravitate, and through which one might hope to obtain increased completion. Thus understood, the notion of Eros has power and relevance which generalizes beyond the details of Plato's own metaphysics. It is a vision of the transformative power of spiritual orientation which resonates not only down the path of Neoplatonism and early Christianity to the Renaissance and beyond but that is also echoed in many spiritual traditions worldwide, for example in Sufism and brahmanic Hinduism.

The relevance of erotic ascent for our present concern is evinced in its aesthetic character. The medium through which Eros moves is aesthetic, its general currency is beauty. The lure for self-transcendence is a lure of beauty. It begins with the natural attraction of sensuous beauty and moves, through the cultivation of more refined sensibilities, in particular aesthetic sensibilities, towards higher insights, elevated experiences, and, finally, climatic transformation of the self. The point, then, is that beauty moves; it has a transformative power; it entices us to creatively pursue greater intensity of value, and thus to go beyond the limitations of extant experience and of present achievement. And since beauty and harmony are intimately entwined it makes good sense to ask how this transformative power of beauty may apply to the problem of addressing the dynamics of change underlying the viability of harmonious forms.

Although mentioned in succinct form earlier, it is worth restating how harmony and the erotic drive for "giving birth in the beautiful" may be interconnected. First, it is through the love of the beautiful that we come to appreciate harmony in the first place. To be sure, certain types of harmony (in nature, family, society, and the like) have other values, moral as well as pragmatic, but without aesthetic appreciation of

such harmonies their allure is greatly diminished. This is not only due to the fact that harmonies are suffused with aesthetic qualities (as argued in section III above) but also because, as Nathaniel Lawrence reminds us, "[a]esthetic sensibility is the most natural of all types of value sensibility" (1963, 177). While a moral sense of duty could be barren and forbidding, the aesthetic mode is alive and creative. It offers "excitement, allurements, inspiration" (Ibid., 178); it delights the child, moves the adolescent, and refreshes the cultivated adult; and at the highest level of spiritual achievement, "that of mystical insight... the common literary representation is always in terms of beauty" (Ibid., 177). Second, it is the erotic impulse which keeps us in a state of vigilance, prevents us from being smug and fully content with existing circumstances, and drives us to seek harmonious perfections beyond our present state of achievement. In short, the erotic impetus for self-transcendence plays a vital role in our very interest in harmony, as well as in nourishing the creativity and foresight necessary for being good stewards of harmony.

But beyond that, there is also the reciprocal influence of harmony on Eros. Harmonies are syntheses of consonant and contrastive elements in which the components combine such that their qualities merge synergetically, with the result being that the overall pattern is qualitatively enhanced. A harmonious union is an exemplar of the old saying "the whole is more than the sum of its parts". And since, as argued above, harmonious wholes are of an irreducibly aesthetic character they constitute prominent instances of aesthetic fulfillment. As such, the realization of harmony is an affirmation of the erotic drive itself, a temporary triumph of the ongoing quest to "give birth in the beautiful". Moreover, actualized harmonies may serve as scaffolds for the attainment of still higher harmonies, where by "higher harmonies" we may understand those that realize a greater intensity of value. Insofar as harmonies are things of beauty, the more we cultivate them the more we expose ourselves to the lure of beauty; and through this, to the possibility of self-transcendence.

In sum, harmony and Eros are reciprocal, the one reinforces the other. Provided, of course, that the erotic impulse does not turn into fanatic zeal, hence into an agent of discord (consider, in this respect, the blind-thrust and excessive one-sidedness of certain moral and religious crusaders); or alternatively, that the harmonies sought after are not utterly coarse and banal thereby blunting the edge of the erotic impetus (as they all too often are in our hyper-commercialized entertainment media, for example). Nonetheless, that the terms of a relation may turn pathological in no way implies that there is no relation in the first place. Assuming the reality of such mutual reinforcement, I have argued that taking the erotic dimension into consideration is vital for an adequate dynamic conception of harmony. The next and final section addresses some difficulties and objections related to the ideas developed herein.

#### V. Neither Static, nor Magical: Some Objections and Replies

An appeal to the Platonic conception of Eros, and a plea for its relevance for a comprehensive view of harmony is likely to be met with some opposition. In what follows I address two major objections. In meeting these concerns I attempt to clarify

some of the metaphysical commitments of my position while also render the view itself more appealing, or, at any rate, less objectionable.

The first objection can be gleaned, more or less directly, from the writings of Chenyang Li (2014). As seen above (section IV), Li describes the predominant Greek conception of harmony, as found in Pythagoras and in Plato, as *harmony by conformity*. On this conception harmonies are made harmonious by conforming to "a static, pre-set, rational order imposed unto the world from outside" (Ibid., 33). In particular, for Plato, terrestrial harmonies are achieved through alliance with the realm of forms, a static, eternal, celestial order of perfect harmony. In other words, earthly harmonies presuppose a divine fixed order, a static template from which they derive their being, qua harmonies, and to which they must ultimately conform. From this, an immediate concern follows, namely, that to commit ourselves to a conception of harmony based on conformity to an unchanging ideal order is to commit to an inherently static and pre-ordained picture which is hardly in accord with our initial motivation to make better sense of the constructive and creative *dynamics* of harmony. Such argument, however, is based on a genetic fallacy. For the fact that the notion of erotic impetus originates with Plato (assuming it does) does not imply that whoever makes recourse to this notion is thereby adopting Plato's philosophical package wholesale. As indicated above (section V), in embracing the notion of erotic impetus I espouse an idea that takes its cue from Plato and is platonic in spirit, but not in letter. It involves the concepts of individual incompleteness, the drive for self-transcendence, erotic ascent, and the possibility of coming to contact with an ulterior reality, but it need not include reference to a platonic realm of pure forms. Indeed, the ideas just mentioned are characteristic of many philosophical and spiritual traditions worldwide, often known under the umbrella term *perennial philosophy* (Huxley 1945/2009). Plato clothes these ideas in superb prose and timeless imagery but there is no need to assume that the notion of erotic ascent commits us to Plato's theory of forms.

For similar reasons, nor do I believe that the appeal to Eros tethers us to a conception of harmony based on conformity to a static pre-set blueprint of any other sort. What erotic ascent seems to require is the existence of an ulterior reality of transpersonal significance, but this realm need not be static and rigidly structured. It could, for example, resemble the structureless ineffable absolute of Plotinus or the vedāntins. Or it could be a dynamic, responsive, cosmic mind such as Śakti (as explained, for example, in *Aurobindo* 1919, Book II, chap. II); the figure of Śiva in Kashmiri Saivism (Fritzman et. al. 2016); or Whitehead's "consequent nature of God" (1929/1978, 345-351). Moreover, it need not be a wholly transcendent and external: for it could be immanent, as per pantheism, or immanent-cum-transcendent, as per panentheism. Last but not least, nor must such ulterior presence impose itself upon the world. Instead, its impact may be evocative: a gentle calling, patiently drawing towards itself through the power of beauty and love. This is how Whitehead envisions the pull of Eros (Ibid., 345). Indeed, Whitehead argues that the idea that "the divine

element in the world is to be conceived as a persuasive agency and not as a coercive agency" (1933/1967, 166) can be traced, at least in part, to Plato himself! (in his later writings).<sup>4</sup> In short, In endorsing the gist of Plato's insight regarding the erotic drive towards self-transcendence we need not follow Plato's conception of harmony, nor do we have to ratify his vision of a perfect pre-given static order. It is altogether possible to situate Eros in a setting more congenial to an inherently dynamic outlook.

Having dissociated ourselves from the charge of succumbing to a static and rigid conception of order, and hence of harmony, there is yet a more formidable challenge to face. It comes in the form of the imputation that in embracing the notion of Eros we commit ourselves to the reality of divine presence, as well as an irreducible *telos* operative in nature — thereby making the position irreconcilable with naturalism and, on account of this, compromising its attractiveness and plausibility. This is a serious challenge, but its force depends on a variety of substantive issues which need to be unpacked before a proper evaluation could be reached.

We could begin, perhaps, by asking what *naturalism* is, and why we must subscribe to it. In a broad and vague manner, yet one that seems relevant to the present concern, to subscribe to naturalism is to side with science. This, in turn, conveys several connotations, including (a) being well-informed by empirical science and constrained by its findings; (b) adopting a scientifically oriented approach to philosophical problems; and (c) taking science as a guide to reality. While these different senses vary in logical strength, they share the imperative to reject supernatural explanations; where, in this context, "supernatural" means, above all things, magical: something that defies and violates the laws of nature.

The trouble with this characterization of naturalism, however, is that it is too simplistic and ineffective. Most philosophers whose views are accused of being non-naturalist do not subscribe to miracles. This general rule applies to the position defended here. A divine being whose fundamental relation to the world consists in the fact that it dwells in all things, constituting their innermost categorical nature (while nevertheless being hidden from ordinary, that is egocentric and outward-focused, consciousness) may be capable of steering us gently towards higher aims, or of resonating to our efforts, without thereby constitute blatant violations of the laws of physics. It is neither a commander, nor a conjurer of tricks. Still, one might be tempted to adopt a harder line according to which naturalism entails physicalism, where the latter is understood as the view that the only things that exist in the world are the entities posited by physical science. The charge, then, would be that our proposal stands in violation of the decrees of science. Here, however, one faces a different set of problems. To begin with, it is not at all clear how to understand the clause "entities posited by physical science". Does it refer to the science of today, of

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<sup>4</sup> The reason for this surprising statement is that Whitehead discerns in Plato the notion that the divine works upon the world through the power of ideas (see also Dunham et. al. 2011, 23) and "[t]he influence of the entertainment of ideas is always persuasive" (Whitehead 1933/1967, 148). However, Whitehead also admits that Plato wavers on this point, and argues that "he failed to coordinate it systematically with the rest of his metaphysical theory" (Ibid, 166).

which we have good reasons to believe that the future will find seriously wanting; or is it an ideal final science, of which we know next to nothing (assuming that the very idea of a final science is coherent in the first place)? This is the problem known in the literature as *Hempel's dilemma* (Hempel 1969). Despite there being no consensus on how to define physicalism it is common amongst physicalists to look up to contemporary science as the arbiter of what there is. Yet here a more severe problem arises. For, whereas the naive naturalism with which we began is too weak, the present position appears too strong, by which I mean that the price for using it as grounds on which to reject divine Eros is that one ends up with an ontology too austere to be palatable.

The issue is rich in content, and I can only give it brief consideration, but the essential point is that a rigorous examination of what science tells us about reality reveals that it tells us less than we commonly think it does.<sup>5</sup> Physics characterizes its objects in terms of their behavior and structure: oppositely charged bodies attract each other; massed bodies resist acceleration in proportion to their masses; etc. And so, we know that, being negatively charged, electrons and protons are mutually attractive; that since the mass of a proton is about 1836 times that of an electron proton are significantly more resistant to acceleration; and so on. What such descriptions do not tell us, however, is what the electron and proton are in *themselves*, namely, what their intrinsic natures are. Apart from behaving this way, or that way, what is it which does the behaving? For all its power and glory, science remains mute on this point.

The observation is not new. While known already to Leibniz, it has been most effectively stressed by Bertrand Russell (1927) and Arthur Eddington (1928).<sup>6</sup> Intriguingly, both Russell and Eddington stress that there is one place — our own brain — in which the existence of an inner reality irreducible to objective descriptions of structure, function, and behavior manifests itself to us in the form of conscious experience. The moral, then, is twofold. First, that science accounts only for the *without* of things, namely, that its explanatory schemes pertain entirely to the observable behavior — the external appearances — of its objects of study. And second, that introspection reveals to us that in addition to their external appearances things also have a *within*: an interiority which, in our own person — and perhaps throughout nature at large — takes the form of a subjectively manifest reality inaccessible to external observers.<sup>7</sup> It is of little wonder, then, that consciousness escapes the net of reductive physicalism, constituting a *hard problem* for the science

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<sup>5</sup> This is not meant as a critique of science but as a descriptive statement of a methodology which has proved itself spectacularly powerful precisely because it limits itself to objective and quantitative methods (cf. Goff 2019, chap. 4).

<sup>6</sup> But see also Whitehead (1925).

<sup>7</sup> While Russell remained agnostic regarding the precise character of the intrinsic constitution of physical objects *other* than human (and animal) brains, Eddington thought that reason suggests an extrapolation from our own case to the rest of nature: namely, that what appears from the outside as matter is, from the inside, *consciousness*. Contemporary scholars continue to debate the issue (for a general discussion see Wishon 2019).

of consciousness (Chalmers 1995). For the idea that matter (as described in the equations and laws of physical science) could give rise to consciousness, the idea that a world of pure exteriority could give rise to an inner subjective domain, appears unintelligible.

The relevant point for the present discussion is that while it may be possible to deny the reality of consciousness on the ground that it fails to fit the physicalist bill doing so is a highly problematic move insofar as it denies that which is closest and most immediate to us. Thus, the case of consciousness serves as an illustration of how austere naturalism could lead us astray by imposing upon us a conception of reality that cannot do justice to the phenomena. A more rational approach, one would think, is to question orthodox physicalism and the *incomplete* picture of reality it imposes upon us. In the case of consciousness studies, a growing realization of this point has led, recently, to a surge of interest in theories that engage openly with metaphysical outlooks of a revisionist character, with an increased openness to philosophical and scientific approaches (e.g., panpsychism, idealism, neutral monism, quantum-based holism, etc.) that may be able to do better justice to the reality of consciousness by moving beyond the strictures of mainstream physicalism.

It appears, then, that compatibility with austere naturalism need not be our chief concern seeing that we have independent reasons to reject it. Nevertheless, this does not yet remove the difficulty. As philosophers, our goal is to work towards an integral picture of reality which strives to weave together coherently the various elements of our experience. Doubtlessly, science has a pivotal role to play in shaping and constraining the weaving of this tapestry. Hence, the concern may remain that the metaphysical assumptions presupposed by the erotic ascent hypothesis might simply not fit the picture, making it a burden on a theory of harmony. This is a fair concern, except that I am not convinced that the evidence weighs against the hypothesis. In contemplating the plausibility of the view, we must consider both its content and the alternatives against which it competes. I cannot address this question in full here, but I would like to add a few remarks which will, hopefully, shed some light on the matter.

One motivation behind the appeal to the notion of erotic ascent has little to do with the theory of harmony. It consists simply in the observation that the human sense of incompleteness, the hunger for meaning, and the urge for self-transcendence, are psychologically real and potent. This calls for an explanation. It would be strange indeed if in a world completely bereft of immanent telic impulse, a world in which all things are pushed from below, as it were, and none pulled from above, there would be such intense spiritual cravings. A more mundane naturalistic explanation is likely to appeal to natural selection as the ultimate grounds for the emergence of such psychological inclinations, but it is far from clear that a reductive explanation of this sort could ever be satisfactory. All too often, when it comes to the higher faculties of the mind the evolutionary account tends to be little more than a promissory note in the form of an abstract template ready to be applied to the relevant context but lacking by way of positive content. Moreover, if consciousness is basic rather than emergent, and we have seen that there are serious reasons to think that it may well be, then the idea that we could explain the erotic impetus as being purely a product of natural selection is even more tenuous. When we introspect our own stream of consciousness,

we can easily discern the centrality of appetites, strivings, aims, and ideals. Sensory data interact with these telic elements, but they exist as constitutive aspects of our experience. Now, if our experience gives us any credible clue as to the *general* nature of experience, it gives us good reason to expect that no experiencing creature, however simple or humble, may lack strivings, aims, ideals, or frustrations altogether. If so, then these are ingredients which natural selection presupposes rather than ultimately explains and we are back with the problem of making sense of the reality of telos. Considerations of this sort play a pivotal role in Whitehead's elaborate metaphysical system (Whitehead 1929/1978). Significantly, they also led him to take seriously the concept of Eros, clothing it with a fresh interpretation.

There is more to be said in favor of the metaphysical seriousness of the concept of erotic ascent: from holistic considerations in modern physics which, combined with the panpsychist assumption that consciousness is fundamental, point to the possibility of cosmic consciousness (Shani and Keppler 2018); to the epistemic weight of the testimony of altered states of consciousness, meditative and otherwise (see, e.g., Maharaj 2018, chap. 6). But I must leave it at that, and conclude, instead, with some brief comments on the standing of the present hypothesis vis-à-vis alternative conceptions of harmony. Since I am by no means an expert on this subject, I shall confine myself to Li's theory of deep harmony mentioned above. Moreover, I make no attempt to adjudicate between deep harmony and the quasi-Platonist approach (if we may call it that way) presented here. Rather, my purpose is merely to bring into focus some features worthy of future consideration.

While deep harmony appears less extravagant than the position defended here in respect of its alleged metaphysical commitments, it is nevertheless worth noticing that it, too, contains assumptions which make it hard to reconcile with extant forms of naturalism, at least as articulated in the western tradition. For one, it involves the notion that nature is suffused, at all levels, with creativity and a penchant for harmony; and moreover, that the triadic harmony of Earth, Heaven, and Humanity operates throughout the cosmos (Li 2014, chap. 10). For another, its recourse to such fundamental notions as *Dao*, *Chi*, and in particular the seemingly normative *Li* (or principle) is, again, not easily reconcilable with the familiar templates of western naturalism. That a quintessentially Chinese way of thinking does not match faithfully with the familiar coordinates of western naturalist thinking is neither surprising nor, necessarily, a problem, but it does show that neither a Confucian conception of harmony, nor the quasi-platonic conception presented above seat comfortably with common reductionist intuitions and naturalistic sympathies.

This being the case, perhaps a more significant question when it comes to comparative assessments of rival conceptions of harmony is the question could harmony really be free-floating, or deep. On the quasi-platonic conception, it isn't since the erotic impulse, and the supreme reality towards which it aims, do not themselves emerge out of prior harmonization, but are rather preconditions for harmony. Hence, in comparing such a view to deep harmony one ought to focus not only on the metaphysical baggage of each position but also on pivotal theoretical questions such as: could harmony be entirely self-generated?; and, is harmony the ultimate good, and the source of all value? These are interesting questions which

could, and should be debated (see, for example, Chiu 2017), but in debating them we no longer need to assume that the relevant contrast is, necessarily, between deep harmony and harmony by conformity.

### Conclusion

It is my hope that the general outlook presented here offers a coherent angle on the problem of explaining the interlocked dynamics of the growth and maintenance of harmonies, and that it delineates a valuable avenue worthy of further exploration. While the concept of Eros may appear alienated from much that is prominent in our present ways of thinking I have tried to show that it is nevertheless powerful, not only in its poetic evocativeness but also in terms of its explanatory potential. I can think of no better way to end this paper than to borrow these words from Aurobindo: "The animal is satisfied with a modicum of necessity; the Gods are content with their Splendours. But man cannot rest permanently until he reaches some highest good" (*The Life Divine*, 1919/2013, p. 51).

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