Confucian Harmony from an African Perspective

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Abstract

Chenyang Li's new book, *The Philosophy of Confucian Harmony*, has been heralded as the first book-length exposition of the concept of harmony in the approximately 3,000 year old Confucian tradition. It provides a systematic analysis of Confucian harmony and defence of its relevance for contemporary moral and political thought. In this philosophical discussion of Li's book, I expound its central claims, contextualize them relative to other work in English-speaking Confucian thought, and critically reflect on them, particularly in light of a conception of harmony that is salient in the sub-Saharan African tradition. Hence, this article aims to continue the nascent dialogue between indigenous Chinese and African philosophical traditions that has only just begun.

Keywords

Introduction

According to Daniel A. Bell's dust-jacket endorsement, Chenyang Li's *The Philosophy of Confucian Harmony* (2014) is the first book-length manuscript on the topic ever produced in the approximately 3,000 year old Confucian tradition. Although I am not qualified to judge the accuracy of this bold claim, it is clear

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to me that Li's book is a unique and important addition to Confucian philosophy composed in English. In this critical notice, I expound its central claims, contextualize them relative to other work in Anglophone Confucian philosophy, and raise some questions about and objections to them.

While there have been several reviews and discussions of Li's book (including Lu 2014; Tang 2014; Bell 2015a; Pokorny 2015; Rosker 2015; Tan 2015), none has considered it in light of the sub-Saharan philosophical tradition. It is literally only in the past five years that philosophers working in the indigenous Chinese and African traditions have begun comparing and contrasting values (Bell and Metz 2011; Unah 2014; Metz 2014, 2015a, 2017).[1] One thing that they have revealed is that harmony is a concept central to both Confucianism and the sub-Saharan ethic of *ubuntu*, the famous southern African (specifically, Nguni) word for human excellence. It should be revealing, therefore, to consider Li's conception of Confucian harmony from the standpoint of a characteristically African conception of it. Although I note some similarities between the two, my primary aim is to highlight key differences, ones that have important implications for how individuals should live and institutions should be organized.

In the next section, I expound the key elements of *The Philosophy of Confucian Harmony* and compare it to other recent books in English-speaking Confucian philosophy, bringing out what contributions it has made to the philosophical literature. In the next three sections, I critically explore Li's analysis of harmony in light of three other concepts central to Confucianism, namely, self-realization, *ren*, or human excellence through beneficence, and hierarchy. For each concept, I reflect on not only how harmony as conceived in the Confucian tradition bears on it, but also what one salient sub-Saharan conception of harmony entails for the issues raised.

Although I note respects in which those coming from an African perspective would question the merits of Confucian harmony as Li authoritatively interprets it, my aim is not to show that the doubts are indeed sound, let alone to reject Li's philosophy. Instead, I seek to put the latter into conversation with a philosophical tradition that turns out to be much closer to it than characteristic Anglo-American and Continental ones. I conclude by indicating some of the key issues that merit further reflection as the exchanges continue between thinkers guided by indigenous Chinese and African values.

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1   Social scientists have also just begun to compare values in the two regions, e.g., Hofstede et al. (2010); Anedo (2012); Matondo (2012); Ampiah (2014).

Li's Methods, Aims and Claims

The Confucian Philosophy of Harmony is, as per its title, a work of philosophy, and, more specifically, value theory or ethics. Social scientists would usually think about values (or norms) descriptively, in terms of what people report about their beliefs or what one can infer about people's beliefs from their behaviour (e.g., Hofstede and Bond 1988: 8-9). In contrast, most ethicists and moral philosophers approach values prescriptively and analytically.[2] By the former I mean that they seek to argue for the values that people ought to hold or prioritize, if they do not already. By the latter I mean that they reflect carefully on the content of values, not only clarifying their nature, perhaps by providing a careful definition of them, but also considering their logical and explanatory relationships, say, determining which values are fundamental and which are derivative. Li's book is philosophical in both of these senses, as will be my own critical discussion of it below.

One of Li's three major aims is to present and defend a certain view of which value is central to the Confucian philosophical tradition and how it relates to other values in it. According to Li, harmony is the final value that is most central to Confucianism, with (nearly) all other major values being a function of it.

As he, Li, notes (2014: 18), *ren*, i.e., human excellence through beneficence (care, compassion and related dispositions), has often been taken to be the most "central" or basic moral category in Confucian thought. Li makes an extremely strong case for thinking it is not. He draws a distinction between the thought of Confucius himself, on the one hand, and Confucian thought more generally, on the other. Li grants that *ren* might be basic to Confucius' thinking, but contends that it is too narrow to capture the broader tradition. Li maintains in particular that this broader tradition includes values that *ren* cannot capture, but that harmony can while also capturing what *ren* does. I discuss these matters below in some detail; for now, note that Li points out that *ren* is an interpersonal ideal (addressed in terms of harmony in chs. 7-9), but that the Confucian tradition also includes intrapersonal factors (ch. 6) as well as more cosmic considerations (ch. 10) that are not well captured by beneficence.

A second major aim of Li's book is also analytic for seeking to clarify the nature of harmony in the face of misinterpretations and to distinguish it from related ideas. Li often speaks to the Western reader, urging her to consider how

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2 Some also do so phenomenologically, in terms of what it is subjectively like to abide by the values, exemplified most influentially these days by the work of Emmanuel Levinas.

the word "harmony" as it has often been used by philosophers and thinkers from that background differs greatly from the Confucian sense of it.

Confucian harmony is neither mere peace, nor sameness, nor agreement, nor conformity to a fixed order. Although Confucian harmony often includes peace, it is not reducible to it and includes more integration than mere détente. It is also by definition not sameness, as it necessarily includes differential elements. It is not simply agreement, for those who have different opinions and perspectives can harmonize, and, indeed, if they had identical views, then there would be mere sameness. Finally, it is not merely aligning oneself to a predetermined cosmic pattern, for harmony is often something to be established between people and even within a given one of them.

According to Li, Confucian harmony is, in contrast, essentially a matter of different elements coming together, where differences are not merely respected, but also integrated in such a way that the best of them is brought out and something new is created. "Harmony is an active process in which heterogeneous elements are brought into a mutually balancing, cooperatively enhancing, and often commonly benefiting relationship" (Li 2014: 1; for additional definitional statements, see 9, 47-48, 109-110, 113, 126). Li often appeals to aesthetic analogies to illustrate this concept of "creative tension" between disparate properties, his favoured catchphrase for harmony; think of different instruments making music together, or a variety of ingredients that form a tasty soup.[3]

In the first instance, harmony so conceived is a property that is to be realized between people, roughly such that differences between them ought to be combined in a way that is good for all. "Confucian interpersonal harmony begins with family.... The cultivated person's loving relationships with his wife and children are like a symphony where different instruments are played in concert" (Li 2014: 82). However, the concept also applies beyond the interpersonal, so that, for instance, an individual person's emotions, feelings and beliefs ought to cohere together.

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3   The concept in the Western tradition most like Confucian harmony, as Li interprets it, is that of organic unity; both are a matter of a whole composed of diverse elements that is greater than the sum of its parts. It would be fascinating to consider elsewhere how Confucian harmony and organic unity differ. One line to pursue is that the former is characteristically hierarchical, as discussed below, whereas the latter is not. Another angle is that the former is often supposed to be good for all the members of the harmonious relationship, whereas in the latter case the emphasis is often on the value of the whole as distinct from that of the parts. On organic unity in Western philosophy, see Moore (1903); Nozick (1981: 403-450); and Sedgwick (2012: 45-69). See also Li (2014: 17) for mention of "organic whole".

In addition to contrasting this, Confucian conception of harmony with Western notions, Li also works to differentiate it from other Chinese interpretations of the concept. In particular, he indicates how it is distinct from the talk of "harmony" found in two other major Chinese moral-philosophical traditions, namely, Daoism, which roughly prescribes fitting into a natural order, and Mohism, which demands universal beneficence (for concise overviews of both, see Wong 2013).

Li's third major aim in the book is prescriptive, a matter of arguing that the Confucian conception of harmony is (the) one that should inform contemporary moral thought and practice. Separate chapters contend that harmony is a plausible ideal when thinking about how: one should become a good person (ch. 6); family members ought to interact (ch. 7); a government ought to engage with its citizens (ch. 8); and states ought to relate to one another (ch. 9). Before discussing several of these views in some detail in the contexts of self-realization, *ren* and hierarchy, I highlight what Li has accomplished in *The Confucian Philosophy of Harmony*, compared to other sole-authored books in English focusing on Confucian normative philosophy.

Li is not the first to have conceived of Confucian harmony as, roughly, symbiotic interaction between different elements, and to have contended that it is central to Confucianism (e.g., Yao 2000: 170-173; cf. Ihara 2004). However, he has done so in by far the most systematic and, to my mind, conclusive fashion.

Furthermore, most of the recent Anglophone books on Confucianism have sought to advance a political philosophy about, say, how to distribute state power or what the proper aims of a state should be (Tan 2003; Bell 2006, 2015b; Angle 2012; Bai 2012; Cline 2013; Chan 2014; Elstein 2015). In contrast, Li's book addresses the nature of harmony much more thoroughly than these texts, and applies it to a much wider array of topics, including how to develop virtue and how to relate in a family.

Finally, there are those who have addressed Confucian morality at the intrapersonal and interpersonal levels (and not strictly the political). However, they have either focused on expounding the views of particular Confucian thinkers (e.g., Ivanhoe 2000), or have deemed different concepts to be central to Confucianism, such as family (Fan 2010) or role (Ames 2011). Li would maintain, plausibly in my view, that harmony is more basic than these other concepts, which are derivative. Regardless of whether that is true, a clear virtue of Li's book is that it occasions such a foundational debate amongst Confucian value theorists.

In sum, then, Li's book is unique for having articulated the concept of harmony in the most depth, argued with plausibility that it is foundational to Confucianism, and applied it to a wide array of normative topics. Its

thoroughness and comprehensiveness in these respects are welcome additions to the field.

Self-Realization and Harmony

In the rest of this article, I consider how harmony, as Li understands it, plausibly relates to other values often deemed to be inherent to Confucianism, as well as how a characteristically sub-Saharan approach to harmony is similar and different. I aim to highlight respects in which the Confucian and African interpretations of harmony clash and so provide divergent prescriptions for contemporary behaviour and policy.

One concept that is cardinal for Confucianism is self-realization or self-cultivation. Often for those in this tradition, the ultimate reason for one to perform a given action is to realize one's true self. The thought is that there is a higher, distinctly human part of one's nature, which contrasts with a lower, animal part, and that the point of living is to develop the former and to overcome the latter. The idea is reminiscent of ancient Greek *eudaimonism* (and is salient in African philosophical thought, as I discuss below).

Li points this out in the book, quoting Mencius, second only to Confucius himself when it comes to influencing the Confucian tradition: "'If I.... do not live through human excellence and moral rightness, it is called self-abandonment' (*Mencius* 4A10; TTC 2721). Mencius holds that humans by nature.... tend towards goodness; if a person tends to the contrary, he is giving up his real self" (Li 2014: 92).

The question that arises is how self-realization and harmony are supposed to relate to one another. On the one hand, Li has maintained that harmony is foundational to Confucian moral and political thought, while, on the other, he seems to acknowledge that self-realization is.

Although I believe that Li's ultimate view is that self-realization *just is* to live harmoniously, that they are ultimately one and the same thing, it takes a bit of work to apprehend that from the book. There are instead passages suggesting that self-realization and harmony are distinct properties, with one serving as a (mere) cause of the other.

For example, sometimes Li appears to maintain that self-cultivation is a mere means towards the production of harmony. "Once a person's will becomes *cheng*, his heart-mind can be set upright. Once his heart-mind is set upright, he can cultivate his self. Once his self is cultivated, he can harmonize the family.... Once he harmonizes the family, he can put the country in good

order" (a quotation from *The Great Learning* in Li 2014: 89). "Through dedication, a person sets his heart-mind right and engages himself diligently in cultivation, and he thereby achieves the goal of becoming a cultivated person and is able to harmonize not only with himself but also with other people" (Li 2014: 98).

These quotes *suggest* that one should value self-cultivation (solely) as a tool to generate harmony. However, that is not Li's considered view, as it would not give adequate recognition to the importance of self-realization as a final value, i.e., as something valuable for its own sake, and not a solely instrumental one (Li 2014: 89, 101).

Other passages are naturally read as maintaining the opposite view, that harmony is (solely) a tool to generate self-cultivation. For instance, one finds these lines: "When harmony is achieved and maintained, individuals in it thrive. . . . (For) Mencius. . . . people's harmony is the most important of the three concepts that influence the success of human affairs. To achieve a major goal, a leader must. . . . have ensured that his people are working together harmoniously" (Li 2014: 15). "(T)here is no (real) peace without harmony, and there is no happiness without peace" (Liu 2014: 124). "In this view. . . . (h)armony is necessary to human happiness. . . . (W)ithout harmony. . . . nothing in the world would be able to flourish . . . Harmony in persons results in virtuous persons" (Li 2014: 15, 16, 17, 20).

These quotations *suggest* that harmony is a mere means towards other goods, such as thriving, success, happiness, flourishing and virtue. However, that, too, is not Li's view, as it would not give adequate recognition to the importance of harmony as a final value (Li 2014: 1, 9, 10, 68, 70, 168).

I think the best way to read Li is as suggesting that, although self-realization can cause harmony and harmony can cause self-realization, they also constitute one another, with such being the typical relation between them. On this score, one finds these passages: "The ideal good individual attains harmony within his or her person and also with other individuals. . . . A person who is guided by ritual propriety is a good person. . . . (and a) person of ritual propriety is one who can harmonize with himself and with others" (Li 2014: 18, 70).

These remarks suggest that one's true nature is to harmonize, so that one becomes a genuine human being *insofar as* one lives harmoniously. Such a view is a plausible way to construe the relationship between two properties that each have a strong claim to being foundational in Confucianism.

And it is fascinating that it is so similar to typical sub-Saharan understandings of ethics. Before addressing them, note that when I speak of "sub-Saharan" or "African" values, I am of course making generalizations, specifically, claims

about features that have been salient amongst many (not essential to all) indigenous peoples, or at least the philosophers inspired by them, below the Sahara desert for a long span of time. I am contending that certain philosophical views have been recurrent (not universal, not exclusive) there.[4]

Working with a bird's-eye view of ethical thought in a large region is natural for philosophers, who seek out what is abstract and general. Those with a more social scientific background might prefer a discussion with more context and particularity, say, a study of the beliefs of a specific African people such as the Igbo in Nigeria or the Akan in Ghana as they bear on Confucianism (undertaken in Anedo 2012 and Ampiah 2014, respectively). While there are at least several hundred linguistic and ethnic groups in sub-Saharan Africa, which of course have different cultures and worldviews, those who have learned about many of them agree that there are broad commonalities amongst them (for just a handful of examples, see Gyekye 1996; Ramose 1999; Bujo 2005; Metz 2007; Wiredu 2008; Nkulu-N'Sengha 2009). I therefore submit that both approaches are warranted and should be informed by one another; it would be ideal for scholars to think about the particular and to do so in light of the general, and vice versa. In this article, I focus strictly on the general, citing thinkers from a variety of peoples in sub-Saharan Africa to substantiate claims about what is salient amongst them, or at least their philosophers.

As is well known to scholars of indigenous Africa, maxims often used to sum up morality include "A person is a person through other persons" (e.g., Mokgoro 1998: 17; Dandala 2009: 260; Nkulu-N'Sengha 2009) and "I am because we are" (e.g., Menkiti 1984: 171; Mbiti 1990: 106, 110, 113). Although these phrases have metaphysical or descriptive senses, to the effect that one is dependent on others for one's existence and identity, they also have moral or prescriptive senses. Personhood, selfhood and humanness in characteristic traditional sub-Saharan language and thought are value-laden concepts; that is, one can be more or less of a person, self or human being, where the more one is, the better (for discussion in the context of several traditional African peoples, see Nkulu-N'Sengha 2009). One's ultimate goal in life should be to become a complete person, a real self or a genuine human being, one who has *ubuntu*.

In addition, for one large swathe of African moral thought, the central way to realize oneself is by living harmoniously, or communally, with others. Consider the following remarks from Desmond Tutu about sub-Saharan peoples' views of morality:

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4   For further analysis of the meaning of geographical terms such as "African", "Western" and the like, see Metz (2015b).

> We say, "a person is a person through other people." It is not "I think therefore I am." It says rather: "I am human because I belong." I participate, I share . . . . Harmony, friendliness, community are great goods. Social harmony is for us the *summum bonum* – the greatest good. Anything that subverts or undermines this sought-after good is to be avoided like the plague (1999: 35).

Although below in the rest of this article I bring out respects in which a characteristically African conception of harmony differs from the Confucian, the present point is that, for both traditions, there are distinctively human and more animalistic sides of one's nature, one's basic aim in life should be to realize one's higher, human nature, and the way to do that is to relate to others in a certain, harmonious way (as I first noted in Metz 2015a).[5] In this respect, these two non-Western traditions turn out to have much more in common with one another than either does with typically modern Western approaches to ethics, where individualist concepts of freedom, autonomy, agreement, contract, pleasure and happiness are more commonly deemed to be foundational.[6]

Of course, not all Western values are individualist in these ways, with there being a communitarian tradition. However, the latter is far from dominant in Euro-American thought, and it tends towards either the relativist view that norms are binding because accepted by a group (e.g., Sandel 1984) or the corporatist view that groups have a moral significance beyond their individual members (often ascribed to Hegel, as discussed in Masolo 2004). Indigenous African and Chinese values, in contrast, focus on ideals of communing with other individuals or interacting with them harmoniously. I suggest they are aptly characterized as "relational" values, in contrast to individualist, relativist or holist ones (on which see Christians 2004: 244-245; Metz 2012b; Metz and Miller 2016).

Ren and Harmony

As Li notes, *ren*, i.e., human excellence through beneficence (care, compassion), has often been taken to be the most central or basic moral category in

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5 For many thinkers, such as Tutu (1999), one's self-realization is constituted by living harmoniously, whereas for others, the latter is an essential means to another value considered basic, such as the promotion of vital force (Bujo 1997) or the common good (Gyekye 1997).

6 Aristotle, and the early Marx as inspired by him, are close, but, even here, there are large differences, on which see Metz (2012a).

Confucian thought (2014: 18). Recall that Li argues that *ren* is not sufficiently comprehensive to make sense of self-cultivation and interaction with nature and the universe, whereas harmony is. The question remains as to how harmony and *ren* interrelate, given that they are not one and the same thing.

I find Li's answers to this question to be vague. He maintains that *ren* and harmony "complement one another" (2014: 20) and that they are both "central concepts" (2014: 19) of Confucianism. These phrases could usefully be more precise, and on the face of it admit of weak readings to the effect that *ren* and harmony exist "side by side", but have no overlap or other connection.

These characterizations should be stronger, not only for the Confucian tradition, but also, I strongly suspect, for Li's own reading of it. There is plausibly a more robust, partially *constitutive* relationship between *ren* and harmony. In particular, I gather Li would, upon reflection, maintain that *a large part of what it is* to live harmoniously is to live beneficently. Since Confucian "harmony" for Li characteristically includes the idea of tension taking a form in which there is "a favorable environment for each party to flourish" (Li 2014: 9), and since *ren*, beneficence, is action done with the expectation that it will improve another party's flourishing, it makes good sense to say that *ren* partially constitutes harmonious living. The two properties are not co-extensive, however, since *ren* is naturally construed as interpersonal, whereas, again, harmony can be intrapersonal or even obtain between persons and non-persons, by Li's reading of Confucianism.

An interesting question that arises at this point is about the precise nature of living harmoniously through *ren*. Clearly, a harmonious agent is one disposed to help others. However, neither what counts as "help", nor when an individual can reasonably expect it, are obvious, and Li's book occasions awareness of different understandings of these issues.

First, there are times when Li seems to maintain that living harmoniously implies that others around one *actually* flourish. That is, there are passages where Li suggests that harmony with others implies they are *in fact* living well. "When harmony is achieved and maintained, individuals in it thrive" (2014: 15; see also 12).

However, second, at other times Li says that harmony "creates constructive conditions for the healthy existence of all parties" (2014: 10) or means that one is to "let each thrive in his or her own way" (2014: 122), which statements do not imply that health or thriving has actually been achieved (see also 2014: 1).

And then there are, third, still other points where Li maintains that a concern for harmony can mean that others are intentionally *harmed* upon being sacrificed for a greater good. "Confucian harmony is a holistic rather than an

individualistic philosophy.... This kind of philosophy carries an inherent risk of sacrificing individuals and smaller units for the sake of the larger and the whole" (2014: 14). This sort of approach to harmony does not cohere well with the first approach above, according to which it implies that the "individuals in it thrive".

I submit that something like the second approach is the most promising, in light of ethical judgments salient in not merely the Confucian moral tradition, but the bodies of thought most attractive to just about any contemporary audience of professional ethicists and moral philosophers.

Consider that it is too demanding to suppose that harmony or *ren* must result in actual benefit to people. There would intuitively be no lack of human excellence through beneficence if unforeseeable, accidental or insurmountable conditions prevented a person from actually benefiting as a result of a well-intentioned agent taking a means reasonably expected to help him. For example, if someone were drowning in the ocean, and one dove in to save him, one would have acted out of *ren* or harmony, even if one failed to rescue the person. What matters most for Confucianism, or any relational ethic, is that people *relate beneficently*, not a *state of affairs in which others benefit* (especially where that could have resulted unintentionally or even contrary to the agent's intentions).

If living harmoniously with other persons need not mean that their lives in fact go better as a result of one's engagement with them, can it also mean that one makes their lives go worse for the sake of others or a "greater harmony"? Li is lead to suspect so by virtue of reflections on harmony in the natural world, specifically between populations of wolves and sheep (2014: 13-14).

It is reasonable to think that there is such as thing as harmony within and between groups. However, when constructing an attractive ethic for persons, group harmony should take second place to relating harmoniously with individuals; the corporate should not override the relation. Even if one could maximize the amount of harmony in a society in the long run by killing one innocent person with the purpose of redistributing his organs to four people who would die without them, one would be wrong to do it.

So, I do not think that the basic obligation of a Confucian moral agent is, as Li often says (esp. ch. 8), *to promote harmonious relationships throughout society*; for in order to maximize harmony globally, one might need to be discordant locally, and in ways that are intuitively immoral, as per the organs case above. A more promising construal of a Confucian moral agent's basic obligation, at least when it comes to people, is to *relate to each individual harmoniously* or at least in a way that respects harmony (which would allow for some

discord in response to those who will not stop being discordant; cf. Li 2014: 13, 145, 169).[7] Although one should seek to foster harmony in society, especially if one is in a position of influence such as a politician, it must not come at the expense of relating harmoniously to individuals.

Suppose, then, that when it comes to beneficence towards persons, a Confucian roughly ought to relate to individuals harmoniously or to honour harmonious relationships with them, where that means doing what is likely to make other people better off, but that need not result in them actually benefiting. How does that conception of (interpersonal) harmony compare with a characteristically African conception of it?

I detect three major differences between them, two of which I discuss in the rest of this section and one I save for the next. In the following section I note that harmony for indigenous sub-Saharan thought has often meant sharing power, and I weigh this perspective up against Confucian political meritocracy. Here, I discuss the fact that African harmony often includes sharing a sense of self and also sharing resources with strangers, themes that are not as visible in Confucianism.

First, when thinkers from a variety of sub-Saharan peoples and places have thought about what it is to harmonize or to commune with other people, they have often referred not just to a kind of beneficence that Confucians would appreciate, but also to sharing a sense of self or identifying with one another. Consider the following statements:

The Nigerian philosopher Segun Gbadegesin says that for traditional Yoruba morality, "Every member is expected to consider him/herself an integral part of the whole and to play an appropriate role towards achieving the good of all" (1991: 65).

Probably the most influential African political philosopher since the post-independence era, the Ghanaian Kwame Gyekye, says, "A harmonious cooperative social life requires that individuals demonstrate sensitivity to the needs and interests of others.... Communitarian moral theory.... advocates a life lived in harmony and cooperation with others, a life of mutual consideration and aid and of interdependence, a life in which one shares in the fate of the other" (1997: 72, 76).

Former South African Constitutional Court Justice Yvonne Mokgoro remarks of a sub-Saharan ethic, "Harmony is achieved through close and sympathetic

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7   In some places, Li maintains that to relate harmoniously to others is to give each one due consideration (2014: 17, 122-123, 126). Given that it does not suggest a utilitarian calculus according to which the interests of each are merely to be summed up and maximized, this kind of approach would also be a promising way to avoid corporatism.

social relations within the group" (1998: 17), and *Simunye*, which means "We are one" in Zulu, is a frequently encountered maxim in South Africa.

Finally, the Kenyan historian of African philosophy Dismas Masolo highlights what he calls the "communitarian values" of "living a life of mutual concern for the welfare of others, such as in a cooperative creation and distribution of wealth. . . . Feeling integrated with as well as willing to integrate others into a web of relations free of friction and conflict" (2010: 240).

In these and other statements, there is mention of two distinct values (first analyzed in Metz 2007). On the one hand there is reference to beneficence in the form of achieving the good of all, mutual consideration and aid, sympathy, and concern for the welfare of others. However, there is, on the other hand, reference to considering oneself a part of the whole, being interdependent and sharing a fate, being close, and feeling integrated. The latter concepts go beyond beneficence, and are well summarized as sharing a sense of self or enjoying a feeling of togetherness.

Confucian families might well experience such emotions, but the point is that Confucian philosophy does not appear to place *moral value* on them, at least not to the degree that African philosophy does. Harmony in the sub-Saharan tradition is often construed as including ideals such as thinking of oneself as a "we" and not so much an "I", taking pride in what one's "we" has accomplished (or, conversely, shame in its failures), and liking the fact that one is part of a "we".

As Chinese and African philosophers continue to exchange ideas, it would be interesting for them to consider whether either has the "better" conception of harmony in this respect. Both views are naturally understood as grounding ethics on the ways that family members intuitively should interact (e.g., Shutte 2001: 28-29; Fan 2010). Pressing questions from Africans to the Chinese would be: is not one thing you value about a family a sense of togetherness, and is that not something to seek to recreate elsewhere, as is feasible?

There is some evidence that Chinese people, or at least those heavily influenced by Confucianism, do not typically prize positive other-regarding emotions in a family setting, with recent discussion about the relative infrequency of the phrase "I love you" being a case in point (e.g., Chung 2014; Lake 2014).[8] Is this a case where positive emotions are valued, but not expressed? Or not expressed with language, but expressed via actions? Or is it rather a case where positive emotions are not valued? If so, is there any neutral angle from which to reasonably say that they should be valued, or, conversely, that they should

8   Cf. the values survey conducted by The Chinese Cultural Connection (1987).

not be, when it comes to morality? There is fascinating work on this score to be done by cross-cultural psychologists and philosophers.

A second recurrent theme amongst African discussions of harmony and morality in general is hospitality, the practice of being extremely welcoming towards strangers (e.g., Mandela 2006; Gathogo 2008; Mnyaka and Motlhabi 2009: 77; Matondo 2012: 41). Beneficence is to be exhibited not merely with family members or even one's in-groups (cf. *guanxi*), but also with other human beings one does not know. As is often noted, it has been common for traditional African villages to invite strangers to stay with them and to share space and food that would have normally gone to family, at least for a short time. Bell claims that neither such a practice nor the principle has been recurrent in the Confucian tradition (Bell and Metz 2011: 89-90).

Here, again, cross-cultural debate would be revealing. Both the Confucian and African traditions of moral thought are clearly partial, meaning that they give some priority to those with whom is already in relationship (on which see Appiah 1998). Traditionally, blood ties and clan were the basis of the relevant relationship, but these days Confucian and African philosophers focus on harmonious relationships. Those with whom one has already harmonized are entitled to more harmonization than those with whom one has not.

However, the concept of human dignity has also been salient in the African tradition. Indigenous sub-Saharans typically believe that all human beings, by virtue of having a life that has come from God, have an inviolable worth that demands respect, which means that one has *some* reason to relate harmoniously with anyone (who at least is also willing to harmonize). In contrast, dignity, at least of a sort thought to ground cosmopolitan hospitality or universal human rights, is not a central feature of Confucian moral thought (e.g., Ihara 2004; Donnelly 2009: 67-73). What Confucians instead often acknowledge is the idea that each human being is entitled to some kind of moral treatment in virtue of her special capacity for virtue (e.g., Li 2014: 160-161).

Again, those from an African standpoint would be inclined to press: if everyone has a moral status (even if not a dignity) because they are capable of virtue or human excellence, then should not one be hospitable to and welcoming of strangers? Can it not be appropriate sometimes to forsake the interests, at least trivial or moderate ones, of family for the sake of non-family? According to the Confucian tradition, "The family was not seen as a necessary condition for the good life, it was the good life" (so reports Bell 2006: 145). Are there deep grounds within Confucianism to temper this claim, to the extent it is true? If not, is there something for it to learn from another tradition? Or, conversely, is it worth "biting the bullet" as Ruiping Fan seems to do?: "(F)avoritism to

family members does not ipso facto appear as corrupt until proven otherwise. Instead, when set within a life of Confucian virtue, familial favoritism is itself virtuous" (2010: xii).

Hierarchy and Harmony

The previous section considered the respect in which Confucian harmony is partially constituted by beneficence (*ren*), what the nature of beneficence *qua* interpersonal harmony is, and how it compares to an African conception of interpersonal harmony, which extends beneficence to strangers, even at the expense of family to some degree, and also includes a sense of togetherness, a moral dimension beyond beneficence altogether. In this section I discuss the relationship between harmony, as Li understands it, and hierarchy in the Confucian tradition, and then view these matters from a common African understanding of harmony.

One striking feature of Li's central characterization of harmony is that it is not *essentially* hierarchal. It *can* include inegalitarian relationships, but it does not require them for harmony to obtain. As I have noted, a typical definition of "harmony" for Li is: "an active process in which heterogeneous elements are brought into a mutually balancing, cooperatively enhancing, and often commonly benefiting relationship" (2014: 1; see also 9, 47-48, 109-110, 113, 126). There is nothing necessarily unequal about a mutually beneficial, or at least a productive, unity amongst diverse elements.

Li's conception of harmony constitutes something of a departure from traditional Confucianism, which is more inegalitarian and role-oriented (on which see Li 2014: 69, 102-103, 108-109). Consider the "Three Bonds", the human relationships in which, and by which, one is particularly expected to realize harmony. "Minister serving ruler, son serving father, wife serving husband, if these three relationships run in harmony, All-under-Heaven will have order" (quoted by Dau-Lin 1970/1971: 29-30; see also Tu 1998; Q Wang 2011). It is commonly thought that the "cardinal spirit of Confucianism is that everyone should play one's essential role and function" (T Wang 2011: 98), with the Three Bonds being central and with other relationships to be modelled on them. Essential to the Three Bonds is the idea of higher and lower positions, with the populace, the young and the female occupying the latter, as they are thought to lack the requisite qualifications (of virtue, education, wisdom) to rule.

As is well known, hierarchical power in the Confucian tradition is not to be understood as domineering and arbitrary. Parents and rulers are expected

to do what is good for children and citizens (respectively), and especially to promote their virtue (Li 2014: 69, 199-120, 123, 130). In addition, children may remonstrate with parents, as may citizens with rulers (2014: 105-106, 168).

Even so, the standard relationship is one of a superior who acts in the interests of an inferior who is respectful, if not deferential. In other words, traditionally speaking, action according to roles with differential power is one salient aspect of harmonization, viz., interaction between different elements in a way that brings out the best of them all.

Li is keen to temper the inegalitarian conception of harmony, when it comes to gender. He maintains that Confucian harmony, as he interprets it, in a family does not require the man to have power over the wife. He also contends that the man and the woman need not have fixed tasks to perform based on their gender, with the woman staying home to look after the house and children. Instead, harmony would obtain in a family if the man and the woman undertook different tasks that were freely chosen (2014: 69-70, 101-116; cf. T Wang 2011).

It is not clear to me whether Li can consistently advocate egalitarianism in the family but resist it in the political realm. Although he does not discuss political meritocracy in the book, in another recent work Li abides by the traditional interpretation of Confucianism and appears to favour it over democracy (Bell and Li 2013). If there should be political rulers appointed by qualifications, viz., virtue and education, the same would appear to be true for the family. Since qualifications do not track gender, Li indeed has firm grounds for not always assigning the head of the household to the man. However, by meritocratic principles, whichever individual is most wise should be the one to rule the household.

I submit that Li faces the following dilemma. On the one hand, the logic of Li's Confucian harmony is arguably still not sufficiently egalitarian in a family setting; it appears to fail to recognize the desirability of *joint rule* amongst adult parents, even when they have unequal qualifications, with one being somewhat more empathetic, experienced and educated. On the other hand, if Li does want to make room for joint rule amongst adults in a family, then he appears to be logically committed to something similarly democratic at the political level, taking him still farther from Confucian meritocratic ideals.

I see three possible ways for Li to respond to this dilemma. First, he might accept the first horn and indeed favour a single head of household who is most wise, pointing out that, if there were to be such differential power amongst adults in a family, it would be fine for a matriarch to have the final authority to make decisions. Second, Li might opt for democracy in government, viewing egalitarian political relationships to constitute (or robustly cause) harmony.

Third, Li might try to argue that the logic of meritocracy favours inequality in government, but not in the family; perhaps the variations in qualifications amongst adults to govern a family are not so great as to warrant differential power, whereas variations in qualifications amongst adults to govern a nation are that great.

It is clear how most contemporary African philosophers would resolve the dilemma; they would opt in favour of political democracy, though of course not on grounds of Confucian harmony. The conception of harmony or communion salient in the sub-Saharan tradition has a strong egalitarian bent to it, and has been frequently invoked to justify a kind of democracy oriented towards consensus (Gyekye 1992; Wiredu 1996: 172-190, 2000; Bujo 1997: 157-180; Ramose 1999: 135-152; Metz 2009: esp. 344-348). In the African tradition, harmony includes not merely acting beneficently and enjoying a sense of togetherness, but also participating with other people on an even-handed basis. Recall mention of "cooperation" in the above characterizations of the kind of harmony or communion that African intellectuals characteristically prize. Central to a harmonious relationship is coordinating behaviour, adjusting one's actions to make possible the realization of others' ends, if not ends shared with them; subordination is out of place.

It is well known that traditional African societies often had a king, but one who would routinely defer to consensus achieved amongst a group of (male) elders, who had often been popularly appointed. And then it was also common for decisions affecting the clan to be made consequent to unanimous agreement reached after discussion amongst all affected adults. Contemporary African political philosophers, inspired by these practices and by the value of harmony underlying them, have proposed fascinating forms of how to share power in a modern state. For instance, what if it were a Constitutional rule that, in order for a statute to be valid, all representatives must come to a unanimous agreement about what would be best for the public as a whole, thereby preventing majoritarian blocs of lawmakers from running roughshod over minority interests and views (see esp. Wiredu 1996: 172-190, 2000)?

So, it appears that the African conception of harmony readily prescribes sharing power, whereas the Confucian conception does not. How to choose between them? One strategy from the African perspective would be to press Li and other Confucians on the type of harmony they deeply value, upon reflection. Recall that Li's characterization of harmony includes nothing that is *necessarily* hierarchical, and that his central definitions of it speak of "coordination and cooperation" (e.g., 2014: 9). One kind of difference could be hierarchical role, but, by Li's reading, such is not essential, just as it is not in the case

of making a tasty soup with a variety of ingredients, or playing beautiful music with divergent kinds of instruments. Similarly, as I have discussed, Li appears to reject hierarchical roles between men and women in a family, and he also maintains they are inappropriate between friends, where friendship, Li notes (2014: 102-103), is traditionally one of the influential "Five Relationships" that is egalitarian. If all these relationships can exhibit Confucian harmony without hierarchy, can political ones, too?

Conclusion: Harmonizing the Two Conceptions?

In this critical notice of Li's *The Confucian Philosophy of Harmony*, I have sought to spell out its central claims about the nature and role of harmony in Confucian philosophy, to indicate how they make an addition to the stock of knowledge, to consider how Li's conception of harmony relates to other cardinal Confucian concepts, and to appraise it in light of another non-Western value system, namely, a conception of harmony salient in the sub-Saharan African philosophical tradition. According to Li, Confucian harmony is a process by which heterogeneous, even opposing, factors are integrated in such a way that brings out the best of them, whereas a more African conception of harmony is cooperative, altruistic action consequent to a shared sense of self. I have noted similarities and differences between these ideals, and worked to draw out their different implications for which kinds of social interaction are morally desirable.

Although I have been sympathetic towards the African approach, I have not sought to argue that it is better. Instead, my primary goal has been to put Confucian harmony into dialogue with an ethic that is closer to it than typical Western ones, but still removed enough to offer a critical vantage point. In a phrase, I have sought to introduce some "creative tension". From a typically sub-Saharan perspective, it is morally important to act consequent to identification with others, to be hospitable towards strangers who are deemed to have a dignity (even if at some expense to one's family), and to resolve political conflicts by sharing power amongst all adults affected. Can Confucian harmony be interpreted in a way that accounts for some of these characteristically African values? In cases where it cannot, is it Confucianism or the competing values that should be adjusted or rejected? These are interesting questions that have emerged only recently amongst those doing philosophy in a globalized world. Li's book has enabled us to pose them and perhaps, in time, to answer them.

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