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Harmony from Confucian, Greek, Liberal, and Global Perspectives

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It is a great honor to have distinguished scholars Jiyuan Yu, Yu Kam Por, and Daniel Bell to engage me on my book of *The Confucian Philosophy of Harmony*. They each raised thoughtful and important questions regarding my interpretation of Confucian harmony.

Jiyuan Yu's insightful comments focus on the comparison between the Confucian notion of harmony and ancient Greek notions of harmony. On his expert account, the Greek word *harmonia* is derived from the verb *harmonozein*, which means "to fit together," and the word can be translated as "structure." Hence, "structure" is inherently implied in Greek notions of harmony. The Pythagoreans found such a structure in music and numbers, on which their notion of harmony is based. This approach to harmony can be said to have a "scientific orientation." In contrast, the Confucian approach "focus(es) on daily examples such as soup." Such an approach, he argues, "does not have to be in conflict with the scientific approach." After all, with the exception of a few well-experienced chiefs, most people need recipes to cook soup, and the recipes are usually full of numerical and quantitative proportions of ingredients and spices. Hence, Jiyuan Yu queries, why didn't the Confucians take a similar "scientific" approach when they used music as a prototype for harmony as the Pythagoreans did? From their prototypes of soup and music, why didn't ancient Confucians integrate an approach based on daily life experience (e.g., making a soup) with a scientific approach (e.g., numeric proportion) in formulating the concept of harmony? These are undoubtedly important questions. The subject of science has been a major weakness in Confucianism for a long period of time (see Li 2012). Presumably, had early

Confucian thinkers taken a somewhat “Pythagorean turn” from using the model of music in developing their conception of harmony, the situation would have been quite different. But why didn’t they? It seems to me, in order to answer this question, we need to revisit the issue of pre-set order. I have argued in the book that, while Confucians took order (e.g., ritual propriety) seriously, their cosmogony did not allow them to accept any ultimate pre-set order. For them, the universe did not begin with a pre-set order as in the view of the Pythagoreans. All forms of order are generated subsequently. This, I submit, explains why early Confucian thinkers did not take the objectivity of order as firmly as the Pythagoreans. Consequently, the main concern of ancient Confucians was how harmony can be generated through active and creative participation rather than what is fixed there to be discovered and to conform to it. We should not see such a Confucian philosophy in a mere negative light, though. Such a philosophy may be more relevant to us in the age of the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene stands for the idea that the human species is now the dominant force in shaping the Earth. As 1995 Nobel Laureate Paul J. Crutzen and his coauthor C. Schwägerl put it, “It’s no longer us against ‘Nature.’ Instead, it’s we who decide what nature is and what it will be” (Crutzen and Schwägerl 2011). We should note that the idea of the Anthropocene is not only for a new geologic epoch. It is a new worldview, a new philosophy. Confucians view humanity as a fundamental force in collaboration with heaven (*tian*) and earth in shaping the universe (see Li 2014, ch. 10). This view is largely congruent with the theme of the Anthropocene and their relation should be explored.

Jiyuan Yu points out that, in covering similarities between the two sources, I overlooked an important view shared by Confucians and Plato that harmony requires “each getting it due.” While Confucians hold this principle to be important, Plato also shares such a notion (for Jiyuan Yu’s exposition of Plato’s function argument for this point, see Yu 2007, 64-5). He notes that “letting each get its due” is central to Plato’s notion of harmony and justice: “To be completely

just, one must have knowledge of the Good. The Form of the Good is that ‘by reference to which just things and all the rest become useful and beneficial’ (505a2-3) and it is ‘the cause for all things of all that is right and beautiful’ (517c1, cf. also 534b8-c5).” I see two main differences between Plato’s notion and that of the Confucians. The first is again about pre-set order or the absence of it. Plato’s Forms are not generated but pre-set. Therefore, his harmony achieved through letting each get its due is to conform to a pre-set order (i.e., the Form of the Good). The second is that Plato’s notion of “letting each get its due” carries a stronger totalitarian tendency than that of the Confucian. On the first difference, Jiyuan Yu argues that, besides the thread of Confucian thought on harmony without a pre-set order, there are also thoughts indicating that there is a pre-set order, namely an order from Heaven (*tian*). For instance, in *Analects* 17: 19 Confucius says, “What does Heaven say? Yet there are the four seasons going round and there are the hundred things coming into being. What does Heaven ever say?” Jiyuan Yu maintains that this passage shows that Confucius has a pre-set paradigm in mind. I do not read it this way. In the way I understand Chinese cosmogony, even *tian-di* (heaven and earth) are generated out of *hundun* (chaos, see Li 2014: 28-9). There are two reasons in support of my reading. First, such a reading coheres well with the *Yijing*, which presents a comprehensive Confucian philosophy. The *Yijing* states that the process of change begins with the Ultimate (chaos), which generates the two wings of *yin* and *yang*. The two forces of *yin* and *yang* further generate their multiple forms of combinations, which eventually account for the myriad things in the world (易有太極，是生兩儀，兩儀生四象，四象生八卦). Second, I differentiate two kinds of order, pre-set order and generated order. To say that Confucian harmony does not have a pre-set order is to say so in the ultimate sense; it does not mean that there is no order at all in Confucian harmony. Rules of Confucian ritual propriety, for example, are evidently a kind of order, in the sense that they have

been established prior to people's action and are supposed to be followed. They are, however, generated order, not pre-set in the ultimate, Platonic sense (Li 2014, 33-4). Generated order is a consequence of "deep harmony," the notion that any order is a consequence of prior harmonization. Should the human condition have been fundamentally different, these rules would have been radically different. If we take the *Yijing* seriously, we even can say the same with heaven and earth. Should these two of the heaven-earth-humanity have been generated differently from the Ultimate, the requirements or dispositions of heaven and earth would have been different. In this sense, even the order of heaven and earth is a generated order, not a pre-set order.

Now we look into the second difference between the Confucian and Plato's notion of "letting each get its due." In Book IV of the *Republic*, Adeimantus questions whether individuals in Socrates' ideal state would be happy. Socrates replies that his goal is not to make a few citizens happy but the entire state happy. Towards that goal, individuals must serve the need of the state. Using the example of painting to make his point, Socrates says that, a painting of a person as a whole cannot be beautiful if one insists on merely making one part of it beautiful, e.g., on using the most beautiful color, say purple, to paint the eyes. Instead, one should give each feature its due proportion in order to make the whole beautiful. Similarly, in managing the state, the goal is not to look to people's greatest happiness individually, but rather to the state as a whole. In order to achieve such a goal, individuals must be either induced or compelled to do one's work in the best way for the state. In this Platonic context, the "due" to each is entirely determined by the need of the state as a whole. It is precisely this aspect of Plato's harmony that Karl Popper has argued leads to totalitarianism and it is contrary to freedom (Popper 1945). In the Confucian philosophy of harmony, although it has a holistic orientation, it builds in a

mechanism to allow individuals room for their wellbeing and growth. The *Xi Commentary B* section of the *Book of Changes* advocates a philosophy of “letting each get its due,” which should be understood along with the notion of “*ge zheng xing ming*” (各正性命) in the first chapter of *Qian*, namely, everything gets vindicated on its own path of life (Li 2014: 164). Hence, the notion of “letting each get its due” accords more consideration to the individuals than its Platonic counterpart (whether this idea has been fully translated into practice is another matter, however). Jiyuan Yu notes my argument in this regard with respect to the Confucian requirement for contextuality of determining the due, the hermeneutical nature of *zhong*, and regulative function of ritual propriety. He also presses me to be more specific about what the due is in the Confucian philosophy of harmony. In this regard, the best place to look, and the area that people are most interested in, is political philosophy. This leads our discussion directly to Yu Kam Por’s commentary.

Liberals have long been cautious with holistic social philosophy, including philosophy of harmony. Yu Kam Por raised challenging issues for harmony philosophy in the political arena. How much room does the Confucian philosophy of harmony leave for individuality and pluralism? Can a harmony philosophy give adequate “due” to individuals? Yu Kam Por writes, “the holistic understanding of harmony does not seem to be congruent with the emphasis on the due of each and every individual.” I do not deny that the Confucian philosophy of harmony implies some kind of holism and that there is certain tension between its holist orientation and its emphasis on individuals’ due. As I read it, Confucian philosophy maintains that goodness is not realized in isolation and harmony is achieved in the whole, whether on the level of the person, a relationship, family, society or the world (Yu Kam Por has taken the personal health as an important analogy for harmony along with that of making music and making soup, see Yu Kam

Por 2000). I see nothing wrong with this kind of holism per se. We need to be cautious, though, when it comes to proper handling of harmony on one level in relation to harmony on another level, for example, social harmony with individual harmony. Confucians try to maintain a delicate balance between the good of the whole on the one hand and giving each its due on the other. In an ideal situation, the flourishing of the whole facilitates individual flourishing, and vice versa. However, there can be inevitable tension between these two. In the kind of harmony I understand, we need to protect individuals in society not only because it is important for individual happiness but also for human flourishing as a whole. Individual rights have to take into consideration of what human persons need for the good life. On the fundamental level, what we need in life is a result of evolution, which has been a process of cosmological harmonization. What we take to be a legitimate right could change if the large context of human existence changes. For instance, as I argued in chapter 8, we usually consider the right to reproduce as an absolute individual right: a person has the right to decide how many children he or she can have. But if the human population exceeds the carrying capacity of the earth, we may well lose such a right. I also caution that after a right is established in a society, it retains relative stability and should not be dismissed lightly as long as the large context does not undergo significant changes (Li 2104: 133). Again, I do not see any way out this continuous process of back and forth equilibrium in determining individual's due and harmony. Harmony is good at least in part because it contributes to individual wellbeing and flourishing; individual's due are important at least in part because they are indispensable to the Confucian kind of social harmony. With that said, I readily admit that, in comparison with liberalism and libertarianism, the Confucian harmony philosophy leans more towards social harmony. I do not think Confucians need to be apologetic about that. If individual rights are absolute as some liberals maintain, we will not be

able to justify many things society as a whole does for the good of society. A philosophy like Confucianism is a conception of the good life. As such, it is a configuration of values (see Li 2008). I do not believe there is a perfect value system which can promote all values without any cost. Confucianism is no exception. Ultimately, it comes to balancing different values that have tension between them. We may disagree on what the best balance is.

Yu Kam Por asks, “Does the Confucian philosophy of harmony approve the act of ‘harmonization’ as in contemporary Chinese politics?” Such a question cannot be answered satisfactorily with a simple “yes” or “no.” Some of the measures adopted by the PRC government under the policy of “harmonization,” such as giving underdeveloped regions more favorable policies for catching up with more developed regions, can be supported from a general view of the Confucian philosophy of harmony, whereas other measures may not be. Furthermore, it is entirely possible for two persons to share the same philosophy yet come to opposing judgments on the same matter. Sometimes, they may perceive reality differently and apply their philosophy in accordance with their perceptions. Even when they perceive reality the same way, they may still disagree on how to apply their share philosophy, particularly on issues that admit of varied degrees of reaction.

Yu Kam Por’s second issue has to do with the relation between harmony and authority. Can harmony coexist with authority? My view is that, on the one hand, harmony can take place without an authority, such as in nature and between friends, and on the other, authority does not necessarily contradict harmony. Can a philosophy class, in which the professor has authority, be taught in a harmonious way? Can a country, where the government has authority, be run harmoniously? I think the answers have to be yes. It depends on what kind of authority and how it is exercised. In social affairs, good authority can facilitate and help bring about harmony. That

is a major reason we need good leadership. The Confucian belief that the universe as whole is largely harmonious does not mean there is no need for human effort, especially when human society is concerned. Human beings can contribute to social harmony by actively coordinate with one another. Yu Kam Por seems to see a close link between “coordination” and authority. In my view, coordination does not have to imply authority. A harmony between friends or between husband and wife probably does not need any authority even though coordination is needed. When we talk about coordination, we often have in mind conscious activities, usually by human beings. Broadly construed, however, coordination does not require consciousness. Symbiotic species can coordinate. Even two plants next to each other negotiate space for growth and they can coordinate. For Confucians, governments definitely have a leading role to play in promoting social harmony. In that sense, yes, an authority can and should contribute to harmony. But that does not imply centralism--if by it is meant an exclusive role in total control of social harmonization—or authoritarianism. Yu Kam Por worries that harmony can be manipulated if there is a party who can direct and dominate the harmonization process. His worry is not unfounded. In fact, today many Confucian thinkers turn away from discussing harmony because they fear being manipulated by authoritarian governments for using it for ulterior purposes. That is indeed unfortunate. It is true that harmony can be manipulated. But is there anything that is immune to manipulation if one party dominates the process? Few would question justice as a good value. But if slave owners dominate, they can defend slavery on the ground of their property right of what they have paid for, which justice commonly implies. As solution, we should clarify what justice really should be, including whether property right implies ownership of other human beings, rather than giving up on the notion of justice or property right altogether. Similarly, we should clarify whether it is real harmony if governments dominate and dictate

everything in society at the expenses of ordinary people, rather than giving up on the notion of harmony altogether. One major reason for us to debate about harmony, I take it, is precisely to clarify, and possibly further develop, the Confucian notion of harmony for contemporary societies.

Yu Kam Por's third objection has to do with the risk of pragmatism. I argue that Confucian harmony incorporates both *jing* and *quan*, both principled ritual propriety and pragmatic maneuvers. Yu Kam Por does not dispute the important of being "contextual and situational" in achieving Confucian harmony. But he rejects the need for "compromise." For him, being "contextual and situational" is about "situational application of rules," which he thinks can be justified, whereas "compromise" is to go beyond what morality allows. He gives the example of a story regarding a minister of the state of *Zheng* in the *Gongyang Zhuan* and states,

The rightness of the action (including breaking a promise solemnly made and usurping the power that rightly belonged to the lord of *Zheng*) was surely contextual but it was not a compromise. His action (breaking promise and usurping power) could be justified fully on moral terms.

Perhaps here we disagree on the meaning and use of "compromise." To me, when someone has to make a big lie and to break a solemnly made promise in order to achieve a good much greater, it is already a kind of compromise, for if she can achieve the same good without making a big lie, she just should not lie at all. Yu Kam Por maintains, "When one looks into the context and situation, one does no more than taking the morally relevant factors into consideration, and no morally irrelevant factors are introduced into the deliberation." In principle, I do not disagree. I guess a lot depends on what counts as "morally relevant" and "morally irrelevant." In the above example of a minister lying and breaking his promise in order to preserve the rightful order in the

state of *Zheng*, his action is justified. Similarly, if today a government has to delay a legitimate project in order to prevent terrorists from blowing up a city, would that end be morally relevant? If yes, as I think it must, would that be another example of justified compromise? In my view, longterm harmony, in the way defined in the book, is highly morally relevant; therefore, compromises can be made on that ground. Philosophers should be realistic about politics. Politics is about managing various interests in society, some of which compete and conflict with one another. It requires compromises. The Confucian philosophy of harmony is no naïve idealism; it has ample resources to offer for its practice in today's world. There is of course a risk in managing political compromises. But then, politics inherently involves risks. Politics without any kind of promise is not possible, whether domestic or international.

Yu Kam Por's last question is on harmony and pluralism. I claim that, for Confucians, harmony is of a supreme value. In comparison with other Confucian supreme values such as *ren* (仁) and *li* (礼), I think harmony is even more important, in part because it is a comprehensive value that extends beyond the human virtues of *ren*, *li* and so forth to penetrate the entire universe. Yu Kam Por asks whether that implies that harmony is a super value that subsumes all other values. He writes, "is harmony a super value itself that can trump over other values?" The relation between various values is a very important question. Confucius said that a person achieves *ren* when he can practice the five virtues of *gong*, *kuan*, *xin*, *min*, *hui* (恭、宽、信、敏、惠). So in a sense we can say that *ren* subsumes these virtues, meaning that being a person of *ren* entails that she practices these virtues. But this does not imply that *ren* will negate the other five virtues. To the contrary, we can equally say that she is *ren* because she possesses these virtues. If we recognize that *ren* is a higher value than the other five, in what sense can we say *ren* "trumps" these other values? Is it even appropriate to raise such a question? Similarly,

harmony is a higher value; in order to achieve harmony, however, other values are needed. For instance, “giving each its due” is a bi-directional value for achieving harmony. Without it, harmony as understood in this book is not possible. In order to achieve social harmony, we need to give adequate room for individual freedom. They are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, they are mutually required. So, on the one hand, harmony is definitely not a super value that subsumes all other values like Plato’s Good, nor does it “trump” or negate other values. On the other hand, harmony does provide a crucial role in achieving Confucian moral and social ideals. The Guodian text *Wuxing* states that the harmony of virtues is the heavenly way (*tian dao* 天道), giving harmony a special status in comparison with other virtues. When the five virtues of *ren, yi, li, zhi, sheng* (仁、义、礼、智、圣) are practiced in harmony, they are realized in the most appropriate, and hence the optimal, way. Unlike some other Confucian virtues and values, harmony is intrinsically relational. It is always harmony of certain things. In this Confucian view, all other values or virtues have to be practiced harmoniously. In that sense, harmony occupies a special status that no other value or virtue does. I understand value pluralism as the thesis that there are a variety of values and that they cannot be reduced into one single value. Value pluralism in this sense, however, does not mean that there can be no requirement regarding how a value should be practiced vis-a-vis other values, even though different philosophies may present different requirements (or prescriptions). Requirements in this regard are relational ones. In the Confucian view, it is a matter of harmony of values. Therefore, recognizing harmony as a supreme value does not contradict value pluralism.

In his generous review of my book (Bell 2015), Daniel A. Bell raises two challenging questions. The first is in regard to methodology. Bell discerns two guidelines in my work. On the one hand, I articulate a Confucian philosophy of harmony by systematizing the insights of early

Confucian texts. On the other hand, I am also guided by the normative concern that “this philosophy can help our world today” (Bell 2015: 167). Bell suggests that these two guidelines may lead to conflicting conclusions. For one thing, my normative reconstructions may lead to conclusions that do not fit the early Confucian worldview. If so, he queries, “why stick to the early Confucian worldview when trying to (re)construct an ethic for our times?” Bell has indeed identified the two main purposes of my book. I readily admit the tension between the two guidelines or courses of endeavor. They are, however, not irreconcilable. On the one hand, Confucianism as an ancient philosophical tradition is embedded with a philosophy of harmony as I have illustrated in the book. We need to do justice to it by articulating clearly what it is. On the other hand, the rich resources that it possesses on the philosophy of harmony can be profitably harvested to benefit our world today. We must draw on these valuable resources in light of our contemporary moral sensibilities. What integrates these two endeavors is that Confucianism is a living tradition. A living tradition is subject to re-interpretations and re-orientation¹. My book is meant to contribute to that purpose. Conversely, failing to connect the two endeavors has bad consequences. First, we may not be truthful to history if we construct a philosophy whose key components are already present in an existing philosophical tradition, i.e., Confucianism in this case. Second, such a philosophy may be without a cultural root. The main challenge one faces in integrating these two endeavors is that some ancient ideas may no longer be adequate or relevant to our contemporary sensibilities. In such situations, we should be honest and straightforward about it. We need to reform pertinent aspects of the tradition and to re-orient it. For instance, Confucian thought developed more than two thousand years ago is no longer adequate in dealing with issues of gender equality in our times. New ideas need to be generated. The endeavor to develop a new version of the Confucian philosophy of harmony answers the need in this regard.

¹ For more discussion of related issues, readers can see Li 2016.

The second issue raised by Bell is about the central importance of harmony in our times. Bell writes, “Li needs to make a more forceful argument on behalf of the priority of harmony if his aim is not just to systematize what early Confucians had to say about it, but also to argue in favor of the claim that harmony should be prized as the most important ideal today.” I differentiate three issues regarding the central importance of Confucian harmony. The first has to do with whether harmony has been the most important ideal or value in traditional Confucianism. The second is whether harmony should be the most important ideal in Confucianism. The third is whether harmony should be the most important ideal for our world beyond Confucianism. In my book, I deliberately avoided making a positive argument about the first question. My claims in the book are that in Confucian philosophy harmony is “a central ideal,” “a social and moral ideal” (Li 2014: 7), “a central concept” (20), “one of the most important concepts” (18), and that “as a comprehensive philosophy, Confucianism is incomplete without harmony among its central concepts” (20). I did not argue for harmony as *the* most important ideal in traditional Confucianism, not because such a move was not tempting, but because I did not (and do not) believe it would be a fruitful move to make. Confucianism has over two thousand years of history, with numerous key figures making various contributions along the way. Like many other philosophies, Confucian philosophy commands a cluster of key concepts. Confucius’ teachings evidently gravitate towards *ren*, whereas Xunzi focuses more on *li*. Justifying one concept such as harmony has been the most important to Confucianism is by no means a straightforward matter. My strategy is to avoid getting bogged down in such difficult yet likely unfruitful debates. I take the stand that “*ren*, ritual propriety, and harmony are all central concepts of Confucian philosophy” (19).² Such a position neither commits one to, nor rules out, the view that harmony is the most important ideal in Confucianism. Taking such a position does not mean, however,

² For more discussion of this matter, see Li 2017.

looking forward today, we cannot argue that harmony should become the most important ideal in Confucianism and moreover, for the entire world. Given the importance of harmony in Confucianism as I have argued in the book, and given its significance in our times, we should advance such an argument. For one thing, most other central concepts such as *ren* and *li*, are primarily about human beings and society. Confucianism as a comprehensive philosophy is more than just ethics or social philosophy. The concept of harmony transcends these dimensions and penetrates the entire realm of philosophy. A strong case can be made that harmony should be the most central concept in Confucianism in the new millennium. Furthermore, one can make an even stronger case that harmony should be the most important ideal for the entire world. Towards that end, much most work awaits.

In conclusion, let me sincerely thank Jiyuan Yu, Yu Kam Por, and Daniel Bell. If I had had this discussion before the completion of the book, there would have been a much improved book. This round of discussion, I believe, will prove fruitful for our further study of the Confucian philosophy of harmony and related subjects.³

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