

“HARMONY” (HE 和) AND “COHERENCE” (LI 理) IN NEO-CONFUCIANISM

Alice Simionato*

Abstract: This paper offers a comparative study of two fundamental Confucian concepts, namely, “harmony” (he) and “coherence” (li). After presenting and interpreting the two characters – with reference to both classical thought and Neo-Confucianism – the paper examines how these concepts relate in the specific context of Neo-Confucian thought. While considering their differences in historical development, the study takes account of important characteristics shared by the two concepts as well as the ways in which they differ: in particular, it is argued that “harmony” is primarily relational while “coherence” is primarily constitutional. The common ground relating these two notions, in light of their differences, is to be found in their shared aspects of creativity and dynamism.

Introduction

“Harmony” (He 和) and “Coherence” (Li 理) are two of the most fundamental philosophical notions of Confucianism. While both concepts have been part of this tradition throughout its development, they each gained central importance in different historical moments. On the one hand, *he* was at the core of debates in classical Confucianism while *li*, on the other hand, became a prominent notion in Song-Ming Confucianism (also known as Neo-Confucianism). Interestingly, despite their development in different periods, the two concepts share important characteristics and philosophical implications; among other things, for example, both harmony and coherence are dynamic, transformative, and designate a type of relation among things (harmonious or coherent). In addition to these features, another important characteristic of both *he* and *li* is that they describe a relational tension between differences among beings and the way they form a unity, between the peculiarity of each thing and the nature that bounds it to everything else. In short, both harmony and coherence seem to describe a tension, as well as a unitary relation, between the one and the many. At the same time, together with their commonalities, the two concepts also differ from each other in important ways, which have not been considered by studies on the subject. In the following paper, I attempt to bridge this gap by presenting a comparative study of *he* and *li*. The comparative analysis will be presented in three steps which are aimed at providing the reader with a comprehensive framework of the key features of both notions. First, I will introduce the two concepts by referring to authors from both the classical period and Neo-Confucianism. Then, I will discuss the relationship between harmony and coherence

* ALICE SIMIONATO, PhD student in Philosophy at Nanyang Technological University (Singapore), specializes in European Rationalism and Neo-Confucianism. (alicesimionato0@gmail.com)

within the context of Neo-Confucian discourse; the fact that Neo-Confucian thinkers have employed both harmony and coherence in their philosophical discussions shows that the two concepts are different, yet complementary in some important sense. More specifically, in light of *he* and *li* differences and commonalities, I propose that harmony, on the one hand, can be understood primarily as a relational concept, which serves the purpose of describing certain relations among beings, while coherence, on the other hand, is primarily a constitutive concept, which describes the fundamental constitution or nature of beings. Ultimately, I argue that identifying the complementarity between *he* and *li* allows us to clarify the reasons why harmony cannot be merely externally imposed onto beings, but rather is achieved through relations which are established on the basis of the constitution of things.

I. Harmony (*He* 和)

Translation of Chinese philosophical terms into English is often a challenging and even controversial task. Nevertheless, I do not take issue with specific regards to translating *he* 和 as ‘harmony’. In fact, this interpretation is already widely accepted by scholars of Chinese philosophy, perhaps also because there seem to be no other English term that can serve the same hermeneutical purpose. Furthermore, “harmony” (*harmonia*, ἁρμονία) as used in the context of Greek philosophy seems to share important similarities with the Chinese term *he* – whose significance goes beyond notions of conformity or uniformity.¹

One important description of the concept of harmony is found in the *Guoyu* 國語 (*Discourses of the States*), a text of the Spring and Autumn period (770-476 BC) which collects anecdotes and conversations between rulers and ministers of the time. In the chapter Zhouyu C, the act of governing a country is explained in terms of orchestrating music which, in turn, is about creating harmony. As in musical harmony different instruments which produce a variety of sounds come together in forming a unitary melody, the chapter states that: “when sounds respond to one another and mutually enhance one another it is called *he*.”² This explanation, importantly, suggests that Confucian harmony requires difference (in this specific case, of instruments or sounds). Furthermore, it also suggests that harmony consists in a process through which different elements, by means of relation, mutually complement each other, thus producing a flourishing unity. Difference, then, is a fundamental requirement for harmony to both generate and be generated. These aspects of *he* are emphasized by the scholar-minister Shi Bo (551-475 BC) in the Zhengyu chapter of the *Guoyu*, which states:

¹ An analysis of this issue is provided in chapter 2 of Li, 2014.

² 聲應相保曰和.

Harmony (*he*) is indeed generative of things. But sameness does not advance growth.³ Smoothing one thing with another is called harmony. For this reason, things come together and flourish. If one uses the same thing to complement the same thing, it is a dead end and will become wasted. [...] A single sound is nothing to hear, a single color does not make a pattern, a single taste does not satisfy the stomach, a single item does not harmonize. (Li 2006, 584).⁴

This is motivated by the fact that: “A single sound is nothing to hear, a single color does not make a pattern, a single taste does not satisfy the stomach, and a single item does not harmonize” (Li 2006, 584). Another description of harmony is provided by statesman-scholar Yan Zi (? – 500 CE) – a contemporary of Confucius – as recorded in the *Zuozhuan* 左傳 (*Commentary of Zuo*):

Harmony (*he*) is like making soup. One needs water, fire, vinegar, sauce, salt, and plum to cook fish and meat. One needs to cook them with firewood, mingle (*he*) them together in order to balance the flavor. One needs to compensate for deficiencies and reduce excessiveness. The virtuous person (*jun zi*) eats [such balanced food] in order to maintain peace in his heart/mind (Li 2006, 585).

The musical and the culinary analogy provide good insight into the faceted meaning of harmony: on the one hand, we understand that a harmonious world – similarly to a musical symphony – is grounded on diversity, since there could not be harmony in uniformity; on the other hand, the culinary metaphor suggests that *he* is not just about different things coming together in a certain way, but it is also a process in which things are balanced out and mutually transformed. Alan Chan argues that the two metaphors employed to explain the concept of harmony illustrate the latter by emphasizing two different characteristics of *he*. First, the culinary metaphor suggests that harmony is a “careful blending of not only divergent but also possibly conflicting elements” (Chan 2011, 43), thus the way to harmony consists in “understanding the

³ Here Li translates “*ji* 繼” as “advance growth”, following *Analects* 6.3: “The superior person helps those in an emergency but does not advance the cause of the rich” (君子周急不继富). See Li, 2006: 601.

⁴ According to Shi Bo, *he* was at the foundation of the governance of the ancient kings, and it is what led their societies to flourish: “Therefore, the early kings mixed Earth with Metal, Wood, Water, and Fire, and produced varieties of things. They balanced one’s taste with the five flavors, strengthened the four limbs in order to guard the body, harmonized (*he*) the six measures of sounds to improve the hearing, made the seven parts of the body upright to maintain the heart/mind, balanced the eight body parts to complete the whole person, established the nine social rules to set up pure virtues, and put together the ten offices to regulate the multitude. Therefore, there came into existence thousands of categories and tens of thousands of methods used in calculating millions of things and evaluating myriads of properties. They maintained constant incomes and managed countless items. Therefore, the kings had land of nine provinces and had incomes to raise the multitude. They taught the people adequate lessons and harmonized (*he*) them as one family. Thus, it was harmony (*he*) at the highest level” (Ibid).

properties of the different elements and how they play their unique roles in creating and sustaining a rich and balanced whole” (Ibid.). Second, the musical metaphor presents the idea of “conformity with certain norms” (Ibid., 40). Such conformity, Chan explains, is “the absence of strife, and this absence can only be brought about if contention gives way to concord” (Ibid., 41). Through these metaphors we can better understand what I consider to be a fundamental aspect of harmony, namely, the tension between conformity and diversity. I say tension because the concept of harmony entails and preserves both unity and difference as complementary. This also means that harmony is not a third option between unity and diversity, but rather that harmony *is* both. Importantly, the images employed to explain *he* that I discussed above seem to suggest that the key to harmony lies precisely in such tension, and thus that the latter should not be solved – but rather preserved and understood, so that one can master it and align with it. It is within this delicate balance that harmonious transformation and generation can take place. If uniformity was to prevail over diversity, this would lead to sameness⁵, which would preclude harmony. On the other hand, if diversity was to prevail over conformity then *he* would still be impossible to attain since it would be lost in disorder and scatteredness.

Importantly, that which is described by the notion of harmony is not static or fixed order; this is because harmony also consists in the process through which beings can grow and flourish. In his *The Confucian Philosophy of Harmony* (2014), Li has identified five features that characterize the concept of harmony, some of which have already been discussed above.⁶ One of these features, in particular, frames *he* as dynamic in terms of renewal: “Harmony is not achieved as a final state, but as stages in an ongoing process. It admits of degrees. A harmonious relationship is maintained through continuous renewal.” (Li 2014, 9). It is precisely through this continuous process of renewal that beings come to grow and flourish together. Thus, Confucian harmony should be understood as dynamic rather than static. Importantly, this notion does not only refer to the context of human relationships, but also to everything else. This is clearly stated in the *Zhongyong* 中庸 (*Doctrine of the Mean*), one of the Four Books:⁷ “Centrality is the great foundation under Heaven, and harmony is the great

⁵ *Tong* 同. Li reports that in Yan Zi’s conversation with the duke of Qi, he explains that the duke confuses *he* with *tong* by appealing to the two metaphors discussed above: “When the duke says “yes,” Ju also says “yes;” when the duke says “no,” Ju also says “no.” This is like mixing water with water. Who can eat such a soup? This is like using the same kind of instruments to produce music. Who can enjoy such music?” (As quoted in Li, 2006: 586). The strict differentiation between *he* and *tong* is also found in *Analects* 13:23: 子曰：君子和而不同，小人同而不和。 *Tong* is sameness in the sense that it is absence of difference (See Li, 2006: 586).

⁶ The five characteristics identified by Li are: 1) heterogeneity; 2) tension; 3) coordination and cooperation; 4) transformation and growth; 5) Renewal. See Li, 2014: 9.

⁷ The four books are: *Daxue* 大學 (*Great Learning*), *Zhongyong* 中庸 (*Doctrine of the Mean*), *Lunyu* 論語 (*Analects*), and *Mengzi* 孟子 (*Mencius*).

way under Heaven. In achieving centrality and harmony, Heaven and Earth maintain their appropriate position and the myriad things flourish” (Li 2006, 588).⁸

A further point worth of being noted is that harmony as a process/state is not external to things: in other words, it is not imposed on things by means of a higher power. On the contrary, harmony takes place and is maintained because of the way things and beings relate to each in consideration of their own characteristics and attitudes. Considering this, the culinary and musical metaphors might be misleading, in that they could lead us to think that harmony is imposed by some external entity (the cook making the soup, or the conductor of an orchestra). This is not the case when it comes to the ‘myriad things’: the relational aspect of *he* suggests that the way in which things come together harmoniously has to do, indirectly, with the nature of the things that come into relation. This is also clear in the metaphors mentioned above: even though a good soup can be made by mixing very different ingredients it is not the case that any ingredient makes a good soup. When things are in conflict it can be because the nature of those things cannot converge. Other things have natures that are different but not opposite: those things can form patterns with each other by means of interrelations. The same principle applies to the musical case: harmonious music can be played by uniting the sounds of different and contrasting instruments, but this does not mean that everything makes good music. Thus, harmony seems to depend on both the way in which things come into relation (to form ‘appropriate’ relations) and, secondly, on the terms of the relation themselves. Needham, when discussing the Confucian worldview, elaborates on harmony as follows: “The harmonious cooperation of all beings arouse, not from the orders of a superior authority external to themselves, but from the fact that they were all parts in a hierarchy of wholes forming a cosmic pattern, and what they obeyed were the internal dictates of their own natures” (Needham 1952, 230). In this conception, harmony is not a pre-given law, since it emerges from the interactions of beings forming patterns with the world.

Contemporary scholar Stephen Angle states that “harmony is the realization of coherence” (Angle 2009, 68). Here, the term ‘coherence’ is employed to render the Chinese term *li* 理, which acquired central importance throughout the development of Song and Ming Neo-Confucianism.⁹ Li disagrees with this statement since, according to him, the notion of *li* has metaphysical implications that are not expressed by the notion of harmony. While discussing coherence in Neo-Confucianism, with specific reference to the Song philosopher Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200), Li suggests that the concept might depict a pre-set, eternal order of the universe, which is unchanging and prior to beings (Li 2014, 144). This understanding has informed his rendering of *li* as

⁸ For an explanation of the relation between the concepts of harmony and centrality see Li 2014 chapter 5.

⁹ 理 *li* has been rendered into English in many different ways, including ‘principle’, ‘pattern’, and ‘reason’. ‘Coherence’ is the most recent interpretation, on which I will elaborate in the next section. As mentioned, *li* became a fundamental philosophical notion during Neo-Confucianism – and, in fact, Angle’s statement refers to the Song period of the Confucian tradition, not to the classical one.

“reasonable order” (Ibid.). On the other hand, Li holds that *he* can be understood as ‘Deep harmony’ because it is “self-generating” and “reaches the most fundamental level of the world” (Li 2014, 29). This makes harmony and coherence diametrically different, since if *li* is conceived as fixed and eternal order it cannot possibly participate in the perpetual self-generating process of harmony. In the following section I provide a brief discussion of Confucian coherence, in order to argue that Li’s interpretation (despite being widely shared) illustrates a narrow interpretation of the concept. As we will see, *li* shares many properties with harmony, so much so that we find more consistency than discrepancy between these two notions. After introducing the concept, I will argue that the most recent translation of *li* as ‘coherence’ – despite emphasizing an important aspect of this concept – does not express its dynamic aspect, and I will therefore propose a working definition, namely, “coherent distinction-making”.

II. Coherence (*Li* 理)

While the concept of *li* was not a fundamental one in classical Confucianism, it gained central importance with Song-Ming Confucian thinkers and, in particular, with Cheng Hao 程顥 (1032-1085) and Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033-1107) – also known as the Cheng brothers. Arguably, the meaning of *li* has had an evolution throughout the history of Chinese thought (from the classical period, to Huayan Buddhism, and to Neo-Confucianism). With regards to this, Brook Ziporyn has noted that in the *Book of Songs*, *li* is used as a verb, rather than a noun:

It is paralleled with the term *jiang* 疆, used as a verb to mean ‘to divide or make a border’. *Li* here seems to be a verb meaning ‘to separate into groups, to divide into sections’, but with an implication of doing so for a particular purpose: in this case, the division of a field in order to cultivate crops, and the creation of pathways to those fields. The earliest Chinese dictionary, the *Shuowen Jiezi* 說文解字, defines the term simply as ‘to treat jade’ (*zhi yu ye* 治玉也). The implication is that *li* means ‘to cut and divide in a way which is consistent with a particular human value’ (Ziporyn 2008, 403-4).¹⁰

The complexity of this Chinese term is reflected in its translations. *Li*, in fact, has been rendered in English in a variety of ways: the most common translation found among scholars of Neo-Confucianism is “principle” (adopted by Wing-tsit Chan and Angus Charles Graham, among many others), but *li* has also been translated as “reason” (Carsun Chang), “pattern” and “order” (Peterson on pre Neo-Confucian *li*). The interpretation of this concept as “coherence” – in the specific sense of “the quality or characteristic of sticking together” (Peterson 1986, 14) - has gained

¹⁰ New Confucian Tang Junyi 唐君毅 (1909-78) has provided the most complete study on the evolution of the term *li* in his essay *Yuan Li* 原理 (‘Tracing Li’), originally published in 1955.

prominence in the past decade, and was first introduced by Willard Peterson in his essay *Another Look at Li*, first published in 1986. This translation was later adopted by both Ziporyn and Angle in their more recent studies on *li*. Peterson considers the difficulty of translating the term as ‘principle’, and justifies his choice of employing ‘coherence’ instead as follows: “One of the difficulties, as Graham pointed out, in translating *li* into English as “principle” is that we are continually forced to decide whether unitary “Principle”, “a principle” of a single thing, or “principles” is meant (Ibid). Graham suggested that *li* was to be conceived as a “network of veins” and as a “network of roads.” On the other hand, Peterson states that “Coherence is coherence, whether we are referring to a member of a set, all of the members of a set, or the set as a whole. Coherence refers to both the parts and the whole and should not be understood as additive.” (Ibid., 18). In a footnote of his article, Peterson briefly comments on translating *li* as ‘reason’. According to him, this interpretation was adopted because “it is the most potent term in the later European philosophical tradition to which *li* can be matched, but such a translation introduces into Song thought unwarranted implications of a ‘consciousness’ on the part of what is doing, or has done, the reasoning.” (Ibid., 13). It is unclear what Peterson means when stating that reason implies consciousness, since both terms can be contextualized in different ways. Furthermore, it is also unclear why implications of consciousness within the context of Song thinkers are “unwarranted”. Leaving these doubts aside, I think that interpreting *li* as ‘reason’ or ‘rationality’ with specific regards to the human context (human nature) is not implausible, since a basic requirement of reason and rationality is precisely coherence.¹¹ Apart from this, I agree with Peterson’s position that rendering *li* as “principle” does not express the important tension between unity and multiplicity described by this concept. Thus, I shall translate *li* as “coherence” throughout the present discussion.

There is a consensus in Confucian scholarship¹² that *li* is the most important notion in Neo-Confucianism, so much so that this tradition is also known in Chinese intellectual history as *lixue* 理學 (“Study of *Li*”).¹³ Prior to Song Philosophers, the term was used in Huayan Buddhism to indicate the nature of ultimate reality, and it can be argued that the Huayan usage of this concept had great influence in the way it was later understood by Song philosophers.¹⁴ The most important thesis which is central to the study of *li* in Neo-Confucianism is stated by Cheng Yi in the formula

¹¹ This is probably the reasoning that lead Jesuit missionaries in translating *li* as *ratio* in their first translations of Chinese classics (see *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus, sive Scientia Sinensis latine exposita studio et opera Prosperi Introcetta, Christiani Herdricht, Francisci Rougemont, Philippi Couplet, Patrum societatis Jesu*, Paris 1687).

¹² See, for example, Chan 1963, Ziporyn 2013, and Liu 2018.

¹³ Neo-Confucianism is also known as *daoxue* 道學 (“Study of Dao”). Song and Ming thinkers often used *li* and *dao* as synonyms.

¹⁴ The term was introduced in Huayan Buddhism by Dushun 杜順 (557-640), whose usage of *li* has strong resonance with Song philosopher’s understanding of the term.

“*Li* is one but its manifestations are many (理一萬殊 *li yi wan shu*).”¹⁵ The statement expresses the tension between the one and the many that we encountered earlier in discussing harmony: on the one hand, there is one unitary coherence bounding together everything there is while, on the other hand, each thing has its own particular coherence. In Peterson’s words: “There is coherence (*li*) for each and everything, whether that thing is taken as heaven-and-earth as a whole, or a thing smaller than a cricket, an ant, or a blade of grass.” (Peterson, 1986, 15). This is testified by several of Cheng Yi’s statements, such as “For each unitary thing there is a unitary *li*” (Ibid.) and “When Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things are spoken of together, there is only one *li*. As applied to man, however, there is in each individual a particular *li*.” (Ibid.). Having this considered, I maintain that the tension between the one and the many is indeed a fundamental aspect which characterizes the notion of coherence.

Apart from the fact that the meaning of *li* seems to be all-encompassing, the challenge of interpreting it lies also in the fact the Cheng brothers never define it; instead, the term is used in conjunction with other characters such as *lei* 類 (‘class’, ‘category’) and *tui* 推 (‘push’, ‘extend’, ‘infer’) which help us in further articulating the meaning of *li* (Graham 1958, 9). In addition to this, Graham has noted that a definition which agrees with the Cheng brothers’ use of the term can be found in an enquiry addressed to Xu Heng 許衡 (1209-1281): “If we exhaust the *li* in the things of the world, it will be found that a thing must have a reason why it is as it is (*suo yi ran zhi gu* 所以然之故), and a rule to which it should conform (*suo dang ran zhi ze* 所當然之則), which is what is meant by *li*.” (Ibid., 8).¹⁶ The phrases here used to explain *li*, Graham notes, are employed in conjunction with it in the Cheng brothers. Here are two examples of such usage: 1) “There is a single principle in outside things and in the self, as soon as ‘that’ is understood ‘this’ becomes clear. This is the way to unite external and internal. The scholar should understand everything, at one extreme the height of heaven and thickness of earth, at the other that by which a single thing is as it is (*suo yi ran*).” (Ibid., 2) “To exhaust the principles [*li*] of things is to study

¹⁵ Liu has noted that this phrase is often conflated with another statement from Cheng Yi: “Principle is one, but each one’s due is different (理一分殊 *li yi fen shu*).” (See Liu 2018: 88.) W.T. Chan has committed such conflation, but he provided a justification for translating the two statements in the same way (namely, ‘Principle is one with many manifestations’): “The term *fen* is not to be pronounced in the upper even tone, meaning to divide. This misunderstanding has led to such a wrong translation as ‘distinction’. Rather, it is pronounced in the falling tone, meaning ‘duty’, ‘share’, ‘endowment’. Philosophically, it means principle or material force endowed in an individual person or thing, that is, the universal embodied in the particular, partially, or completely. Hence the translation ‘manifestation’ here.” (See Chan, 1976).

¹⁶ Graham does not extensively comment on rendering *li* as ‘reason’. One might argue that, in light of these passages, ‘coherence’ seems to be an unsuitable translation. Supporters of the ‘coherence’ interpretation could respond that ‘reason’ and ‘coherence’ can be understood as interchangeable. However, ‘coherence’ does not express the idea of causation which is implied by ‘reason’.

exhaustively why they are as they are (*suo yi ran*.)” (Ibid., 3) “All things have principles [*li*], for example that by which (*suo yi*) fire is hot and that by which water is cold.” (Ibid.). These passages reveal that the *li* of things is that by which a thing is what it is. There are two ways in which this can be understood: first, what ‘makes a thing what that thing is’ can be its cause¹⁷, in straightforward terms of causation; second, the phrase employed to explain *li* (*suo yi ran*) refers to the unique nature of each particular beings (such as: *x* posits the existence of *y* in a way that when *x* is taken away then *y* does not exist). In this latter sense *li* serves a role analogous to that of Aristotelian essence. Importantly, these two ways of interpreting the phrase (causation and distinct uniqueness) are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, it could be argued that in early modern European rationalism there is no substantial sharp differentiation between a cause and an essence. However, for the sake of our current purpose, I will focus on the understanding according to which the *li* of things consists in their fundamental and unique nature. Importantly, particular coherence is not partial. In commenting a statement from the *Mengzi*, Cheng Hao states that “‘All things are already complete in oneself.’ [*Mengzi* 孟子 7A :4].¹⁸ This is not only true of man but of things also.” (Chan 1963, 534). Understanding *li* as unique fundamental nature of things is compatible with the Cheng brothers’ use of the term, since they often use ‘nature’ (*xing* 性) as a synonym for *li*.¹⁹

The reason why coherence can be both diversified and unitary at the same time is that, as stated earlier when quoting Peterson, *li* is contextual. For example: one’s beliefs and actions can be coherent with respect to her individuality (history, character, cultural context). At the same time, those beliefs and actions can be considered coherent with respect to human behavior which, in turn, can be coherent with regards to the ways in which nature functions, and so on. Each instance, whether as a singular or as part of a whole, has its own coherence, and the latter depends on what is being considered (its context). If this is accepted, we can appreciate an important advantage of interpreting *li* as coherence, namely, that even though it is contextual, the different contexts are necessarily related to each other in the ways they cohere. In this sense, *li* does not impose us to choose between the whole and the singular, but rather maintains the tension between the one and the many by preserving the value of

¹⁷ According to Peterson, interpreting *li* as ‘cause’ is not enough to exhaust its meaning: “When we say that summer follows spring, we are referring to the coherence of the passage of seasons, but spring does not ‘cause’ summer.” Peterson, 1986: 23. I think this is debatable.

¹⁸ 萬物皆備於我矣。

¹⁹ Cheng Hao claims that the ultimate reality “is called change (*yi* 易) with respect to its reality; it is called *dao* with respect to its *li*; it is called divinity (*shen* 神) with respect to its function; and is called nature (*xing* 性) with respect to its being the destiny in a person (其命於人則謂之性) - *Yishu* 1:4, Huang’s translation. Cheng Yi makes a similar claim, saying that “when in heaven it is destiny (*ming* 命); when in rightness, it is *li*, when in human beings, it is nature (在人為性); when controlling the body, it is heart/mind (*xin* 心).” (*Yishu* 18: 204, Huang’s translation).

diversity in understanding the whole *as* unity. In Ziporyn's words, *li* refers to both "the coherence of the parts of any whole with each other, and the coherence of this whole with all other things which are related to it, which contextualize it" (Ziporyn 2008, 408). This is the reason why, in the Cheng brother's view, it is not enough to merely investigate one's own coherence; the latter takes its meaning from interacting with its context and is therefore necessarily related to other manifestations of *li*. Thus, Cheng Yi states: "There are many ways to grasp *li*: to read books to illustrate it; to examine people and events in history to make the distinction between the right and the wrong; to handle human affairs and settle them appropriately. These are all ways to fully grasp *li*" (Huang 2014, 231).²⁰ Grasping *li* means grasping the ways in which things stick together and flourish. 'Coherence', then, is necessarily a relational concept which can never be exhausted by one perspective alone.

Having sketched the contours of the fundamental metaphysics of *li*, let us reconsider Li's suggestion that Neo-Confucian coherence might indicate a pre-fixed, eternal order of the universe. Graham has noted that the Cheng have stressed, among other things, the idea that "*li* is changeless" (Graham 1958, 14) through notions such as 'constant *li*' (*chang li* 常理), 'fixed *li*' (*ding li* 定理), and 'substantive *li*' (*shi li* 實理). (Ibid.)²¹ It is therefore possible to understand *li* as pre-set, unchanging order of the universe, in opposition to the generative characteristic of harmony. However, this interpretation does not consider the broader context of the Cheng brothers' metaphysics in which, I think, coherence does indeed appear as a dynamic and generative principle. Notably, Cheng Hao states: "the reason why it is said that the ten thousand things form one body is that they all have *li*. It all comes from this fact. 'The unceasing life-giving activity [*sheng* 生] is called change [*yi* 易].' It is right in this life-giving activity that *li* is complete." (Ibid., 210).²² while Cheng Yi states that "*Li* as life-giving activity is natural and ceaseless." (Ibid.)²³ Graham has noted that 'change', in the context of Chinese philosophy, generally refers to the "cyclical replacements which proceed between heaven and earth, sun giving place to moon, day to night, heat to cold, reflected in the replacement of one diagram by another in the divination of the *Book of Changes*." (Graham 1958, 110). Because of its association with *yi* and *sheng*, Huang has argued that, in the Cheng brothers, *li* is not a *thing*, but rather, the *activity* of things. After discussing the meaning of the term as reported in the *Shuowen Jiezi* ('to dress jade', as mentioned earlier), Huang states that "the unique contribution of the Cheng brothers is to de-reify the Confucian idea of the ultimate reality by their unique interpretation of the term *li*...[still used as] a verb

²⁰ *Yishu* 18; 188.

²¹ Graham also notes that the Cheng assumes that "the imperviousness to change is a proof of reality (*shi* 實, literally 'solid'), although they do not, like the Buddhists, regard change as a proof of unreality (*xu* 虛, literally 'void')."

²² *Yishu* 2a: 33.

²³ *Yishu* 15; 167.

meaning some *activity*, not a noun referring to some *thing*.” (Huang 2014, 209).²⁴ Huang further explains that, considering the identity of *li* and *sheng*, whenever the Cheng talk about ‘constant *li*’ or ‘fixed *li*’ we should understand it as: it is constant for each and everything to embody the life-giving principle (Huang 2014, 212). This is clearly stated by Cheng Yi in the following passage:

No *li* under heaven can be constant without activity. When there is activity, there will be a beginning after the ending, and so it can last forever without end. Nothing born between heaven and earth, including the solid and sturdy mountains, is without changing activities. So, to be eternal is not to be fixed; to be fixed is not to be constant. The constant *dao* is nothing but the unceasing activity of change (Ibid.).²⁵

Thus, it would be misleading to conceive of *li* as fixed and unchanging, and when the concept is framed in the broader metaphysics of the Cheng brothers, we can appreciate its dynamic character. This way of understanding *li* is central to philosophical debates in Neo-Confucianism and gives to this tradition its distinctive character.²⁶

After briefly presenting the core characteristics of Confucian harmony (*he*) I have here attempted to do the same with respect to coherence (*li*). The latter occupies a central place in the metaphysics of the Cheng brothers, as well as that of later Song and Ming philosophers. I think it would be no exaggeration to say that the importance played by harmony in the classical period is analogous to that played by *li* in Neo-Confucianism. Despite their different historical developments, it is possible to identify some characteristics that Confucian coherence shares with harmony as it is discussed above: 1) *li* describes a tension between unity and difference and, by doing so, makes sense of both as complementary, rather than incommensurable; 2) *li* cannot stand autonomously, rather, it is relational and context dependent; 3) *li* is naturally eternal and dynamic. Despite sharing important characteristics, however, harmony and coherence should not be considered as the same concept stated differently, in separate historical period. In fact, Neo-Confucians did use both terms, and this suggests that they occupied different, yet complementary roles in philosophical

²⁴ Huang has argued that *li* should be interpreted as ‘creativity’. This interpretation would do justice to the dynamic aspect of *li*, which is often neglected in studies of the Cheng-Zhu school. However, Huang does not explain how ‘creativity’ can explain the normative dimension of *li* which, in the Cheng’s metaphysics, also serves as ethical principle. Despite this, ‘creativity’ adds important breath of expression to the ‘coherence’ interpretation, and thus I believe that a synthesis of these two notions might be a fundamental step in further understanding the philosophical debates of Song and Ming thinkers.

²⁵ *Zhuoyi Chengshi Zhuang* 3; 826.

²⁶ According to W.T Chan, “To look upon the universe as an unceasing process of life-giving is a new development in Chinese thought and gives Neo-Confucianism a distinctive character. Few developments are as important as this.” (Chan 1963: 533).

debates. The following section considers how harmony and coherence were conceptualized by some Neo-Confucian thinkers.

III. The Relation of Harmony and Coherence in Neo-Confucianism.

In his *Sagehood: The Contemporary significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy* (2009), Stephen Angle provides a brief account of the notions of harmony and coherence in Song Neo-Confucianism. As mentioned earlier, Angle states that “harmony is the realization of coherence” (Angle 2009, 68). This formulation is in accordance with the writings of Chen Chun 陳淳 (1153-1217), a student of Zhu Xi, who in his *Neo-Confucian Terms Explained* has commented on the *Zhongyong* as follows:

When the emotions are aroused and each and all attain due measure and degree, they can then be called harmony. Harmony means not to contradict. When the coherence (*li*) inside is manifested, one feels pleasure when there should be pleasure and is angry when there should be anger, without contradicting coherence in anyway. That is attaining due measure and degree. Attaining due measure and degree is simply achieving the coherence of what should be, without any excess or deficiency, and not in conflict with coherence. That is why it is called harmony. (Angle 2009, 85).

With respect to this passage, I shall clarify a few things. First, Chen Chun was heavily influenced by Zhu Xi who, despite the fact that he is often considered identical with the Cheng brothers’ in terms of thought, differs in some ways from my earlier exposition of *li*. I am not going to consider the divergences between the Cheng brothers and Zhu Xi in the present study.²⁷ Nevertheless I shall consider two points: first, a central aim of the Cheng’s philosophy is focused on the importance of overcoming the dualism of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ (subject/object) in order to fully grasp coherence; second, the Cheng brothers – unlike Zhu Xi - did not affirm the distinction of *li* and *qi* 氣 (material energy), but rather recognized these two as one and the same, since principle exists only in embodiment. Chen’s translation seems to portray coherence as something fixed and predetermined to be achieved and externally imposed onto beings, but this is not the case for the Cheng brothers since, as stated earlier, *li* is considered identical with *xing*. Therefore, in a sense, what ‘should be’ already is, since all the myriad of things are endowed with nature (and thus coherence). However, even though *li* is a given – since it is constitutive to things – understanding the relation between what makes things what they are as singulars and as a unitary whole takes effort. Such effort – that is, thoroughly investigating *li* (*qiong li* 窮理), should be carried out by means of self-cultivation (*xiushen* 修身) and extension of knowledge by investigating things (*gewu zhizhi* 格物)

²⁷ For a study on this topic see Chan 1976.

致知). In light of these considerations, I think when beings understand and realize their coherence (by mutually understanding each other), then they engage in a harmonious process. Thus, I agree with Angle in stating that harmony can be understood as the realization of coherence. The interconnectedness captured by both *he* and *li* is often associated with the following passage from the *Western Inscription* (*Xi Ming* 西銘) by Zhang Zai 張載 (1120-1077):

Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I find an intimate place in their midst. Therefore, that which fills the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions. (Angle 2009, 69).

Angle argues that, even though Cheng Yi did not discuss harmony, “in his slogan [‘coherence is one with many manifestations’] harmony nicely captures the combination of difference and unity at which he is aiming.” (Ibid.). From the similarities between *he* and *li* already mentioned above, it is plausible to conclude that the Cheng do not discuss harmony as much as coherence because, in their system, *li* partly does the work of harmony, with the difference that *li* speaks of the constitution of beings as grounding the ways in which relations are formed and maintained. In addition to this, the historical context indicates that the Cheng (as well as other Neo-Confucians) were responding to metaphysical concerns raised by Huayan Buddhism, which employs the term *li* to designate the ultimate reality. Nevertheless, despite the fact that the link between harmony and coherence is evident, it is still important to note that Cheng Yi employed *li*, and not *he*, to make his case. He did not argue that “harmony is one with many manifestations”, however Angle does not provide reasons for this, nor he explains what makes harmony different from coherence.

In the previous section I have identified the main features shared by both *li* and *he* as follows: 1) these concepts describe a tension between unity and difference as complementary, rather than incommensurable; 2) they cannot stand autonomously, as they are both contextual and relational notions; 3) Both *li* and *he* are dynamic. But what is that makes harmony and coherence two different notions in Confucianism? According to my understanding of the concepts, and considering what has been discussed so far, I argue that while harmony primarily describes a continuous process of balanced generation as beings relate to each other, coherence primarily describes an activity peculiar to the very constitution of beings. In other words, *he* is primarily relational, while *li* is primarily constitutional. In discussing the etymology of Confucian coherence, Graham notes that the history of the term has been investigated by Demiéville in his summary of the *Annuaire du Collège de France* of 1947. Here, he concludes that

the original meaning of *li* is not ‘dressing jade’ (as is said in the *Shuowen*), but the division of land into plots, as in the *Book of Odes*. Up to the end of the Han, *li* was used as “un principe d’ordre, de bonne repartition des choses” [a principle of order, adequate distribution of things]. Buddhism turned *li* into an “absolu métaphysique

immanent en chacun de nous” [absolute metaphysics immanent in each of us], in opposition to *shi* 事, the relative and phenomenal. Neo-Confucianism returned to the old sense of “un principe d’ordre naturel” [principle of natural order], but without fully freeing itself from the Buddhist conception of *li* as an Absolute immanent in itself and in all things. (Graham 1958, 21).

This suggests that *li* as activity expresses purposeful and coherent distinction-making. More specifically, *li* designates the action of establishing relations among beings on the basis of both the nature of things and an agent’s purpose, generally guided by the aim of constructing unities in which members are mutually transformed. This understanding is aligned with the coherence interpretation, as well as Huang’s reading of the term as activity rather than a noun. Interpreting *li* as coherent distinction-making (in the sense of distinguishing by *following and revealing patterns*) has the potential of accounting for several aspects of the term. First, distinction-making happens only in relation to a context, thus *li* cannot stand autonomously. Second, part of the activity of distinction-making is what constitutes a singular thing or being as such - in other words, it is constitutive of beings in a way that they distinguish and identify themselves according to their inclinations and/or functions. Third, this activity generates meaning: whenever a thing or a being is defined as distinct or as part of a whole, then it becomes valuable, in the sense of *meaningful*. In this latter sense, the activity of distinction-making is analogous to that of generating meaning.²⁸

Considering this, I propose that coherence and harmony shall be treated as complementary notions. Li argues that “*Tong* [sameness] without adequate difference precludes harmony” (Li 2009, 586). I think that an important addition to this statement is that ‘adequate difference’ must be grounded on the way things are or, in other words, the constitution of beings. Without bridging the relationship between harmony and beings we might be left to wonder how harmony can be differentiated from violent domination. Importantly, unlike the latter, harmony is the establishment of relations through which things mutually transform while flourishing. Things, however, can flourish only through uncovering and developing their *own* nature, and this is why harmony shall be grounded on a constitutive principle. In this sense I state that *li* and *he* are complementary notions; coherence, or the activity of coherent distinction-making, is that through which the purpose of establishing harmonious unities can be aligned – and based upon - the very nature of things. On the other hand, since the *li* of beings is not a given – but rather needs to be uncovered and developed - constitutive principles are also dependent on harmony. This means, in turn, that the role played by *li* and *he* is fulfilled only when harmony and coherence are mutually actualized. Without accounting for a constitutional principle, harmony risks to be understood whether as structural order externally imposed onto beings (violent

²⁸ An important question that shall be explored elsewhere is whether meaning can be incoherent or, in other words, what is the relationship between meaning and coherence. For now, I take as uncontroversial that a thing, in order to be meaningful, must also be coherent (both in itself and in its context).

domination in disguise), or as a matter of chance. I think Li would agree that these interpretations are both incorrect. Thus, the importance of examining both the affinities and differences between *he* and *li* lies in the fact that their complementarity provides us with the tools to avoid misguided interpretations, by revealing that harmony is achieved and maintained only when grounded on the constitution of beings.

Conclusion

In this paper I have provided a brief comparative study of the two notions of harmony (*he*) and coherence (*li*) in Neo-Confucianism, with particular reference to the Cheng brothers. The main argument presented is that, while the two terms share many characteristics, they also differ in an important sense: on the one hand, harmony is primarily relational and, on the other hand, coherence is primarily constitutive. This means that while harmony is preoccupied with the way in which different elements come together in order to produce a flourishing unity, coherence concerns the very constitution of such elements. According to Neo-Confucian thinkers, the flourishing of a unity (a family, a community, or the world) is dependent upon the ways in which different elements relate to each other, which in turn is dependent upon their constitution. Thus, harmony is never external to beings or imposed to them, but rather it is *realization of their nature*. In this sense, *he* and *li* are complementary notions that necessarily coexist. In addition to explaining the relation between these two important notions, I have also reconsidered the rendering of *li* as “coherence”, arguing that this interpretation does not capture the dynamic character of the word. As I have mentioned, *li* designates an activity related to generating coherence, and thus – in line with Graham and Huang’s interpretations – I have proposed “coherent distinction-making” as a working definition which can account for *li* as constitutional activity. Overall, this comparative study aims at showing that the recognition of the similarities and the differences between *he* and *li* is a necessary precondition for better understanding the characteristic role of foundational principles that these two notions played throughout the history of Confucianism.

References

- Angle, Stephen C. 2009. *Sagehood: The Contemporary Significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy*. Oxford University Press.
- Chan, Alan K. L. 2011. Harmony as a contested Metaphor and conceptions of rightness (*yi*) In Richard King and Dennis Schilling (eds.), *How Should One Live? Comparing Ethics in Ancient China and Greco-Roman Antiquity*. De Gruyter.
- Chan, Wing-tsit. 1963. *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*. Princeton University Press.
- Chan, Wing-tsit. 1978. Patterns for Neo-Confucianism: Why Chu Hsi differed from Ch'eng I. *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 5, 101-126.
- Cheng, Hao 程顥, and Cheng Yi 程頤. 2004. *Completed Works of the Two Chengs* 二程集, 2nded. Beijing 北京: Zhonghua Shuju 中華書局.
- Li, Chenyang. 2006. The Confucian Ideal of Harmony. *Philosophy East & West*, 56(4), 583-

603.

- Li, Chenyang. 2014. *The Confucian Philosophy of Harmony*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Graham, Angus Charles. 1958. *Two Chinese Philosophers*. IL: Open Court Publishing Company.
- Huang, Yong. 2014. *Why Be Moral? Learning from the Neo-Confucian Cheng Brothers*. SUNY Press.
- Liu, Jee Loo. 2018. *Neo-Confucianism: Metaphysics, Mind, and Morality*. Blackwell Wiley.
- Peterson, Willard. 1986. Another look at Li 理. *Bulletin of Sung and Yuan Studies*. (18), 13-31.
- Needham, Joseph. 1952. *Science and Civilization in China*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ziporyn, Brook. 2008. Form, Principle, Pattern, or Coherence? Li 理 in Chinese Philosophy. *Philosophy Compass*, 3(3), 401-422.
- Ziporyn, Brook. 2013. *Beyond Oneness and Difference: Li 理 and Coherence in Chinese Buddhist Thought and its Antecedents*. State University of New York Press.