***Confucian Harmony, Civility, and Echo Chambers*[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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**Abstract:** How should we interact with people in echo chambers? Recently, some have argued that echo-chambered individuals are not entitled to civility. Civility is the virtue whereby we communicate respect for persons to manage our profound disagreements with them. But for civil exchanges to work, people must trust one another and their testimony. Therefore, some argue, we can be moderately uncivil towards those in echo chambers who are unlikely to trust our attempts to be civil. I argue against this position. I suggest the focus should be on trying to rebuild these social relationships in alignment with the Confucian value of harmony. In this tradition, we aim to manage social relationships with disagreeable others by turning *inward* and cultivating certain dispositions in ourselves: open-mindedness, amenability, tactfulness, and courage. I argue this helps us craft a concept of ‘reparative civility’: an ideal for managing our fraught social relations in a world of echo chambers.

**Section 1 - Introduction**

In Western political philosophy, tolerating those whom we disagree with is a mark of the virtue that philosophers and non-philosophers alike refer to as *civility.* Cheshire Calhoun has identified the distinctiveness of civility as a *virtue* embodied in the way we *communicate* or *display* respect for the beliefs and positions of our fellow citizens. True civility on her view consists not just in *being* respectful or considerate but engaging in the social practices and behaviors that display respectfulness, such as not rolling your eyes when a person makes an offensive comment.[[2]](#endnote-1)

 I will take this understanding of civility as my framing for the question I am interested in which is distinctly practical. On a day-to-day basis, *how ought we to relate to those echo-chambered individuals that we encounter online and offline*? There is plenty of work that laments the existence of echo chambers as well as research on how these environments might threaten some of our cherished political ideals (e.g., maintaining a healthy democracy).[[3]](#endnote-2) But there is unfortunately little work on how we ought to behave in our daily interactions with these kinds of individuals.

Perhaps that is because the issue seems quotidian in nature, just something that we can leave entirely up to individual judgment. I think that misrepresents the importance of those interactions. While political philosophers do well to focus on ‘big picture’ issues of echo chambers we should not leave these ‘smaller picture’ moments behind.[[4]](#endnote-3) After all, the average person spends a lot more time in social interactions with others than they do in crucial moments of the political process. Figuring out how to navigate those interactions in a way that leaves both parties satisfied would be quite welcome in a time marked by great social divisiveness. In fact, surveys done by the American Psychological Association suggest that over 60% of Americans are significantly stressed by the “current social and political climate” which they take to be overly divisive and polarizing.[[5]](#endnote-4) Accordingly, it makes sense to examine one aspect of our current social and political climate which may contribute to this, namely, echo chambers.

 My focus for this essay is on the Confucian concept of *harmony* which shares with the Western idea of civility a concern for making aspects of our social-political lives easier to navigate. ‘Harmony’ goes further than this by being not just a model for how we can survive our social relations with others but for prescribing a way to repair them. In that sense, we might call it a *reparative* form of civility.

I start by discussing recent philosophical work on civility and how it recommends we relate to echo-chambered individuals.[[6]](#endnote-5) **Section 2** opens with a skeptical view of civility. I consider the argument that perhaps moderate incivility is what we should express to those in echo chambers with epistemically suspect or morally problematic beliefs. This argument

 gives up too quickly on the importance of civility and misdiagnoses civility as the problem. The problem, in my view, are the acrimonious social relationships between echo-chambered individuals and others, which, importantly, can be *improved*. In this respect, we must look beyond work on civility to provide an account of how to become *disposed* toward being civil.

**Section 3** introduces the Confucian ideal of harmony. It recommends individuals cultivate certain dispositions that make one manage their social relationships with disagreeing others in better ways. **Section 4** elaborates these dispositions and I add one more component – the idea of moral courage – to bolster the harmony-framework advanced in the paper. Finally, **Section 5** considers two sets of worries for the framework. The first is that the view (allegedly) enjoins us to treat deeply epistemically and morally problematic views as being on a par with well-supported, reasonable views. Call this the *bothsidesism* worry. The second concerns what we ought to do when others are unwilling to be engaged civilly and believe that our attempts to do so are disingenuous. I respond to these worries and conclude by reiterating the practical importance of maintaining harmonious relationships.

**Section 2: Civility and Echo Chambers**

On one prominent view, echo chambers exist when an epistemic community “creates a significant disparity in trust between members and non-members”.[[7]](#endnote-6) How this community is sustained is a combination of “discrediting” the epistemic credentials of those outside one’s echo chamber and “amplifying” the credentials of those within the echo chamber. We can understand this broadly to refer to the way in which echo chambers affect our *dispositions* to trust and distrust the testimony of others. Now, distrusting the testimony of others can be epistemically problematic (i.e., undermining the acquisition of true beliefs). Of course, such distrust is not *necessarily* epistemically problematic. For example, is there anything wrong with distrusting the testimony of flat-earthers? This has led some philosophers to argue they are not really a problem. It is the *content* of the echo chambers that is problematic or the fact that certain false beliefs echo more than true beliefs in that particular social network.[[8]](#endnote-7)[[9]](#endnote-8)

However, these arguments neglect how echo chambers could be socially problematic even if they are not always epistemically problematic; in other words, undermining these trust-related dispositions can be problematic for other non-epistemic reasons. Perhaps, this distrust might lead us to be less considerate of others’ needs, interests, values, and beliefs because we view them and their testimony with suspicion (even if our own view is right).[[10]](#endnote-9) This provides some motivation for thinking about how these environments affect our dispositions toward civility in a possibly adverse way. The working thought is that individuals in these environments might become more tempted by incivility toward those outside the echo chamber or those in a different echo chamber. (For the remainder of this paper, I will work with this understanding of echo chambers for two reasons. First, it has garnered support from many social epistemologists.[[11]](#endnote-10) Secondly, my paper is not concerned with the definitional question but rather a normative question. How *should* wetreat people in these kinds of epistemic environments, broadly understood?).

Of course, those not in echo chambers – or perhaps those in different echo chambers – can also be tempted by incivility. Much research in media studies and political science has demonstrated a marked decline in civil discourse as well as increased online hostile dialogue on social media platforms. Exposure to hostile dialogue also seems to fuel further hostile messaging generating a kind of vicious cycle.[[12]](#endnote-11) This is to say we all likely engage in uncivil behaviors from time to time or have been the target of them. Of course, to some extent social media platforms have encouraged uncivil behavior insofar as that tends to promote engagement. But they are not completely to blame for the perpetuation of echo chambers both online and offline.[[13]](#endnote-12) We can choose to be civil to one another. We can choose to converse with those holding controversial views in ways that show respect for them as a person and thus make disagreement more palatable. Intuitively, there is something morally commendable about displaying such behavior.

 But why is being civil a morally commendable thing to do, or stronger yet, a *moral* virtue as many in popular discourse seem to think? How can it be morally virtuous for me to follow social rules of politeness and communicate respectfulness to those whose positions are morally abhorrent, such as that of racists or sexists? In other words, surely we (who do not hold those positions) can be uncivil and, in fact, *righteously* uncivil to people in echo chambers who are morally unreasonable.

Some might worry that displaying civility to those individuals gives their views an epistemic and moral standing that they do not deserve.[[14]](#endnote-13) Perhaps the anti-vaccination views, flat-earth views, and racism and sexism one finds in echo chambers ought to be responded to with “moderate incivility”. This means these views should be interrupted when expressed or dismissed curtly to convey these are not beliefs that have a deserved moral and epistemic standing. One motivation for being moderately uncivil might be that to respond otherwise would compromise our moral integrity. Instances of incivility might promote the virtue of integrity which some plausibly hold to be more important than the virtue of civility.[[15]](#endnote-14) But notice that the integrity-motivation for moderate incivility has less to do with echo chambers and more to do with responding to unreasonable views. This is important to point out because incivility could be properly targeted at echo-chambered individuals but we would first need to say what is unique about them.

Echo chambers are unique in that they *dispose their members to interact* in a distrustful manner to those who offer certain testimony or to those who make civil overtures towards them. Trust between two individuals does seem to be an important condition for the success of such a civil exchange. Since no such trust exists, Rodrigues concludes that civility will be useless especially if its purpose was intended to *regulate* and ameliorate the divisiveness that emerges from contentious disagreement.[[16]](#endnote-15) Therefore, calling for moderate incivility toward echo-chambered individuals specifically reveals an expectation that civil exchanges cannot mitigate their active contempt or distrust towards us.

I think many might agree with this argument and modify their behavior accordingly with echo-chambered individuals. However, I think this prematurely gives up on civility. Crucially, this is because it is also an *empirical* matter whether these distrustful dispositions can be diminished and whether these social relationships can be improved.[[17]](#endnote-16) If we expect or assume these dispositions cannot be altered or diminished, then it might be plausible to downplay the role of civility or even advocate some incivility. However, we have good reasons to think these assumptions are unsupported by the relevant literature in social psychology (which I also discuss in Sections 4 and 5).

The important finding in this research is the influential idea that structured (and even unstructured) forms of intergroup contact can reduce prejudice and negative cross-group comparisons.[[18]](#endnote-17) The intergroup contact hypothesis has been held to be “one of the most effective” and successful strategies to come out of social-psychological research on intergroup conflict.[[19]](#endnote-18) Interestingly, the effectiveness of intergroup contact was tested and confirmed by observing its effects on *existing* conflicts as opposed to being simply a theory of how to *prevent* intergroup conflict.[[20]](#endnote-19) As such, structuring our interactions with echo-chambered individuals in line with beneficial intergroup contact or simply adopting norms and dispositions that fall under contact’s purview might also have the *ameliorative* effects that are generally predicted.[[21]](#endnote-20) A skeptic might say that such research does not consider the powerful effects of active distrust characteristic of echo chambers. This would also be an empirical claim. In fact, the salutary effects of intergroup contact are mediated by trust, but interestingly, the relationship goes both ways.[[22]](#endnote-21) Intergroup contact can also *increase* intergroup trust if it is done in such a manner that provides good evidence of future contact intentions to ‘distrusters’.[[23]](#endnote-22) As such, the ‘distrust-component’ of echo chambers does not necessarily throw up problems for these theories.[[24]](#endnote-23)

 The point about providing good evidence of ‘future contact intentions’ hints at the importance of interacting with echo-chambered individuals in a certain structured manner. I suggest that one way of signaling such future contact intentions is for people inside and outside of echo chambers to alter their *dispositions* toward being civil with one another. In particular, I suggest a certain set of civility-related dispositions that can have these salutary effects. My suggestion builds on classical and contemporary work on the ideal of Confucian harmony which I argue enriches our concept of civility while also finding surprising support for its effectiveness from work in social psychology. As I go on to explain, harmony provides an ideal model for social relationships between disagreeing others. The dispositions it recommends are ones that are also amenable to the Western concept of civility.

**Section 3 – Harmony**

**3.1 Introducing Harmony**

Harmony or和(pronounced ‘huh’) is a crucial concept in Confucian thought rendered in different ways over time and by different thinkers.[[25]](#endnote-24) In keeping with the methods of the Confucian philosophical tradition, the concept of harmony is best illuminated with an analogy. One of the oldest analogies relies on the similarity between governing harmoniously and making a good soup. When one makes a soup, there are a variety of ingredients that one needs to add and different quantities of each ingredient must be added carefully to achieve a dish that is balanced in flavor. Similarly, Confucius thought, a ruler should solicit many different points of view on what an acceptable policy is and take note of the dissenting and approving verdicts and determine an optimal balance of preferences. ‘Harmony’ is explicitly referred to in *Analects 13.23*:

The Master said, “The gentleman harmonizes without being an echo. The petty man echoes and does not harmonize.” [Alternatively, “The exemplary person pursues harmony rather than sameness; the small person does the opposite.”].[[26]](#endnote-25)

The thing to avoid in making soup, ruling a country, or trying to reconcile different things that are in tension is to have too much ‘echoing’ or ‘sameness’. For example, having too much of the same opinion in government or having too much of the same ingredient in a soup. The problem with this, to reference an ancient Chinese commentator, is that “this is like trying to improve the taste of water with more water. Who would want that?”.[[27]](#endnote-26) Harmony in the broadest sense is the process by which different elements are brought together into a constructive whole.[[28]](#endnote-27)

 The above is impressionistic and more needs to be said about this ‘process’ and the idea of a ‘constructive whole’. Before I do that, it must be noted that the kind of conceptual precision required by analytic philosophers is going to be difficult to acquire here. This is because the idea of harmony is never systematically laid out by Confucius despite being gestured at many times in a variety of contexts. The fact that the idea is often understood gesturally should not lead one to conclude that it is less valuable or suitable for a rigorous philosophical inquiry.[[29]](#endnote-28) It may be that what is the result of finding harmony will be somewhat dependent on the context it is sought in. As I go on, my method will be to draw on core Confucian work (*The Analects*) as well as engage with the work of recent philosophical commentators to elucidate aspects of this concept that are helpful for my inquiry.

In this paper, given the prior discussion of civility, the relevant context here is how harmony is sought in the management of our social relationships with acquaintances, friends, family etc.[[30]](#endnote-29) We can gauge the quality of these social relationships by focusing on how well individuals *relate to one another*, which just refers to the ways in which we act towards others and the explicit or implicit attitudes we express towards others.[[31]](#endnote-30) While this focus on harmonious social relationships is more common in Confucian philosophy, there are relevant analogues in ancient and contemporary Western philosophy. In Plato’s view, a society was harmonious to the extent that the three social strata of society related to one another’s respective social *groups* in certain ways (e.g., auxiliaries and producers obeyed the wise guardians or ‘philosopher-kings’).[[32]](#endnote-31) By contrast, contemporary Anglo-American philosophers argue that what normatively matters is the way *individuals* relate to one another. But while they believe the state should play some role in managing those relations in line with values such as equality or sufficiency, they do not think there should be some hierarchical order based on ‘allegedly’ innate differences between groups of people (i.e., Plato’s myth of metals).[[33]](#endnote-32) All this is just to say that both traditions of philosophy have shown some concern for the ways people relate to one another.

 But what is distinctive about the Confucian ideal of harmony for social relationships? In my view, rather than a focus on obtaining a particular *state* for a social relationship – for example, the absence of status hierarchy for relational egalitarians – the Confucians maintain a focus on the *processes* those relationships go through. A relationship between two people can be described as harmonious if the relationship continually proceeds through certain stages that Chenyang Li lists as: heterogeneity, tension, coordination, transformation, renewal.[[34]](#endnote-33)

The first stage is *heterogeneity* which involves awareness on the part of two individuals of their distinct views and beliefs and the way they are currently relating to one another. Secondly, the two individuals interact with one another in some capacity which may provoke certain conflicts of varying degrees of intensity (*tension*). Third, the two individuals attempt to *coordinate* and mutually adjust their expectations of the other as well as examine their own values and beliefs to see whether those tensions and conflicts can be transformed in such a way that enables both parties to flourish (*transformation*). Finally, since these relationships may always be in flux as a result of people’s varied dispositions, and their interactions with the changing environment, it may be the prior stages need to be *renewed* continually. In short, a harmonious social relationship is ‘dynamic’ in the sense that it is likely to change often and ‘constructive’ in the sense that it tries to reconcile the tensions between individuals due to their different beliefs and values without squashing those differences or trying to command conformity.

**3.2 Harmony’s Relation to Echo Chambers**

The above still might sound abstract, but we can make it more concrete by considering an example of a paradigmatically *disharmonious* social relationship. My view is that the relationships between individuals inside and outside of echo chambers fit this description (or perhaps those relationships between members of different echo chambers, for example, the dynamics between fervent right-wing and left-wing political partisans). Consider again the stages above. It seems clear that these individuals have passed through the heterogeneity stage while remaining locked at the tensionstage. In support of this point, we can draw on the research conducted by political scientists on ‘affective polarization’. This research shows that we have become more positively disposed toward our in-group while simultaneously holding very negative beliefs about out-groups.[[35]](#endnote-34) Robert Talisse suggests that this means we define our own social and political identities in terms of what we oppose and we think *through* our social affiliation.[[36]](#endnote-35) In other words, we do not think *about* political issues and our fellow citizens independently of our complex social network. Perhaps the most striking observation is that the dislike is notconfined to others’ views or beliefs. As Talisse puts it, quoting empirical research: “we also find their nonpolitical behavior disagreeable. The clothes they wear, the vehicles they drive, the food they eat, their preferred modes of entertainment, their pastimes, and more are all sites of cross-partisan contempt.”[[37]](#endnote-36) In short, all this makes it more likely that these social relationships remain locked at the tension stage.

The conditions to which these social relationships are subject make it incredibly difficult to proceed toward the coordination and transformation stages of a harmonious relationship. In my view, both individuals in the relationship are somewhat to blame for the disharmony.[[38]](#endnote-37) Rather than seeking to reconcile their differences, echo-chambered individuals may fail to gain knowledge of the world, communicate only with one another and be part of a limited community disconnected to civil society. Along the *Analects* quote above, we might say they ‘echo’ each other too much and too often seek the comforts of sameness-of-opinion. By contrast, I think it is plausible to describe those outside the echo chamber as having become too frustrated or bitter to deal with these individuals and their ‘extreme’ or often ‘bizarre’ beliefs about the world. For example, many family homes have become divisive environments because some members maintain there is a ‘Jewish Conspiracy’ where others do not. This often leads to exasperating and heated arguments which make it more difficult to break up those ‘echoes’. Attempts to reconcile differences are met with the stubbornness of echo-chambered individuals. The problem is not just that both sides cannot reach a mutual agreement, but that their negative perceptions of each other dispose them *not* to want to.

I think this suggests that calls for civility, as the concept is commonly understood, are likely to fall short. While it is important to attempt constructive dialogue with a disagreeing other, we must first address the disharmony of social relationships before suggesting that individuals in them act civilly. In particular, I argue here for a number of behaviors and dispositions individuals must cultivate in themselves to start treating the other with civility. It might sound unpalatable to suggest I focus on improving my own behaviors when encountering those I disagree with or whose beliefs I find bizarre. Surely, the onus is on them to drop the beliefs of their echo chamber.

However, I think that focusing solely on what echo-chambered individuals may be required to do misses out on the other side of that social relationship and the non-ideal behaviors that the ‘nonecho-chambered’ are displaying. Here, I am referring to those not in echo chambers who want to engage others but may often exhibit uncivil behaviors. Even if the burden lies primarily on the echo-chambered to modify their behavior, that does not absolve others of the minimal responsibility to *not* exacerbate these disharmonious social relationships. Such disharmony would be exacerbated if the nonecho-chambered made no effort to repair or manage their social relationships with others.

The idea that *self-improvement* may help us deal with the problems of our social relations with others is a familiar one in the Confucian tradition. Confucius’ counsel is helpful here: “when you meet an *unworthy* [own emphasis] person, turn inward and examine your own conduct.”[[39]](#endnote-38) Here, the ‘unworthy’ might refer to people whose beliefs and values you find problematic and whose actions make them liable to moral criticism. When we examine our own conduct, we might find ways that our behaviors and dispositions exacerbate a disharmonious social relationship. Not only that, but we may find that modifying those outward behaviors and dispositions towards the ‘unworthy’ can make those people more receptive to change and reflect those very same behaviors.

In support of this, Amy Olberding cites research on emotional mirroring to empirically defend the beneficial effects on others that may result from observing a good person’s behaviors and dispositions. She describes it as involving the involuntary mimicking of another’s outward bodily behaviors, subsequently expressing those behaviors ourselves, and actually feeling the emotions expressed by others. To add to that, human beings have been found to possess what are called “mirror neurons” which are brain cells that fire both when an organism performs an act and also when another organism is perceived performing a similar act.[[40]](#endnote-39) They are thought to offer the best explanation for how individuals socially learn from one another.[[41]](#endnote-40) As such, this seems to support the efficacy of the socio-moral learning processes that Confucian thinkers have proposed. More importantly, it helps defend the plausibility of examining and modifying one’s conduct in order to improve our social relationships with others.

**3.3 Existing Work on Harmonizing**

So far, we know that harmony is a kind of moral ideal or standard that outlines a process through which people’s different social relationships might progress. The ways in which social relationships have been impacted by echo chambers have left them in the tension stage. In order to progress toward the coordination and transformation stages, I suggested that the nonecho-chambered must learn how to harmonize with others but this raises a question:

Which actions and which ways of acting count as satisfying the standard of harmony? Unfortunately, Confucius does not offer direct advice on this question. Recently, Amy Olberding and David Wong have extracted from Confucian work some ideas that are helpful here.[[42]](#endnote-41)

Olberding focuses on the importance of manners and etiquette; modifying the daily “prosaic exchanges” we have with one another might behaviorally steer us towards more civility.[[43]](#endnote-42) Rather than scoffing or rolling our eyes at an echo-chambered person, Confucians urge individuals to abide by norms of etiquette which here could involve maintaining eye contact and looking like you are listening. This reflects her contention that the values people care about like civility (what she calls the “Big Stuff”) are achieved through enacting small behaviors consistently. The Confucian tradition is full of mentions of the value of *ritual propriety;* Olberding taps into the idea that such small actions might slowly fashion the world into one where profound moral values are more prominent. Abiding by ritual behavior, like displaying manners and etiquette in social environments where they are uncommon, form part of our attempts to make the world *as if it* *were* an ideal social environment.[[44]](#endnote-43) Interestingly, Olberding does not explicitly invoke the notion of harmony in her work. Instead, she applies Confucian insights to civility in order to understand our temptations towards incivility and how to move us way from acting uncivilly. However, her emphasis on the prosaic interactions between people make it seem that her analysis could easily extend to bringing about harmony in social relationships.

By contrast, Wong focuses on broader dispositions that we must cultivate in ourselves without much attention to the minutiae of our manners towards others. In particular, he is interested in the aspect of harmony that involves enacting the moral value of *accommodation*. Accommodation is a moral value whose emphasis is on maintaining a constructive relationship – of respect and concern – in the face of continuing disagreement. It comes into play because societies, in their best attempts to maintain convergence on moral values and ideas, will nevertheless disagree on how to interpret the weight of their shared values and how those values interact when they conflict.[[45]](#endnote-44) Wong treats accommodation as a kind of *second-order* value, since it is a value that refers to how we should deal with (first order) conflicts of value or moral disagreement. “Dealing with” disagreement may sound vague, but on Wong’s understanding of harmony, it means learning how to make such disagreement more *palatable* and not attempting to dissolve it or demand agreement from others.

In his view, those disagreements can be made more palatable and easier to accept once we recognize that they are not just about people’s different views but the estranged or impaired social relations between people.[[46]](#endnote-45) His example about abortion is particularly instructive. Citizens profoundly disagree about abortion but the disagreement is made worse by the fact that the pro-choice or pro-life sides (at their extremes) do not want to figure out how to preserve social relationships perhaps by coming to understand why they disagree so much. Wong’s view is that by accommodating aspects of each other’s moral positions, people might agree on compromises, such as only early-term abortions being permissible or working on the reduction of unwanted pregnancies.[[47]](#endnote-46) They might try to make the disagreement as constructive as possible (recall the definition of harmony above).

In summary, I take it that both Olberding and Wong are interested in doing something about fraught social relationships whether they are fraught because of disagreement (Wong) or because of our natural temptations towards being uncivil (Olberding). I think each approach stands to be benefitted by the other. Together they would make for a unique, action-guiding prescription for how the nonecho-chambered ought to navigate their fraught social relationships. We ought not simply practice the value of accommodation – which I will elaborate on shortly – we ought also to *display* the kinds of behaviors associated with accommodating. In this respect, we can interpret this as building on Calhoun’s insights about the distinctively *communicative* nature of civility. Olberding’s focus on behaviors and etiquette owes a great deal to Calhoun’s and I think it can be used to further Wong’s work on accommodating disagreement. In what follows, I will discuss what accommodation requires and how we might display accommodating behaviors toward others (**4.1)**. I will also argue that our understanding of accommodation as a way of pursuing harmonious social relationships is missing a vital component – the idea of moral courage (**4.2).**

**Section 4: Harmonizing with Others**

**4.1 Openness, Tactfulness, Amenability**

According to David Wong, the accommodation of others has three facets, which I label *epistemic openness*, *tactfulness,* and *amenability*. First, it involves having an epistemic openness to the possibility of expanding one’s view of the good and the right or at least trying to understand other ways of life. Second, it involves a tactfulnessto act on your moral opinions and values in ways that aim to minimize damage to your relationships with others who have opposed views. Third, it involves amenability. This is the willingness to compromise on what we hope to gain for our moral views for the sake of sustaining relationships with disagreeing others.[[48]](#endnote-47) In this section, I hope to show how these facets of accommodation can help individuals harmonize with echo-chambered individuals. In Confucian terms, nurturing these dispositions in ourselves helps us progress through to the coordination and transformation stages of a harmonious social relationship.

The value of epistemic openness is readily seen when dealing with run-of-the-mill echo chambers containing political partisans. Some philosophers have argued that the chances that one will be right about everything are often very slim.[[49]](#endnote-48) When one is a stubborn political partisan and, I would argue this is true of echo-chambered individuals, one believes those outside the echo chamber are systematically getting things wrong. Think, for example, of the left-wing person who thinks their opponent is getting it wrong on an orthogonal cluster of issues, such as abortion, gun rights, marriage equality, affirmative action, policing, climate change etc. In other words, the left-wing partisan thinks that their opponent is *anti-reliable* on many arguably unrelated political issues which seems difficult to rationally justify. The alternative explanation is more plausible: neither the left-wing or right-wing partisan has got it systematically correct or incorrect on orthogonally related political issues.[[50]](#endnote-49) For Joshi, the rational responses to this challenge involve (i) being less confident about the truth of one’s beliefs or (ii) rationally changing some of one’s beliefs in a cluster of unrelated political issues (his suggestion is diversifying one’s news sources).

How does this relate to the open disposition that Confucians advocate? It is helpful if we understand openness as consisting of two components. The firstcomponent consists of being open to the possibility of changing one’s mind. Joshi’s argument, while primarily seeking to undermine the epistemic grounds for partisanship, also seems to provide a good argument in favor of agents maintaining an epistemically open disposition in their interactions toward echo-chambered individuals (or perhaps across partisan echo chambers). Relatedly, another good reason for being open has less to do with one thinking everyone else is wrong but mistakenly exaggerating how different one’s own view is from everyone else’s, as studies on belief polarization tend to show.[[51]](#endnote-50) Perhaps in this latter case, adopting a more open disposition might help us correct or realize our misperceptions about our own views on policy and matters of the good too.

The second component involves communicating one’s potential openness towards others’ beliefs. Part of communicating one’s epistemic openness involves displaying curiosity about what the other thinks through sincere and attentive question-asking. Contemporaries of Confucius observed that he “asked questions about everything” even in matters that he purportedly knew a lot about (e.g., how to perform religious rites).[[52]](#endnote-51) The thought behind practicing such behaviors is that it may convince others of our openness and similarly engender an openness in them. Furthermore, some empirical research on ‘motivational interviewing’ supports this Confucian contention.[[53]](#endnote-52) This style of interviewing was originally developed for helping people deal with substance abuse problems but it has been used to help people reconsider prejudices. It starts by listening carefully, asking open-ended questions to evoke within people their own desire to change or reconsider their beliefs or commitments.

 Even if genuine openness does not lead to changes of beliefs or commitments, it must also be accompanied by tactfulness which is the second element of accommodation. Tactfulness can be difficult to exercise given that many disputes about values or beliefs might be tied up with one’s identity and what we deem fundamentally important. It’s made especially difficult given that these kinds of disputes and disagreements occur online where hostile language and behavior proliferate (see empirical literature cited in introduction). Anecdotally, I have questioned the value of tactfulness when anonymous Twitter users called me a “loser” in a discussion about the permissibility of abortion. It was incredibly tempting to say to my online interlocutor that they were engaging in an *ad hominem* attack. Or maybe I could have said that they were not really committed to arguing about the topic. But this would not have done anything to progress the relationship I have with this individual. This calls to mind Confucius’ observation that “a man who responds with a clever tongue often ends up being detested by others”.[[54]](#endnote-53) The sincerity of attempts to discuss difficult issues with others will be called into question if I am trying to look smart or ‘own’ my opponent. Though not always successful, there is something valuable about constraining my language in ways that don’t exacerbate the tense relationships I have with a disagreeing other.

Finally, accommodating involves not just being open and tactful but being amenable to compromise in the difficult disagreements we have with others. On this point, Confucius’ advice is practical because he discourages us from three temptations that thwart genuine amenability: “Don’t try to explain what is already done. Don’t attempt to remonstrate about what is finished. Don’t decry what is already past.”[[55]](#endnote-54) Confucius advice is remarkably prescient given contemporary concerns about *moral grandstanding*. Moral grandstanding involves contributions to moral discourse that are insincere, aim to promote one’s moral reputation and give free reign to expressions of outrage.[[56]](#endnote-55) Moral grandstanders often do the very things Confucius discourages. For example, they lament that others disagree with them about purportedly obvious matters and engage in discourse that merely reiterates some divisive state-of-affairs. Contemporary parallel aside, acting on these temptations is not likely to make one open to compromise; it may make one more stubborn about attempting compromise. Repeated exposure to those behaviors may blind or obscure the imagination of *cognitive alternatives* to the current social relationships we have with a disagreeing other. Decades of social psychological research suggest that awareness of “cognitive alternatives” (ways in which the world can differ from the status quo) and voicing those alternatives can upset an existing group dynamic or social relationship.[[57]](#endnote-56) Amenability could consist simply of discussing those alternatives with others, which reconcile elements of both group’s moral views and commitments. In so doing, confrontation with these “cognitive alternatives” can expand the sense of their social identity beyond the idiosyncratic elements of their echo chamber and provoke them to make different comparisons with out-groups that are not so negatively valenced.[[58]](#endnote-57)

All this speaks to a point made earlier that thinking of the social relations between people and echo-chambered individuals (or across echo chambers) as beyond repair (and that civility may be unhelpful) is not only pessimistic, but it also just neglects the real possibility that these relations can be improved. If part of what makes echo-chambers worrisome is that their members are far too disposed towards being distrustful, the right question to ask is whether those dispositions can be changed and what model of interaction can promote those dispositional changes. In short, I believe the Confucian ideal of harmony provides such a model.

**4.2 Courage**

I believe openness, tactfulness and amenability are necessary for harmonious social relationships with echo-chambered individuals but I do not think they are sufficient. An alternative way of construing this point is that I think they do not adequately capture the process of harmonizing with others. The missing element in this discussion refers to a kind of *courage* that individuals have to develop. The folk concept of courage is a *physical* onewhere acting courageously may involve overcoming fear of physical dangers (e.g., going to war for a just cause). But we can also distinguish a concept of *moral courage*, which can be construed as acting in line with one’s moral convictions despite possible social censure by others [[59]](#endnote-58). Perhaps the most interesting component of Pianalto’s conception of moral courage is the idea that it also involves “facing the other as a moral agent”, i.e., dealing with the fact that the person we disagree with has a unique background, set of experiences, hopes and desires.[[60]](#endnote-59) Here, the intuition is that there is nothing morally courageous about upholding your moral convictions against others if you view them as mere obstacles, as less than human beings or full-fledged moral agents with unique points of view. True moral courage consists in recognizing others disagree with us – they may even have morally problematic views – while not taking the ‘easy’ route of branding them as ‘beyond the pale’ or mere obstacles in the pursuit of our (superior) moral views.

 Why is moral courage relevant here? To my mind, possessing this kind of courage is what *enables* us to be open, tactful, and amenable with others. The latter three dispositions require that people face others as the complex human beings that they are and try to manage those social relationships despite the difficulties of making progress. This is the orientation toward others required by being morally courageous. It is worth adding that the online environment may militate against being morally courageous for two reasons.

The first is the fact that our exchanges occur with lines of text and a thumbnail-sized avatar intended to represent another person. But keeping in mind that there truly is a person behind that representation – assuming they are not a bot – can be difficult to do and the incentive to treat them as such is much weaker than in the offline context.

 The second reason has to do with the way in which social media platforms structure online environments to incentivize certain kinds of behaviors while disincentivizing others [[61]](#endnote-60). This is a point that has been made by many others but it remains relevant here. Essentially, these recommender algorithms rank posts in terms of likely engagement and present these to individual’s newsfeeds with an eye to keeping users on the platform as long as possible [[62]](#endnote-61). From the standpoint of the average ‘poster’ – who we assume has a desire to communicate with others – there is a great incentive to post content or comment in ways that increase engagement. The algorithm’s engineers accordingly promote content that provokes outrage or other displays of strong emotionality. As such, the kind of posting behavior inspired by moral courage might fail to generate engagement and thus become ignored since divisive content is more popular. Alternatively, it may be that such posting behavior is engaged with but to the detriment of the poster who is attacked for choosing to be open, tactful, and amenable with someone with abhorrent views. Indeed, individuals might face a serious backlash as we often see in cases of mass online public shaming. Online public shaming can have wide ramifications beyond their online presence, spilling into their career and intimate relationships.[[63]](#endnote-62)

**4.3 The Demands of Moral Courage**

For those two reasons, I think online displays of moral courage will seem more demanding of moral agents who seek to harmonize with others. The costs of doing so might be incredibly high and the gains difficult to measure compared to face-to-face interactions. This raises an interesting objection. Is there something unfair or unreasonable about demanding this kind of courage from individuals? Correspondingly, given the difficulties of courage for harmonizing, is there something unfair or unreasonable about demanding that individuals try to improve their social relationships with others? A few responses might be made here.

 First, we might think it is precisely in those moments or in those difficult contexts where moral courage gains its worth and is most important to practice. It is fitting that the very first passage of the *Analects* (1.1) has Confucius extolling the virtue of being “patient when others do not understand” and noting the great satisfaction of learning and practicing what one has learned.[[64]](#endnote-63) So, the morally courageous agent who decides to harmonize with others despite social costs can be comforted by how their steadfastness may reward them with long-term satisfaction.

However, this might not quell a bigger concern some might have about this response. In claiming that there is something morally courageous about attempting to harmonize with others, am I saying that those who do not do so are morally cowardly? It sounds particularly harsh to say to groups who have been historically (and currently) structurally oppressed that they lack moral courage for not engaging with racists or sexists who have no intention of changing their minds. This might be a way to reiterate the point Rodrigues made earlier about giving these views undeserved standing by civilly engaging those who hold them. In any case, this might lead one to doubt that we should tie moral courage to the practice of harmonizing with others.

This is a serious concern and one that I imagine resonates with many people. To mitigate this concern, we can start by pointing out the perhaps banal but true Voltairean point. One should distinguish between the respect accorded to persons and the respect we should accord their views.[[65]](#endnote-64) Too often, we reduce persons to their views which *ironically* is something that I have been doing in this essay by referring to a group of people as the ‘echo-chambered’. I did this because it tracks an important sense in which we treat people who hold views like this as fundamentally incapable of changing their minds. But people are not just capable of pursuing a (sometimes wrongheaded) view of the good, they are also capable of *revising* it and this capacity is arguably worthy of respect.[[66]](#endnote-65) In this sense then, one might be lacking in moral courage if they failed to view people as worthy of respect and as being capable of changing their minds. This need not mean that they must engage people like this whenever such an occasion arises, but when one is able to do so it is a mark of courage. This is entirely compatible with understandable or excusable lapses (albeit temporary ones) in that disposition that might hold for anyone.

Additionally, we may demand more of some individuals than others. In her empirical research on social change and norms, Christina Bicchieri notes that one of the biggest drivers is the significant causal influence of *high-status* individuals, that is, individuals who have amassed a lot of social esteem or social capital.[[67]](#endnote-66) This may include respected authors, politicians, media pundits, influencers etc. When high-status individuals deviate from current social practices, the barest attempts to act in a morally courageous manner incurs fewer social costs. This may even cause a new norm to ripple further through the community. Even if the demands might be too great for ‘low-status individuals’ – the great majority of social media users – they can certainly be shouldered by high-status individuals who can inspire others to act courageously and begin relating to others in a more harmonious way.

**Section 5: Remaining Worries**

Confucian work on harmony yields a kind of reparative ideal or virtue of civility recommending us to engage in open, tactful, amenable interactions with others while recognizing the courage such interactions may require. I now want to consider and address a few potential worries to help clarify the scope of my claims.

**5.1 The ‘Bothsidesism’ Worry**

First, one might worry that the advocate of harmony is liable to a charge of bothsidesism or *false balance*.[[68]](#endnote-67) Such charges are commonly addressed at media organizations who present both sides of an issue regardless of the great disparity in credibility, evidence or reasonableness that might exist.[[69]](#endnote-68) For example, some might argue it is wrong for the media to present ‘both sides’ of the climate change debate since there is a near-universal scientific consensus on one side. Analogously, one might think I am suggesting climate skeptics, racists, sexists, and their reasonable counterparts ought to be open with one another, learn from one another, and accommodate each other’s positions. But surely it would be absurd if my view suggested that both sides on these issues are on a par (in some relevant sense) and that ‘balancing’ their positions is recommended. Moreover, people sometimes worry about false balance in the media because it may lead individuals to adopt the unsupported or wrongheaded view. What if, in attempts to harmonize with those individuals, people come to adopt those positions? Could recommendations to harmonize problematically backfire and lead more people to hold these unreasonable views?

 The bothsidesism charge for the media is often apt because it is irresponsible for them to promote engagement with their content at the cost of accurate reporting on matters of public concern. Is the harmony-advocate liable to a similar charge of irresponsibility? I do not think so. Being open, tactful, and amenable with others still requires good judgment and it may be in some cases that there is not much to learn from the other side. However, where I think this worry goes wrong is in its inability to recognize that would-be harmonizers can adopt two attitudes simultaneously. Here, I suggest the advocate of harmony take a cue from philosophical work on tolerance. Some argue that acts of tolerance involve respect for people’s freedom of conscience and choice that take *priority* over one’s opinion that another’s views are completely wrongheaded or unreasonable.[[70]](#endnote-69) Notice that *taking priority is not the same as replacing* that other opinion we might hold about another person’s views. We can hold that the person is worthy of being treated respectfully in line with harmony and simultaneously hold that we disagree with or disavow our opponent’s views; none of this exalts their position to the same credibility or reasonableness of ‘our’ view.

The case of Ann Atwater (a black civil rights activist) and C.P. Ellis (a local KKK leader) who detested one another (for obvious reasons) and yet became friends is instructive in this regard.[[71]](#endnote-70) Atwater and Ellis both came to learn from and deeply respect each other when they became aware of how their similar economic class defined much of their social lives. Their eventual openness to treating one other as persons – as opposed to the social identities dividing them – brought out a possible way of relating to one another in line with the ideal of harmony. Ellis remarkably came to support desegregation and Atwater interestingly prevented Ellis’ Klan literature from being taken down at an exhibit. This evinces the respect she maintained for him while not accepting any aspect of his racist view but nevertheless being sensitive to where it may have come from.

 Of course, one might wonder whether this is a cherrypicked example and further engagement with empirical literature is required to address the backfiring concern. On this concern, I have two replies. First, while more research on the specific effects of harmony would be helpful, there is a decades-long tradition of work in social psychology on the contact hypothesis I discussed earlier. Subsequent meta-analyses of contact-studies have supported the hypothesis and more research is being done on the effectiveness of ‘online’ contact [[72]](#endnote-71). Presumptively, then, there may be support for the harmony-framework advanced which seems to prescribe certain forms of intergroup contact structured by certain norms.[[73]](#endnote-72) Secondly, even if more people come to adopt certain wrongheaded views this does not change what they are owed as people if one is committed to the ideal of harmony (as I’ve understood it) or to broader liberal justifications for tolerance. In this sense, I agree with philosophers that toleration is a risky enterprise that nevertheless embodies a crucial form of respect for its diverse citizenry.[[74]](#endnote-73) Nevertheless, it coheres with citizens doing their best to constructively engage disagreeing others in line with the ideal of harmony.

**5.2 Hostility to Harmonizing?**

But perhaps – and here we have a final worry – there might be a number of citizens who do not want to harmonize with us.[[75]](#endnote-74) Now, one could claim that this point is partly empirical. It depends on whether we have good reason to think people would be unwilling or unable to change the way they are disposed to interact with others. In line with Confucian thought and empirical work in psychology, I have suggested that these dispositions are alterable and that these conflicting social relations can be improved. However, the normative edge of this worry remains. What *should* wedo about those who are genuinely unwilling to harmonize?

It would be an undesirable feature of the view if it recommended forcing unwilling individuals to harmonize with others. There is something important about affirming a wide freedom not just to associate with whomever we wish, but also to *dissociate* from forms of public associational life.[[76]](#endnote-75) That being said, unless these unwilling individuals are completely off the grid, it is likely that they will be engaging in certain forms of associational life. For most people, engagements, such as our daily interactions with others offline and online, are simply inescapable. My argument could be read as a conditional one. Provided that these interactions happen, we should align our engagements with others in the constructive manner recommended by the ideal of harmony. This is because we will inevitably confront people whose views we disagree with and ways of life we do not share but with whom we must co-exist. As Michael Walzer nicely puts it: “Living together with other people just *is* a moral engagement.”[[77]](#endnote-76) My view then is that the harmony-framework provides a compelling way of structuring the terms of these profoundly moral engagements with others.

However, there is something unsatisfying about this response. It relies on the assumption that echo-chambered individuals simply can’t avoid social life.[[78]](#endnote-77) This may or may not be true. But there is a deeper problem that this response neglects: it is not just that people may be unwilling to engage with us, they might believe we are being *disingenuous*. They may be positively inclined to view our (genuine) attempt at civility as evincing ulterior motives or that we wish to manipulate them into abandoning their beliefs. Assume that the echo-chambered can avoid us then. Or assume, more commonly, that they dissimulate what they believe in front of others until they rejoin their online or offline community. Perhaps all of this reinforces the secret hostility they feel towards genuinely civil interlocutors.[[79]](#endnote-78) What should we do about this deeper problem? Again, I do not think the echo-chambered should be forced to engage with us. This admittedly puts limits on what individuals can do to engage them.

Nevertheless, this does not prevent private individuals who influence many of us from shaping our shared social environments in ways conducive to this harmony-framework. In this paper, I have not focused on the responsibility of social media corporations, but as private groups of individuals they are free (and perhaps ought to) make their platforms into more civil fora. How might they do this? One proposal is that they alter their content-curation algorithms to promote content that creates greater epistemic awareness of each user’s position and demote (but not remove) posts designed to bait outrage or sow distrust in each other. Platform innovations like these are already being experimented with. Consider Twitter’s Community Notes program which has users from different political leanings jointly evaluate and provide context for posts that mislead or misinform. Users who see a Community Note know that people they trust *and* those they distrust have jointly approved a message which may diminish suspicion of testimony from outside one’s social group.[[80]](#endnote-79) For our purposes, the point is this: the combination of individuals engaging others in line with harmony and social media creating more civil fora could create a wider *ethos* for this virtue to flourish. In so doing, the hope would be that inclinations to view civil interlocutors as disingenuous will diminish over time as a function of shifts in the behavior of individuals *and* influential social institutions.

I cannot defend this latter proposal in detail here, but run-of-the-mill individuals will still play a crucial role by promoting harmonious engagement with others.[[81]](#endnote-80) Even if platforms often recommend quite divisive content, they also partly reflect patterns of social behavior in our offline environments.[[82]](#endnote-81) We must also not forget that they distribute content *generated by their* *users* and our sometimes less-than-ideal online posting behavior. Therefore, the onus will also rest on us to set a better example to reverberate across our many social environments. Over time, if the ideal of harmony is more widely circulated in many spaces in public life, echo-chambered individuals might come to be less suspicious of genuinely civil interlocutors if or when they encounter them.

**Conclusion**

Having advanced the ideal of harmony and the reparative form of civility it recommends, one might still be wondering what the ultimate point is of engaging in these behaviors. I started this essay by raising the question of how we ought to relate to echo-chambered individuals. I chose to use them as a contemporary case study which nevertheless exemplifies a fundamental problem in political philosophy: how can societies remain stable despite widespread disagreement about matters of the good and right? What is unique about echo chambers is that they are not mere sites for disagreement about views, but environments that profoundly change the way we *interact* with disagreeing others. They do so by disposing us to be distrustful of out-group testimony which makes the overarching problem of social stability all the more difficult. Trust is important for gaining knowledge but it is also important for treating others as our civic peers with whom we must navigate the complexities of social life and with whom we must routinely decide the norms by which we live. This is where political philosophy can play an important “practical” role by suggesting conceptual tools and ideals to navigate profound disagreements with others on mutually respectful terms (Rawls, 2008: 10). My hope is to have shown that the Confucian ideal of harmony exemplifies this practical role and that it may provide evidence for the value of more ‘cross-pollinating’ philosophy.

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**Notes**

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2. Cheshire Calhoun, ‘The Virtue of Civility’, *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 29, no. 3 (2000): 251–75; Amy Olberding, *The Wrong of Rudeness: Learning Modern Civility from Ancient Chinese Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
3. Cass Sunstein, *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media* (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
4. Here, I am invoking Amy Olberding’s apt distinction between “big moment ethics” and ethics that pays attention to our close-contact social relations with others. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
5. American Psychological Association, ‘Stress in America 2022 Concerned for the Future, Beset by Inflation’, October 2022, https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2022/concerned-future-inflation. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
6. Teresa Bejan’s work on civility is also instructive insofar as it asks us to attend closely to the non-ideal ways that people disagree with one another on profound political issues. See Teresa M. Bejan, *Mere Civility: Disagreement and the Limits of Toleration* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
7. C. Thi Nguyen, ‘Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles’, *Episteme* 17, no. 2 (2020): 141–61. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
8. Jennifer Lackey, ‘True Story: Echo Chambers Are Not the Problem’, *Morning Consult*, 2018, https://morningconsult.com/opinions/true-story-echo-chambers-not-problem/; Jennifer Lackey, ‘Echo Chambers, Fake News, and Social Epistemology’, in *The Epistemology of Fake News*, ed. Sven Bernecker, Amy K. Flowerree, and Thomas Grundmann (Oxford University Press, 2021), 206–27, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198863977.003.0010; Benjamin Elzinga, ‘Echo Chambers and Audio Signal Processing’, *Episteme*, 30 September 2020, 1–21, https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2020.33. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
9. Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting I discuss this. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
10. The point here is that even if the views of our echo chamber are objectively correct, these environments could be problematic because of how they make us *treat one another*. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
11. Jeremy Fantl, ‘Fake News vs. Echo Chambers’, *Social Epistemology* 35, no. 6 (2 November 2021): 645–59, https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2021.1946201; Neil Levy, ‘Echoes of Covid Misinformation’, *Philosophical Psychology*, 2021, 1–18, https://doi.org/10.1080/09515089.2021.2009452. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
12. Dag Wollebæk et al., ‘Anger, Fear, and Echo Chambers: The Emotional Basis for Online Behavior’, *Social Media + Society* 5, no. 2 (2019): 205630511982985, https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119829859; Manuel Goyanes, Porismita Borah, and Homero Gil De Zúñiga, ‘Social Media Filtering and Democracy: Effects of Social Media News Use and Uncivil Political Discussions on Social Media Unfriending’, *Computers in Human Behavior* 120 (2021): 106759, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2021.106759; Alexander Bor and Michael Bang Petersen, ‘The Psychology of Online Political Hostility: A Comprehensive, Cross-National Test of the Mismatch Hypothesis’, *American Political Science Review* 116, no. 1 (February 2022): 1–18, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421000885. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
13. For discussion of the social media corporation’s impact on online public deliberation, see Joshua Cohen and Archon Fung, ‘Democracy and the Digital Public Sphere’, in *Digital Technology and Democratic Theory*, ed. Lucy Bernholz, Héléne Landemore, and Rob Reich. (Oxford University Press, 2021), 24-52. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
14. Daniel Rodrigues, ‘Civility, Trust, and Responding to Echo Chambers’, *Dialogue* 60, no. 3 (2021): 403–13, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0012217321000299. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
15. Calhoun, ‘The Virtue of Civility’. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
16. Rodrigues, ‘Civility, Trust, and Responding to Echo Chambers’, 409. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
17. Of course, these social relationships can be frustrated by a number of things, for instance, if they exist against an unhealthy public culture of argument or engage in an *adversarial paradigm* that identifies success in argument (in popular culture and within philosophy itself) with the defeat of one’s opponent. See Catherine Hundleby, ‘Aggression, Politeness, and Abstract Adversaries’, *Informal Logic* 33, no. 2 (2013): 238, https://doi.org/10.22329/il.v33i2.3895; Scott F. Aikin and Robert Talisse, *Why We Argue (and How We Should): A Guide to Political Disagreement in the Age of Unreason*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2019). While these conditions and paradigms may also require change, I focus on the positive consequences of modifying our own dispositions towards echo-chambered individuals through a Confucian-inspired approach which I think has not received as much attention as it deserves. I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting I look into the work of Hundleby, Talisse and Aikin as having somewhat similar motivations to the project in this essay. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
18. Thomas F. Pettigrew and Linda R. Tropp, ‘A Meta-Analytic Test of Intergroup Contact Theory.’, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 90, no. 5 (2006): 751–83, https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.90.5.751; Gordon Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Addison-Wesley, 1954). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
19. John F. Dovidio, Samuel L. Gaertner, and Kerry Kawakami, ‘Intergroup Contact: The Past, Present, and the Future’, *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 6, no. 1 (2003): 5–21, https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430203006001009. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
20. I thank a reviewer for suggesting I clarify whether the approach I am taking is more apt for conflict-prevention than it is for conflict-amelioration. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
21. Though I expand on this point in Section 5, I have in mind the way that the Confucian ideal promotes the Allport’s ‘equal-status condition’ required for successful contact, namely, that neither group be treated as subordinate to the other. The openness, tactfulness, and amenability I discuss in Section 4 nicely evinces the Confucian ideal’s commitment to not treating our disagreeing others as subordinate to us. See endnote xviii for more on this point. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
22. Tania Tam et al., ‘Intergroup Trust in Northern Ireland’, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 35, no. 1 (2009): 45–59, https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167208325004. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
23. Shelley McKeown and Charis Psaltis, ‘Intergroup Contact and the Mediating Role of Intergroup Trust on Outgroup Evaluation and Future Contact Intentions in Cyprus and Northern Ireland.’, *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 23, no. 4 (2017): 392–404, https://doi.org/10.1037/pac0000275. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
24. Of course, the conception of ‘trust’ social psychologists are working with may be different from the multiple accounts offered in the philosophical literature. To be clear, ‘intergroup trust’ in the psychological literature is characterized as “a social bond that is characterized by feelings of security and confidence in others’ goodwill”. See, for example, Linda R. Tropp, ‘The Role of Trust in Intergroup Contact: Its Significance and Implications for Improving Relations between Groups.’ in *Improving Intergroup Rela- Tions: Building on the Legacy of Thomas F. Pettigrew*, eds. U. Wagner, Linda R. Tropp, G. Finchilescu, and C. Tredoux, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 91–106. This resembles the goodwill/vulnerability account of trust developed by Annette Baier, ‘Trust and Antitrust’, *Ethics* 96, no. 2 (1986): 231–60, https://doi.org/10.1086/292745. The conception of trust (and distrust) at play in at least Nguyen’s analysis of echo chambers has to do with applying epistemic credit or discredits in certain ways. I think this is compatible with the psychological account insofar we might apply epistemic discredits (distrust) *because* we are not confident in others’ goodwill towards us. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
25. Chenyang Li, ‘The Philosophy of Harmony in Classical Confucianism’, *Philosophy Compass* 3, no. 3 (2008): 423–35, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-9991.2008.00141.x. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
26. Confucius, *The Analects (Lunyu): Translated with an Introduction and Commentary by Annping Chin*, trans. Annping Chin (New York: Penguin Books, 2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
27. Confucius, *The Analects*, Commentary on 13.23. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
28. David B. Wong, ‘Soup, Harmony, and Disagreement’, *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 6, no. 2 (2020): 139–55, https://doi.org/10.1017/apa.2018.46. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
29. Harvey Lederman laments that work on Chinese philosophy is often perceived as less rigorous and precise than core areas of analytic philosophy. One view I gleaned from correspondence with Amy Olberding is that ideas in this tradition might actually be deliberately less rigorous to map onto a variety of contexts. That does make the task in this paper somewhat more difficult, but it calls for future work to solidify or contest the interpretation of harmony that I offer. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
30. In making this claim, I do not mean to say that trying to maintain harmony in social relationships is the only way that echo-chambered individuals might become depolarized over time. For example, we may want to remain in an echo chamber precisely *because* we have become estranged from others and prefer like-minded company. Benjamin Elzinga makes a compelling point that certain trusted individuals *within* one’s echo chamber can play an important role in depolarizing or destabilizing an echo chamber. Drawing as I have on Christina Bicchieri’s work, Elzinga suggests these individuals can act like trendsetters and their deviation from the echo chamber’s beliefs and commitments can inspire others to do so as well. My proposal in this paper is compatible with Elzinga’s and I will show that the harmony ideal can play this depolarizing role too. I thank a reviewer for suggesting this alternative way of considering how echo chambers can become depolarized. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
31. Kristin Voigt, ‘Relational Equality and the Expressive Dimension of State Action’, *Social Theory and Practice* 44, no. 3 (2018): 437–67, https://doi.org/10.5840/soctheorpract201853038. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
32. I thank a reviewer for helping me to identify the contrast between these views more precisely. No doubt there is much more to say about these views, but my object in the paper is to discuss an alternative view. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
33. Elizabeth S. Anderson, ‘What Is the Point of Equality?’, *Ethics* 109, no. 2 (January 1999): 287–337, https://doi.org/10.1086/233897; Elizabeth S. Anderson, ‘Toward a Non-Ideal, Relational Methodology for Political Philosophy: Comments on Schwartzman’s *Challenging Liberalism*’, *Hypatia* 24, no. 4 (2009): 130–45, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2009.01062.x. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
34. Chenyang Li, *The Confucian Philosophy of Harmony*, Routledge Studies in Asian Religion and Philosophy (Oxford, Routledge, 2014); Chenyang Li, ‘Active and Passive Harmony’, in *Harmony in Chinese Thought: A Philosophical Introduction*, ed. Chenyang Li, Hang Kwok Sai, and During Dascha (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2021), 41–56. The kind of view I discuss here might be better described as *active harmony*, which Chenyang Li (2021) describes as a constructive engagement with difference as opposed to *passive harmony* which is a peaceful co-existence involving little interaction with those whom we disagree with [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
35. Nolan McCarty, *Polarization: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
36. Robert Talisse, *Sustaining Democracy: What We Owe to the Other Side* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021). [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
37. Talisse, *Sustaining* Democracy, 76. Interestingly, recent research also shows that people think their political opponents are much stupider than they are Rachel Hartman, Neil Hester, and Kurt Gray, ‘People See Political Opponents as More Stupid Than Evil’, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 49, no. 7 (2023): 1014–27. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
38. Again, this is not to ignore the moral responsibility of social media corporations, but to discuss the individual responsibility to deal with others in a civil manner, or so I argue throughout. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
39. Confucius, *The Analects*, 4.17. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
40. J.M. Kilner and R.N. Lemon, ‘What We Know Currently about Mirror Neurons’, *Current Biology* 23, no. 23 (2013): R1057–62, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2013.10.051. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
41. Hyeonjin Jeon and Seung-Hwan Lee, ‘From Neurons to Social Beings: Short Review of the Mirror Neuron System Research and Its Socio-Psychological and Psychiatric Implications’, *Clinical Psychopharmacology and Neuroscience* 16, no. 1 (2018): 18–31, https://doi.org/10.9758/cpn.2018.16.1.18. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
42. Amy Olberding, *The Wrong of Rudeness: Learning Modern Civility from Ancient Chinese Philosophy*; Amy Olberding, ‘Etiquette: A Confucian Contribution to Moral Philosophy’, *Ethics* 126, no. 2 (2016): 422–46, https://doi.org/10.1086/683538; David B. Wong, *Moral Relativism and Pluralism*, Cambridge Elements in Ethics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023); David B. Wong, ‘Soup, Harmony, and Disagreement’; David B. Wong, ‘Metaphor and Analogy in Early Chinese Thought: Governance within the Person, State and Society’, Lectures to NCCU, MS. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
43. Olberding, ‘Etiquette’, 428. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
44. Adam Seligman et al., *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity* (Oxford University Press, 2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
45. David B. Wong, ‘Coping with Moral Conflict and Ambiguity’, *Ethics* 102, no. 4 (1992): 763–84, https://doi.org/10.1086/293447. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
46. This point was brought to my attention by David Wong in personal correspondence. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
47. Nancy K. Rhoden, ‘A Compromise on Abortion?’, *The Hastings Center Report* 19, no. 4 (1989): 32, https://doi.org/10.2307/3562300; Wong, *Moral Relativism and Pluralism*. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
48. Wong, ‘Soup, Harmony, and Disagreement’, 133. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
49. Hrishikesh Joshi, ‘What Are the Chances You’re Right about Everything? An Epistemic Challenge for Modern Partisanship’, *Politics, Philosophy & Economics* 19, no. 1 (2020): 36–61, https://doi.org/10.1177/1470594X20901346. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
50. Joshi, 'Chances', 42. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
51. Talisse, *Sustaining Democracy: What We Owe to the Other Side*, 77. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
52. Confucius, *The Analects*, 3.5. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
53. Guy Itzchakov et al., ‘The Listener Sets the Tone: High-Quality Listening Increases Attitude Clarity and Behavior-Intention Consequences’, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 44, no. 5 (May 2018): 762–78, https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167217747874; Wong, ‘Metaphor and Analogy in Early Chinese Thought: Governance within the Person, State and Society’. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
54. Confucius, *The Analects*, 5.5. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
55. Confucius, *The Analects*, 3.21. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
56. Justin Tosi and Brandon Warmke, ‘Moral Grandstanding’, *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 44, no. 3 (2016): 197–217, https://doi.org/10.1111/papa.12075. More textual support for Confucius’ worries about moral grandstanding comes from *Analects 17.13*: “The village goody man is a thief [and the ruin] of virtue.” Mencius too elaborates the worrisome features of grandstanders by pointing out how they are difficult to fault or censure since they look like they are engaging in proper moral discourse. As Mencius (2009: 7B37) observed, quoting Confucius: “I dislike the weed for fear it will be confused with the grain.” [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
57. Henri Tajfel, ‘Social Identity and Intergroup Behaviour’, *Social Science Information* 13, no. 2 (April 1974): 65–93, https://doi.org/10.1177/053901847401300204; Stephen Reicher and Alexander Haslam, ‘Change We Can Believe in: The Role of Social Identity, Cognitive Alternatives, and Leadership in Group Mobilization and Transformation’, in *Culture and Social Change: Transforming Society through the Power of Ideas*, ed. Brady Wagoner, Eric Jensen, and Julian Oldmeadow (Information Age Publishing, 2012), 53–75. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
58. Henri Tajfel and J.C. Turner, ‘An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict’, in *The Social Psychology of Inter-Group Relations*, ed. S. Worschel and W.G. Austin (Monterey, CA.: Brooks/Cole, 1979), 33–47; Reicher and Haslam, ‘Change We Can Believe in: The Role of Social Identity, Cognitive Alternatives, and Leadership in Group Mobilization and Transformation’. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
59. Matthew Pianalto, ‘Moral Courage and Facing Others’, *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 20, no. 2 (2012): 165–84, https://doi.org/10.1080/09672559.2012.668308. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
60. Pianalto, 'Moral', 172. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
61. Lucy McDonald, ‘Please Like This Paper’, *Philosophy* 96, no. 3 (2021): 335–58, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819121000152. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
62. Luke Thorburn and Aviv Ovadya, ‘Bridging Systems: Open Problems for Countering Destructive Divisiveness across Ranking, Recommenders, and Governance’, *Knight First Amendment Institute at Columbia University*, 2023, https://knightcolumbia.org/content/bridging-systems. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
63. Guy Aitchison and Saladin Meckled-Garcia, ‘Against Online Public Shaming: Ethical Problems with Mass Social Media’, *Social Theory and Practice* 47, no. 1 (2021): 1–31, https://doi.org/10.5840/soctheorpract20201117109. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
64. I found this translation of Analects 1.1 in Joel Kupperman's work on Confucian civility. Joel J. Kupperman, ‘Confucian Civility’, *Dao* 9, no. 1 (2010): 11–23. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11712-009-9154-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
65. Thomas M. Scanlon, ‘The Difficulty of Tolerance’, in *The Difficulty of Tolerance: Essays in Political Philosophy*, 187–201 (Cambridge: Columbia University Press, 2003), 84–112. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
66. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism: Expanded Edition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005). [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
67. Christina Bicchieri, *Norms in the Wild: How to Diagnose, Measure, and Change Social Norms* (Oxford University Press, 2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
68. I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting discussion of this point. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
69. Natascha Rietdijk and Alfred Archer, ‘Post-Truth, False Balance, and Virtuous Gatekeeping’, in *Virtues, Democracy, and Online Media*, ed. Nancy E. Snow and Maria Silvia Vaccarezza (New York: Routledge, 2021), 64–79. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
70. D.D. Raphael, ‘The Intolerable’, in *Justifying Toleration: Conceptual and Historical Perspectives*, ed. Susan Mendus (Cambridge University Press, 1988), 137–54. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
71. Wong, ‘Soup, Harmony, and Disagreement’, 149-151. [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
72. Pettigrew and Tropp, ‘A Meta-Analytic Test of Intergroup Contact Theory.’; Elizabeth Levy Paluck, Seth A. Green, and Donald P. Green, ‘The Contact Hypothesis Re-Evaluated’, *Behavioural Public Policy* 3, no. 02 (2019): 129–58, https://doi.org/10.1017/bpp.2018.25; Julian Bond et al., ‘The Contact Hypothesis and the Virtual Revolution: Does Face-to-Face Interaction Remain Central to Improving Intergroup Relations?’, ed. I-Ching Lee, *PLOS ONE* 18, no. 12 (2023): 1–27, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0292831. [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
73. This research might also be relevant to consider for those that think forms of incivility or moderate incivility could be effective at dealing with disagreeing others. In part, this depends on whether the ‘equal status’ condition of the contact-hypothesis is necessary for successful prejudice-reduction. The results on this are mixed, but researchers are calling for more work on this (see Paluck *et al.,* 2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
74. Scanlon, ‘The Difficulty of Tolerance’; Loren E. Lomasky, *Rights Angles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-73)
75. I thank another anonymous reviewer for suggesting I consider this worry. [↑](#endnote-ref-74)
76. Amy Gutmann, ‘Freedom of Association: An Introductory Essay’, in *Freedom of Association*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 1998), 3–32. [↑](#endnote-ref-75)
77. Michael Walzer, ‘On Involuntary Association’, in *Freedom of Association*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 1998), 69. [↑](#endnote-ref-76)
78. Thanks to an associate editor for pushing me on this difficult point. [↑](#endnote-ref-77)
79. Here, I have in mind Timur Kuran’s work on work on *preference falsification*, where agents deem it rational to misrepresent their genuine views, beliefs and interests due to social pressures. I suspect that even if echo-chambered cannot literally avoid social interactions, they can certainly pretend to express the views of their interlocutors in public before expressing their real suspicion and hostility toward the out-group in private.

 See Timur Kuran, *Private Truths, Public Lies : The Social Consequences of Preference Falsification* (Cambridge, Mass ; Harvard University Press, 1995). [↑](#endnote-ref-78)
80. The mechanism here is known as ‘surprising validation’. See Cass Sunstein, *Republic.Com 2.0* (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 2007); Sunstein, *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media*. explores at length in his *Republic* series of books. See also the paper by Luke Thorburn and Aviv Ovadya, ‘Bridging Systems: Open Problems for Countering Destructive Divisiveness across Ranking, Recommenders, and Governance’. where they apply these ideas to algorithmically redesigning social media in line with some of the suggestions I make above. [↑](#endnote-ref-79)
81. In future research, I hope to draw on the role and responsibilities of social media corporations for dealing with echo chambers. Elsewhere, I develop this platform design proposal in greater detail. For now, I hope to have provided a detailed explanation of the role of individual dispositions and virtues for dealing with echo- chambered individuals and influencing such individuals to get out of their echo chambers. [↑](#endnote-ref-80)
82. Michele Avalle et al., ‘Persistent Interaction Patterns across Social Media Platforms and over Time’, *Nature* 628, no. 8008 (2024): 582–89, https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-024-07229-y.

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