Confucian Harmony in Dialogue with African Harmony: A Response

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Abstract

Engaging in dialogue with African philosophy, I respond to questions raised by Thaddeus Metz on characteristics of Confucian philosophy in comparison with African philosophy. First, in both Confucian philosophy and African philosophy, harmony/harmonization and self-realization coincide in the process of person-making. Second, Confucians accept that sometimes it is inevitable to sacrifice individual components in order to achieve or maintain harmony at large scales; the point is how to minimize such costs. Third, Confucians give family love a central place in the good life before extend love to the rest of the world. Fourth, the Confucian philosophy of gender equality is based on appropriate division of labor consistent with its *yin-yang* philosophy, rather than equal split of power in the family. Fifth, in the Confucian view, hierarchy and harmony do not necessarily contradict each other, though hierarchy is not essential to all forms of harmony. The two can co-exist.

Keywords

African philosophy, Confucianism, harmony, self-realization, *ren,* family, hierarchy.

It is a great honor to have the learned scholar of African philosophy Thaddeus Metz comment on my book of *The Confucian Philosophy of Harmony* (Routledge, 2014). Metz's careful, thoughtful, and engaging review raises important questions on issues related to harmony from African perspectives. He not only highlights similarities between Confucian philosophy of harmony and African philosophy of harmony, but also their important differences. This kind of comparison is particularly significant for studying philosophy in our globalizing world, where divergent cultural traditions come to close interaction in their

development and renewal. I am extremely excited and grateful to have this opportunity for dialogue with African philosophy. Here I respond to some of the questions Metz has raised in order to clarify related issues and to deepen our inquiries with respect to philosophy of harmony.

Metz's first question is on the relationship between self-realization and harmony. The pertinent expression preferred by Confucians is "self-cultivation" (*xiu shen*) rather than "self-realization." Although these two terms are similar, self-cultivation in comparison seems to emphasize more on the process and day-to-day progressing experience whereas self-realization more on the end outcome or the final goal. For the sake of comparison of African and Confucian perspectives and of simplicity, however, I use "self-realization" in the sense of continuous cultivation towards the goal of full humanity, which I believe is also shared in sub-Saharan African philosophy. Both Confucian philosophy and sub-Saharan African philosophy take self-realization and harmony as fundamental. In traditional African philosophical views, a person's ultimate goal in life is to become a complete person or a genuine human being, to be one with *ubuntu*, which stands for human excellence, and this is to be realized by living harmoniously with others in the community. Confucians see a similar goal to be achieved in the person through moral cultivation in the family and society at large. But, how is harmony *conceptually* related to self-realization? In the Confucian view, the processes of self-realization and personal harmonization coincide. Confucian harmony is best understood as a comprehensive process of harmonization (Li 2014: 31). It is a process in which disharmony is overcome and harmony is realized and renewed. Self-realization is achieved through the two closely related aspects of personal harmonization: intrapersonal harmonization (Li 2014, chapter 6) and interpersonal harmonization (chapters 7 & 8). Therefore, a person's moral growth encompasses a process of self-realization as well as one of harmonization. It would be misleading to ask simply which of the two Confucian concepts is more fundamental. In one sense, harmony is a more fundamental concept because it is a concept of Confucian comprehensive philosophy, penetrating personal ethics, social and political philosophy, natural philosophy, all way to metaphysics, whereas self-realization is primarily an ethical concept. In the meantime, however, self-realization is at the center of Confucian ethics, providing the foundation for the meaning of life, a point which I believe is

shared in African philosophy. In this sense, I agree with Metz 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." To me, this implies that self-realization cannot be achieved without personal harmonization, and personal harmonization necessarily comes with self-realization.

Another important issue is the relation between harmony and the Confucian notion of *ren.* Metz's apt translation of *ren* in terms of "human excellence through beneficence (care, compassion)" is right on the mark. Confucian *ren* is a comprehensive virtue of human excellence, to some extent comparable to *arête* in Aristotle (see Yu 2007). It also overlaps with the African concept of *ubuntu. Ren* signifies the ideally accomplished quality of humanity. This quality of humanity, as expounded by classic Confucian thinkers, is characterized particularly by kindness and human-heartedness. Although *ren* can be achieved only through interpersonal relationships and is often described as an interpersonal quality, it is not exclusively interpersonal because *ren* can be understood as a character concept and, as such, it is intrinsic to the virtuous person (see Li and Ni 2014). In the Confucian view, a person of *ren* is capable of harmonizing within oneself, with others, as well as harmonizing the world.

In connection with *ren*, Metz identifies three interpretations of the effect of a harmonious person. First, living harmoniously implies that others around one actually flourish. Second, harmony creates constructive conditions for the healthy existence of all parties or that in harmony one is to "let each thrive in his or her own way." Metz takes it that these statements "do not imply that health or thriving has actually been achieved." Third, harmony may require sacrificing some individuals for a greater good. Metz finds these three positions incoherent and the third one particularly problematic.

For the first statement, I did say, as Metz quoted, that "When harmony is achieved and maintained, individuals in it thrive" (Li 2014: 15). Here I meant it is usually or mostly the case or it is reasonably expected to be the case. One may say something like, "when their team wins, they are happy; when their team loses, they are sad." This sentence makes good

sense and is true, at least most of times. Now imagine someone contends, "But that is not true! Last week the team won but Jennifer was nevertheless sad because her mother was seriously ill." The contender can be perfectly right. Then, is the contended sentence wrong even though it makes good sense? I suppose, if push comes to shove, we will have to admit that, strictly speaking, the sentence is not entirely true even though it makes good sense under normal circumstances. I believe my remark on harmony and individuals thriving in it, quoted above, is a similar case. Metz writes, correctly, "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." While I still think it makes good sense in its original context, my statement is not fully accurate if we take it at face value. A more accurate way to say what I meant is, "*Under usual circumstances*, when harmony is achieved and maintained, individuals in it thrive." This is analogous to saying, "under usual circumstances, when their team wins, they are happy; when their team loses, they are sad"; or "under usual circumstances, when a person is kind, people around him benefit." Even though awkward and apparently redundant, the qualifier is needed in order to be precise, for, presumably, someone around a person of *ren* may not actually benefit from him, as Metz has correctly pointed out.

The above explanation of the first point relates directly to Metz's second characterization of my view on the relation between harmony and *ren*. Although Metz's second characterization is correct, it is however not adequate. My position does not suggest that after harmonious and constructive conditions for the healthy existence of all parties are established, no one in these conditions is actually affected in a positive way. Unless under exceptional circumstances, once these conditions obtain, individuals in them indeed flourish. In fact, we can argue that a test for whether conditions are harmonious and constructive is precisely to see whether parties in these conditions actually flourish. One can hardly claim that he has created a harmonious and constructive environment yet no one flourishes in it.

While Metz takes the second point to be promising, he finds the third point of my position problematic. He writes,

> 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.

I also believe that we should not kill an innocent person in order to harvest his organs to save other four people. This means that harmony at group level does not always override individual harmony. In fact, it is hard to imagine that a society in which individuals are routinely killed so their organs are harvested to save more people can be a harmonious society. But how does a philosophy of harmony justify cases like sending young individuals to war in defense of a society? In cases like that, society as a group does sacrifice individuals (sending them in harm's way) in order to pursue its long-term harmony. Like justice, harmony can come with a cost. Sometimes, the cost can be rather high. Metz insists, "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." I see too strong a dose of modern Western individualism in such a statement. In my view, when individual harmony and societal harmony come to conflict, we should neither always prioritize individual harmony nor always prioritize societal harmony. It depends on the situation. In the above human organ example, obviously individual harmony should not be sacrificed for the four organ recipients; in the above war case, protection of society receives priority over some of its members. This position, however, should not be characterized in the way Metz has put it, namely, "harmony can mean that others are intentionally *harmed* upon being sacrificed for a greater good." In my view, intentionality is content-specific. I intend my son to have a flu shot. Having a flu shot comes with pain in one of his arms. Do I intend him to be pained when I intend him to get a flu shot? It is misleading to say that my intention is to put him in pain even though what I intend—a flu shot in this case—results in pain in his arm. My intention is for him to get a flu shot rather than to put him in pain. Similarly, when society sends individuals to war in order to protect itself, the intention is not, or at least should not be, to harm or sacrifice these individuals. The intention is rather to minimize harm on them while defeating aggressive enemies so social harmony can be preserved or restored. If would be wonderful if these

individuals could return victoriously safe and sound, but that is rather unlikely in most circumstances. We must be realistic. The issue here, however, is not a matter of intention.

A related issue that Metz raised is a perceived difference between sub-Saharan African peoples and Confucians on sharing a sense of self. Metz observes that sub-Saharan thinkers see harmonizing with other people not only just as a kind of beneficence that Confucians would appreciate, but also as sharing a sense of self or identifying with one another. He writes,

> 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 re-create elsewhere, as is feasible?

The idea of togetherness with fellow human beings is certainly not absent from ancient Confucian thinkers. Mencius, for example, held that one should extend love for one's own parents to parents of other people in general and further even to the myriad things in the world (*Mencius* 7A). Later, Song-Ming Confucian thinkers made this line of thought central to their ethical theory, extending beyond the realm of humanity to include all forms of existence. The Song Confucian thinker Cheng Hao (1032-1085) claimed that "persons of *ren* form one body with the myriad things between heaven and earth" (Chengs 1981: 15); the Ming Confucian thinker Wang Yangming (1472-1529) said the "the great persons form one body with the myriad things between heaven and earth. They see everyone as of one family" (Wang 1992: 968). It is nevertheless true that Confucian thinkers of the classic period did not make prominent such a sense of shared self. Their pre-dominant view is that of love with distinctions: although one should love all, he should love his family first and does so more than he loves others (for a detailed discussion of this view, see Li 1999: 105-8). It may be argued that, on the Confucian conception, there are different kinds of love. Many people would agree that the kind of love between lovers is different from love between, say, teacher and students. Confucians hold that one's love for parents is and should be different from one's love for other people, such as spouse, children, and coworkers. In an important sense, one's love for her own family cannot be extended to strangers in the same way. Therefore, the Confucian shared sense of self is not without constraint. Family-centrality in Confucianism may have prevented Confucians to go extra miles in extending hospitality equally to strangers as sub-Saharan peoples have. Strengthening family relationships has been at the core of

Confucian ethical teachings (for a discussion of related issues, see Li 2008b). This point is directly relevant to sharing resources with strangers. From an African perspective, perhaps it can be argued that classic Confucianism has focused too much on the family when it comes to distributing moral and material resources and that it should move more in the direction led by later Song and Ming thinkers. In such a view, being *ren* indeed would require us to have a strong sense of self that is shared with other beings in the universe. However, we should note that there is a matter of different configurations of values. There are many valuable things worth pursuing in life. Oftentimes, various pursuits compete for energy and resources. We have to configure these pursuits in the order of their perceived importance by prioritizing some over others (for more discussion of issues related to configurations of values, see Li 2008a). When valuing one's family and valuing strangers come into tension and even conflict (though they do not always have to), one cannot prioritize both equally without affecting the extent of valuation. If one loves everyone just as one loves one's family, family would lose its central importance as prized by classic Confucian thinkers.

Citing recent discussion about the relative infrequency in using the phrase "I love you" by Chinese people, Metz writes, "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." I do not think this is true. There is a difference between prizing an emotion, on the one hand, and appropriate ways of expressing it, on the other. In all likelihood, Chinese people, including those heavily influenced by Confucianism, have just as much positive other-regarding emotions as African peoples, or for that matter, as people anywhere in the world. But they may diverge in ways of expressing such emotions. A Chinese story of family love makes the point. Traveling long distance from the city of his employment, a filial son returned to his home village to visit his parents for the Chinese New Year. Due to job obligations, he could stay home for only one night. His parents happily welcomed his home visit, with no hugs, no "I love you," but warm family conversations over a huge feast dinner just for the three of them. During the dinner, the son inadvertently mentioned how he had appreciated the delicious Chinese chives dumplings his mother made for him when he was a little boy. The next morning at breakfast before his departure, to his surprise, he was served with Chinese chives dumplings! It has turned out that, having heard the son's remark about

Chinese chives dumplings, the father went out late night to other villagers for help to get some Chinese chives, which were rare in winter, and the mother made Chinese chives dumplings overnight so their son could have some in the morning before returning to the faraway city! There is just as much love from the Chinese parents in the story as any parent in the world. You just do not hear them pronouncing it in words. The difference at issue is in ways of expression rather than between prizing or not prizing positive other-regarding emotions. This is a cultural difference. I suspect, however, that verbal expressiveness is more of a difference between Chinese and Westerners than one between Chinese and Africans.

Another important issue raised by Metz concerns the relation between harmony and hierarchy. By hierarchy I mean a social institution with individuals at varied ranks attached to differential power of influence. I have argued that, although harmony does not presuppose hierarchy—there can be harmony without hierarchy—harmony does not necessarily exclude hierarchy either. When conditions are appropriate, harmony can be achieved within a hierarchy. The family is an example. In the Confucian family, parents and children are not equal. Parents are accorded with more power and responsibilities than children (until after children grow up and parents get old). Yet, harmony in the family is nevertheless achievable (see Li 2014, chapter 7). In the political arena, it is difficult to conceive that a nation like China can be managed effectively without some kind of hierarchy. The relevant question is rather what kind of hierarchy is compatible with, or in certain circumstances even beneficial to, achieving harmony.

Metz perceives an incongruity between my advocacy of gender equality in the family and my allowing hierarchy in the political realm. He questions whether one can consistently advocate egalitarianism in the family but resist it in the political arena. He writes,

> 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.

In my view, the Confucian *yin-yang* philosophy of the family does not support joint rule if by it is meant that the husband and wife have equal say in *everything* in family affairs. Confucian gender equality, as advocated in the book, does not necessitate equal say of husband and wife in every aspect of family affairs. Gender equality means that division of labor and division of power within the family should not be based on sexual lines, but on competency, interests, and the good of the family. It is not the case that the man, just by virtue of being male, should lead in family affairs, and the woman, just by virtue of being female, should be subordinate. It depends on their abilities, needs, and the good of the family. For example, if one person's income-earning capacity is low but is skilled at and enjoys housework, while the other person is a cardiologist who eschews housework, it may be to the advantage of both persons and their children if their division of labor is arranged accordingly to maximize their family prospect. Such a division of labor does not have to be drawn along sexual lines (Li 2014: 113). But this concept does not imply that both husband and wife have equal say in everything in handling family affairs. If, for example, the wife is super-good at managing family finance whereas the husband has a master-sense for grocery shopping, why shouldn't the husband have more say on family shopping and the wife on family finance? In the event that one of the couple is simply incompetent in all major family affairs decisions, why should he or she be part of joint rule in the family? Sure, they should still consult each other rather than let one be authoritarian. But, then, we should have consultation in meritocracy in the political realm as well. In the Confucian view presented here, equality in the family does not necessitate equal say in every aspect of family affairs, just as political equality in society does not necessitate citizens having equal say on every political decision. Therefore, I indeed embrace the meritocratic principle for the family as well as for the political realm. There is not inconsistency between my position with regard to the family and to society. Real life is of course more complicated than theory. Sometime the line between meritocratic rule and authoritarian rule becomes blurred. Other times the need to preserve the good of the family may require temporarily suspend meritocratic rule in the family. Nevertheless, here we are justifying a model of family management for ideal situations. Individual family situations always vary and cannot be forced into any single model.

Now, if by joint rule in the family Metz means the same as what I advocate here, namely by a division of labor on the basis of merit and interest, should we extend it to the political realm? In principle, the answer is yes. But we should be mindful of the fact that managing a country is on a scale much larger than the family. It is impossible for each individual to make decisions for the entire country on what he or she is good at in political joint rule. Also, if someone is good at political affairs but is not interested in them, it is hard to have her make a career in politics.

The African philosophy of harmony as presented by Metz is apparently less tolerant to hierarchy, as Metz writes,

> 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.

But one must wonder, how would an African philosophy of harmony look when it comes to tackle governance issues in contemporary times? Could it really rule out all kinds of hierarchy? Does democracy allow some kind of hierarchy? Does a democratically elected president possess more power, not to mention more prestige, than his or her ministers and average citizens? It may well be the case that Confucian harmony can accommodate more hierarchy than African harmony. I suspect, however, the difference between them is a matter of degree rather than a qualitative one. After all, can human society maintain itself without any form of hierarchy? Confucians doubt it. Their strategy is to figure out the kinds of hierarchy that are capable of harmonization and to rule out those that are not. In this regard, Confucian thinkers still have a lot of work to do. A question from Confucians to African philosophers would be, is hierarchy inherently detrimental to harmony? If not, what kind or kinds of hierarchy can co-exist or even facilitate harmony?

In closing, let me sincerely thank Thaddeus Metz for bringing me into dialogue with African philosophy of harmony. Both great traditions have developed their own harmony philosophy; they also have much to learn from each other. We need more serious and extensive dialogues between African and Chinese traditions, philosophical and otherwise. I

am deeply honored and genuinely pleased to have an opportunity to participate in this exciting and eventually fruitful process.[1]

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