

XINZHONG YAO

THE WAY OF HARMONY IN THE *FOUR BOOKS*

ABSTRACT

This article is to examine the way of harmony that is initiated in the *Analects* of Confucius, and further elaborated in the other three of the *Four Books*. It will argue that the Confucian harmony is a philosophy defining the relation between the self and the other and among the elements of the unity, that it is a way of living and behaving that leads to modesty and flexibility, and that it is a moral process starting from the self and reaching the Middle Way. It concludes that the way of harmony is not only theoretically important for Confucian philosophy but also practically significant for Chinese culture because it later became central to the doctrinal foundation on which all philosophical schools operated.

This article is to examine the Confucian way of harmony that is initiated in the *Analects*, and further elaborated in the other three of the *Four Books*. The critical questions central to this inquiry are as follows: to what extent can we say a unique philosophy of harmony is constructed in the *Four Books*? How to hermeneutically read from as well as read into the textual passages that are traditionally ascribed to Confucius¹ (551–479 BCE) and to Mencius (372?–289? BCE) and shape a paradigmatic character that embodies the principle of “being harmonious but not identical” (*he er bu tong* 和而不同)? What are the key elements of this philosophy which are central to the Confucian solution for the self-other relation and are applied to a wide range of inter-doctrinal relationship? To answer these questions, we will investigate the meanings and implications of harmony as a human-based philosophy, as a way of living and behaving, and as a consciously moral cultivation process. In the following sections we will argue that the way of harmony in the *Four Books* develops in the dialectic relationship between the self and the other, is illustrated and demonstrated by the “two faces” of Confucius—the modest and the dogmatic—and reaches its ultimate realization in the Middle Way.

XINZHONG YAO, Professor, School of Philosophy, Renmin University of China; Director, Lau China Institute, King's College London. Specialties: ethics, religious studies, comparative philosophy. E-mail: xinzhong.yao@kcl.ac.uk

Journal of Chinese Philosophy 40:2 (June 2013) 252–268

© 2013 *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*

I. HARMONY AS A PHILOSOPHY

Unlike other key concepts in the *Four Books*, the character for harmony (*he* 和) seems unimportant in terms of the frequency of usages. In fact it appears only eight times in the *Analects*, five times in the *Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong* 中庸), three times in the *Mencius*, and none in the *Great Learning* (*Daxue* 大學). Of the eight appearances in the *Analects*, one is used as a verb referring to “joining in the singing”² which signifies the original root meaning of the word.³ However, importance must not be measured merely by quantity and the ideal of harmony is not confined to the character itself. Harmony is explicitly or implicitly taken as the human ideal, not only for personal but also for social and political life. The relevant contexts of the *Four Books* outline a philosophy of harmony that has shaped Chinese culture and exerted a lasting impact on their views on inter-personal as well as inter-doctrinal relations.

The core of this philosophy is to be found in the *Analects* 13: 23.⁴ In this passage Confucius appraises “being harmonious” (*he*) with others while rejecting “being identical” with them (*bu tong* 不同). This philosophy can be read from two perspectives. The first concerns the self and the other: “I” aims at being harmonious with the other but will not relinquish “my” own identity. The second perspective is by employing “*he*” and “*tong*” to recognize the elements of a totality as different and even opposite but at the same time to see them as composing parts, each having its own value and position while interacting with others.⁵ The two perspectives combined inform us of a structuralist meaning: the totality is composed of different parts, and none of these parts should require a total extinction of the self-identity of others; rather true unity is to include all “opposites” in itself and makes “opposites” inclusive. In other words, “inclusive opposites” are the power and energy of the harmonizing process, and through harmonizing, elements are brought into a dialectic relationship in which they contradict and yet mutually supplement each other and are thereby constructed in a new relation to form a new unit with a new character and a new collective identity.

In a personal context, the Confucian understanding of harmony as a productive process is primarily ethical. Confucius makes a gentleman (*junzi* 君子) distinctive from a “small man” (*xiaoren* 小人), the former being harmonious but not identical, while the latter is the contrary. In the words of Chung-ying Cheng, “the *junzi* may disagree with others, and yet he would still treat others with respect and regard for the obtaining of the greater good.”⁶ Here harmony is interpreted as the result of the principled conciliation with others, in which the morally cultivated people seek good benefits from others and at the

same time exert good effect on them, by which a new, interactive and harmonious relationship is established. They are placed in a clear contrast with morally inferior people who always accommodate to others while nothing new has been generated from their accommodating contact with others.

In the Confucian ethico-political world, moral quality is often simultaneously a political ideal and is adopted as a state policy. It is therefore no surprise that harmony that is of such an importance for the personal character is taken as the key to the flourishing of the state. Confucius strongly argues that when being realized, harmony would attract people to the state and would surely bring about flourishing: “where there is even distribution there is no such thing as poverty; where there is harmony there is no such thing as underpopulation.”⁷ To ensure personal and social harmony, Confucius and his followers place a great emphasis on the properly functioning or observing of the rites, and see harmony as the best fruit that the tree of the rites bears: “Of the things brought about by the rites, harmony is the most valuable.”⁸ In a sound conservative context, they see harmony as the most beautiful way of the former kings, which must be followed in all matters, great or small. However, harmony must not be taken as something purely out of one’s own will or motive; it must be regulated by the rites, because only knowing harmony or aiming at it but without the regulations of the rites does not automatically lead to harmony. To be regulated by the rites means to set up limits for one’s word, action, and attitude. In this sense harmony is an activity properly carried out within morally approved boundaries.

The Confucian world is not only ethico-political but also ethico-spiritual, in the sense that moral quality is believed to lead to sageliness.⁹ While Confucius regarded sagehood as something beyond the reach of ordinary people,¹⁰ and did not directly associate “harmony” with the sage (*sheng* 聖), Mencius theoretically universalized sagehood and identified harmony as one of the qualities essential for it. He examined a number of the ancient figures and allocated each of them a unique moral quality that enabled its possessor to be a sage. Standing side by side with other qualities (purity [*qing* 清]; responsibility [*ren* 任]), harmony (*he*) is manifestly represented by Liu Xiaohui 柳下惠 who is therefore regarded as the sage of harmony (*shengzhihe* 聖之和). However, for Mencius, Confucius surpassed all of them and was the sage of the time (*shi* 時), by which Mencius implied that Confucius possessed all these qualities in his person, word, and action, and was the most needed and most effective for the time.¹¹

Harmony is thus not only the sign of personal excellence, but also the completion of political and spiritual perfection. For politicians

human harmony is the key to, and the guarantee of, the success of all social enterprises and political maneuverings. In comparison with harmony between people, other conditions such as natural environment and conditions are all considered secondary.¹² However, Confucian harmony is far more than a technical means for a moral or political end; it is embedded in the Way. The *Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong* 《中庸》) elevates the significance of harmony from the moral field to the metaphysical sphere in which the world is said to be sustained by two powers: centrality and harmony: “Centrality is the great root of the world, and harmony is the pervasive Way of the world.” In this sense centrality is regarded as the foundation of the world order and harmony as the source of productivity in all things and beings.¹³

Like many other concepts used in early Confucian texts, “harmony” starts as a moral quality but is extended to refer to the world order through which it also gains an ontological meaning; or in other words, the moral harmony is the basis of the cosmic harmony in which harmony manifests itself as a dynamic process, a process of organic growth that underlies personal life, social integration, the world’s evolution, and universal productivity. Through analyzing and interpreting what is said about this moral-ontological concept in the *Four Books*, we can observe the following three fundamental characteristics that make the Confucian understanding distinctive from the concept of harmony in other philosophical systems.

First, harmony is rooted in the moral order of the world, and does not rely on external powers for existence and functioning. Nowhere can we find any indication in the *Four Books* that harmony is willed or executed by a spiritual being or beings. It must not be understood as pre-established.¹⁴ Confucian harmony is primarily human harmony or human-centered harmony. Although harmony does have an ontological implication, and later Confucians talk metaphysically about harmony independent of humans or human efforts,¹⁵ the basic idea of harmony in the *Four Books* reveals that natural harmony is to be realized or can become relevant through human harmony, and moral effort is prerequisite for harmony. In other words, harmony must be morally sought after (“*zhi* 致”). Moral effort to realize harmony is defined as consciously following the rites and observing moral codes. The Confucian philosophy of harmony in the *Four Books* therefore fundamentally differs from harmony in other philosophies and religions where God or Nature is said to be the source and reason of harmony.¹⁶

Second, Confucian harmony underlies diversity. For Confucian authors, harmony is not a total identity, and does not exclude opposition; rather it functions through opposites. Harmony is both the

necessary path to, and the final end of, reconciling opposites. Through harmony, opposites have become inclusive; in harmony contradiction is moderated, and many (*duo* 多) are unified into the one (*yi* 一). In other words, harmony includes contradiction and opposition within itself, and the one is at the same time the many. The value of harmony lies exactly in its harmonizing contradictory parts, by which opposites are transformed into mutually dependent elements. Therefore harmonizing is not to eradicate totally the characteristics of any element; “to be harmonious” is not the same as “to be exactly alike.” The key difference here is that “Harmony (*he* 和) results in the production of things, but identity (*t’ung* 同) does not.”¹⁷ Confucian understanding of harmony partakes of an essential principle of Chinese philosophy that the world is by nature “to produce” and “to reproduce.”¹⁸ Anything that leads to stagnancy contradicts the Way, and cannot be part of real harmony.

Third, the productivity of harmony means continuity rather than breaking up. Harmony lies in proportionally reconciling different or opposite elements into a new unit, in which by mixing up with other elements each gains a new position and new function, and all contribute to the new characteristics of the new unit. This process of harmony is analogically illustrated by how a tasty soup is produced: “harmoniously equalizing the several flavors, so as to supply whatever is different and carry off whatever is in excess.”¹⁹ To apply it in history, Confucian harmony comes from “reducing” something from and “adding” something to the past (*sun yi* 損益); used politically, it is evolution, not “revolution.” In terms of doctrinal transmission it is “transmitting” (*shu* 述) rather than “remaking” (*zuo* 作), because “remaking” implies “breaking up from the past” while “transmitting” means “continuing from the past.” As far as composite elements are concerned, they are reformed or transformed, but they are not totally remade.

II. HARMONY AS A WAY OF LIFE

Being philosophical, the way of harmony is also to be found in the practices described in the *Four Books*. In other words, its significance is not confined to conceptual deliberation; more importantly it is embodied by the sayings and attitudes that are ascribed to Confucius and Mencius. These sayings and attitudes form a contextual background against which early Confucians delivered the messages concerning what to be harmonious and not to be identical with, and how to achieve harmony and how to reject blind identity. These messages have generated a Confucian paradigm that sets up the upper limit of

“being harmonious” (flexibility) and the lower limit of “not identical” (against dogmatism) between which “harmony” is sought after. Therefore, to assess the way of harmony we must examine the person, action, and attitude of the two Confucian masters, and in particular how Confucius is portrayed as an ideal character that embodies the way of “harmony but not identity.”

Harmony arises from modesty rather than arrogance. Confucius is distinguished by his modest view about himself and by his conciliatory attitude toward others who do not agree with him. As the fountain-head of the Confucian tradition, Confucius is nevertheless modest about his person, his knowledge, and the possible effect of his teaching. His disciples describe him as the one with the virtues of being “cordial, good, respectful, frugal and deferential.”²⁰ He rejects the claim that he possesses a priori wisdom; instead he insists that he is a keen learner and that his knowledge and abilities are not innately installed by heaven, but are gained through employing right methods, in a variety of working experiences, and from his love of study and teaching.²¹ For Confucius a morally superior person or gentleman (*junzi* 君子) always “stands in awe of the words of the sages,” but Confucius never thinks of himself as a sage: “How dare I claim to be a sage or a benevolent man? Perhaps it might be said of me that I learn without flagging and teach without growing weary.”²²

In the political field harmony comes from moral influence rather than punishing law or military intervention. Confucius was a pacifist adviser. In his rejection of the Legalist harsh policies of punishment and execution, we see a tolerant attitude toward different views and behaviors. For him opposition could be effectively reduced or moderated only through moral influence. When asked by the head of a state what he would think of executing those who did not follow the Way, in order to move closer to those who possessed the Way, Confucius answered, “In administering your government, what need is there for you to kill? Just desire the good yourself and the common people will be good.”²³ In other words, peace and order are desirable, but they must be achieved through peaceful and righteous means. Although Confucius always put the Way of King Wen and King Wu together as the splendid ancient culture, he does show a less favorable attitude toward King Wu than toward King Wen, for King Wu was believed to have come to the throne by militarily conquering the Shang Dynasty.²⁴

Under the influence of this pacifist attitude, all the solutions for conflicts Confucius proposed are concerned, one way or another, with how to make morality and education effective. Should the Way not prevail in the world or in a state, what Confucius would do? He did not shout out or fight against it; rather he chose to exile himself.²⁵

Unlike his rivals who were eager to compete for their own primacy, Confucius rejected competing or contending as the tool to solve problems. For him, it is not necessary for people to compete against each other. If competition is good at all, it must be engaged in a gentle way so that it serves the need to cultivate the good character of the competitors.²⁶

Being moderate and pacific, Confucius naturally sought “peace” rather than “conflict” with other people. However, in so doing he did not simply submit himself to them. Hence another, uncompromising Confucius. When he was told that the most powerful Ji 季 family in the state of Lu used the ceremony that was appropriate only for the king, Confucius was so indignant that he told his students, “If this can be tolerated, what cannot be tolerated?”²⁷ It is recorded in the *Analects* that the wealth of the same family (the Jis) was greater than that of the Duke of Zhou, and yet one of the students of Confucius, Ran Qiu 冉求, helped them add further to that wealth by raking in taxes. Confucius was really angry about what this student was doing: “He is no disciple of mine,” and called all his students to “attack him openly.”²⁸ When extending this uncompromising stance to other teachings, he showed a kind of impatience and even arrogance toward the doctrines of other schools. For example, Confucius rejected any possibility to consult those who took on a different way,²⁹ and showed contempt for those who practiced Daoist ideas and implied that what they did was to associate themselves, not with humans, but with birds and beasts.³⁰

In comparison with the “two faces” of Confucius, Mencius was less moderate and more aggressive, and placed more emphasis on “not identical” than on “harmonious.” Consequently the self-asserting or uncompromising attitude that Confucius occasionally showed toward other people or other teachings becomes regular or common in Mencius. While Confucius confirmed the gap between him and the sage was so huge that he was unable to pass, Mencius closed up this gap significantly, claiming that “The sage and I are of the same kind.”³¹ In order to establish his position as the orthodox transmitter of the Confucian Way, Mencius repeatedly made use of ancient sages to justify his critique of other schools: “Were a sage to rise again, he would surely agree with what I have said.”³² Along with this self-assertion, Mencius developed a kind of dogmatic and exclusive perspective toward non-Confucian teachings.

If we say that Confucius was the initiator of the key ideas and ideals, then Mencius was one of their most effective defenders. He took Confucius as the greatest sage in human history: “Ever since man came into this world, there has never been another Confucius.”³³ He spent all his time in safeguarding Confucian values and spreading the

Way of Confucian sages. Non-Confucian teachings were condemned as heresies or evil doctrines, of which the so-called schools of Yang Zhu 楊朱 (440?–360? BCE) and Mo Di 墨翟 (479?–381? BCE) were singled out as his targets. For Mencius what Yang and Mo advocated was no different from “denying one’s prince and father” and was therefore “not different from beasts,” and must be stopped and banished. He made it plain that he was apprehensive because “If the way of Yang and Mo does not subside and the way of Confucius does not shine forth, the people will be deceived by heresies and the path of morality will be blocked . . . then we show animals the way to devour men, and sooner or later it will come to men devouring men.”³⁴ This concern is underlain by a moral consequentialist argument, similar to that used by Thomas Hobbes nearly two thousand years later.³⁵ It seemed apparent to Mencius that advocating such immoderate ideas and practicing such deviated policies, the human world would be soon in chaos, and human life in danger. This assessment has inevitably prompted a dogmatic attitude, and drawn a clear bottom line that Confucian harmony should never cross.

III. HARMONY AS A MORAL PROCESS

The way of harmony in the *Four Books* is achieved through moral cultivation and ethical practice. Holding a firm belief in the Way and a strong confidence in the blueprint they drew up for the world, Confucian masters demonstrated “two faces” in dealing with inter-personal and inter-philosophical issues. Their modesty and flexibility implied an acknowledgment of diversity and pluralism, while their self-assertion and dogmatism allowing for a certain degree of identity-building through the regulation of rites. In keeping balance of these two aspects, the way of harmony is turned to be a process of ethical practices. This process is composed of three key stages: the self as the starting point, the extending of the self to others as the path, and the Middle Way both as the means to, and the end, of harmony.

1. *Self-Cultivation: The Starting Point*

In seeking “harmony,” Confucius and Mencius started with the important role the self plays in inter-personal relationship. The focus on the moral self is central to their solution of all problems in human relations, either between different persons, between different communities, or between different schools of thought. In other words, the Confucian self lies in the core of Confucian harmony, and fundamentally determines the attitudes Confucians hold toward others.

The self is the moral center in the *Four Books*, not in the sense that the self is endorsed with the ultimate right over others, but because the self is considered both the object that must be worked on, and the subjective agent that bears chief responsibilities for the well-being of an individual, the family, and the world. Working on the self is to cultivate it. *Xiuji* 修己 or *xiushen* 修身 (cultivating the self) is thus the starting point for an ordinary person to reach the ideal. This is why the *Great Learning* categorically demands that “From the Son of Heaven down to the common people, all must regard cultivation of the personal life as the root or foundation.”³⁶ When asked about how to become a morally superior person or gentleman (*junzi*), Confucius listed three kinds of moral endeavor, all of which start with self-cultivation: “He cultivates himself and thereby achieves reverence. . . . He cultivates himself and thereby brings peace and security to his fellow men. . . . He cultivates himself and thereby brings peace and security to the people.”³⁷

With such an importance attached to the self it is natural for Confucius to believe that the cultivated self has a powerful impact or effect on whether any task can be dealt with successfully. In the political arena, Confucius made great efforts to advise rulers to be virtuous themselves through self-cultivation, because this was the only effective way to govern the state peacefully: “If a man is correct in his own person, then there will be obedience without orders being given.”³⁸ In interpersonal relationship, Confucius taught that a person should not be worried if others failed to appreciate his own abilities; rather he must be really concerned about his failure to appreciate theirs.³⁹

Like Confucius, Mencius spent most of his life in persuading the heads of warring states to adopt his politics that is centered on benevolence and righteousness. However, Mencius went further than Confucius in holding the self responsible for any contradiction or conflict that arose between the self and others. For him, an unpleasant situation in personal relationship was surely originated in the lack of cultivation in the self. His prescription for the lack of love by others, for the lack of order in others, and for the lack of courtesy from others is of the same formula: to cultivate one’s own benevolence, one’s own wisdom, and one’s own respect; “In other words, look into yourself whenever you fail to achieve your purpose.”⁴⁰ In this sense, Mencius took the self as the center of the moral world, and took the cultivated self as the foundation of order, peace, and harmony: “The Empire has its basis in the state, the state has its basis in the family, and the family has its basis in oneself.”⁴¹

Mencius expanded the earlier ideas on self-examination (*xingshen* 省身) and self-cultivation (*xiushen*), and introduced the retrospective

self (*fan* 反) as the necessary means in dealing with others. In the same spirit as Confucius propagated the Way and benevolence, Mencius advocated benevolence and righteousness as the standards for human living. He argued that it would be contrary to benevolence if one blamed others for the lack of benevolence in the world. Like Confucius, he took archery as an analogy: "Benevolence is like archery: an archer makes sure his stance is correct before letting fly the arrow, and if he fails to hit the mark, he does not hold it against his victor. He simply seeks the cause within himself."⁴² The emphasis on retrospection is one of the key points in formalizing the Confucian understanding of a harmonious relationship where self-retrospection is not only taken as the way to benevolence but also as the first step in dealing with other people and other doctrines.

2. *From the Self to Others: The Path*

Had Confucius and Mencius merely stressed the importance of self-reflection and self-retrospection, then what they were targeting could not be the way of harmony. The virtuous self is the starting point, and has to be extended to others in order to form a harmonious relation with them. Therefore in seeking harmony with other people, the next important step is to extend the cultivated and responsible self. Extending (*tui* 推) of one's virtue to the other side of a relation is not merely a tool to enable a mutually beneficial inter-personal relationship, but is also crucial for Confucians to construct a harmonious world.

For Confucius, the ability to take oneself as analogy for the other is the method of realizing benevolence, by which one would know from one's own desire what the other would desire. This analogy is crucial for a morally interactive relationship. To further this analogy, Confucius works on two fronts. On the one hand he emphasizes that one must not force one's own will upon others: "Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire."⁴³ On the other hand, he calls people to promote the interests of others as a way to build up a strongly mutual beneficial relation: "what he [a gentleman] wishes to achieve for himself, he helps others to achieve; what he wishes to obtain for himself, he enables others to obtain."⁴⁴ These two sides together are known as the Confucian "Golden Rule," a rule that is both necessary and effective in leading us to virtue, prosperity and harmony.

In deliberating on "extending," Mencius employs family relations as an analogy. The key point for successfully dealing with all sorts of relations is that one extends what one would naturally do to one's own family members to those of other families. In the words of

Mencius, if all the people treat the aged in their own families rightly and extend this treatment to the aged of other families, and if they treat the young in own families rightly and extend it to the young of other families, then the whole world would be in peace; and if the ruler could do this, then he would be able to manage his state easily.⁴⁵ This moral optimism comes from his belief that all human beings are of the same kind, with the same goodness in the heart/mind (*xi* 心) which when probably cultivated enables any person to understand the universal nature of human beings, to comprehend the way of heaven, and to be able to serve heaven.⁴⁶ Therefore, not only in dealing with personal relations but also in governing the whole empire, all one should do is no more than “extending” or “applying”: “all you have to do is take this very heart here and apply it to what is over there.”⁴⁷

What Mencius proposes is to establish a “naturalistic moral system” in which all the people extend their virtues to others, and benefits and responsibilities are shared by all more or less equally. The reasoning for “extending” as an effective path to social harmony is validated by two principles for which Mencius powerfully argued: one is the universal human nature that is defined as innately good, and the other is the intrinsic value of the human family in which members care for each other naturally. The former has established the ground on which conflict between individuals could eventually be solved by bringing out the goodness hidden in the heart-mind, while the latter has paved the path to caring for others and tolerating differences.⁴⁸

However, there is a limit to which harmony can be achieved. This is the time when the other side of the Confucian perspective, “not identical,” has become eminent. The *Doctrine of the Mean* provides a more personal version of the Confucian perspective: the strength of a gentleman lies in his maintaining harmony (*he*) but refusing to be adapting or wavering (*liu* 流).⁴⁹ Confucius separated people into different kinds and admitted that not with all of them can we establish a harmonious relation through self-cultivation alone: with some of them one can study together but not pursue the Way together; with some of them one can pursue the Way together but cannot take the stand together; with some of them one can take the stand together but cannot make a decision together.⁵⁰

From a moral realistic perspective, Mencius also realizes that there are different levels of human moral consciousness and different levels of conscious efforts in pursuing the Way. Although all humans are born with a good heart and with the beginnings of a good nature, not all of us are able or are willing to fully cultivate it. Some of us might have totally lost the good heart even without knowing about this. On the one hand Mencius is optimistic about the effect of self-cultivation on interpersonal relationship; on the other hand he is realistic in

admitting that there are people with whom one is unable to reason with. According to him, if we love and respect other people, they would also love and respect us. If they do not, then we must look into our own selves and find reasons in the lack of benevolence and courtesy. However, there are occasions when somebody treated us badly even though we have done everything we can and there is no lack of benevolence and courtesy within and without. If so, then the gentleman would simply say that “This man does not know what he is doing. Such a person is no different from an animal. One cannot expect an animal to know any better.”⁵¹

When the nature of a personal relationship has turned to be that between the human and the animal, Mencius offers no further advice but simply let it go. The moral separation between animals and humans is clearly made by Mencius who argues that what makes humans distinctive is their moral virtue and conscience which do not exist in an animal. However, human distinctiveness is not automatic; it relies on the cultivation humans consciously engage in. Once a human gives up self-cultivation he would not be too far away from an animal: “Slight is the difference between man and the brutes. The common man loses this distinguishing feature, while the gentleman retains it.”⁵² Those who do not engage in self-cultivation are therefore likened to be the people who do violence to themselves or throw themselves away. Those who deny Confucian virtues and refuse to follow the rites in their speech and writing are such people, with whom, Mencius suggests, we can do little to engage meaningful dialogue: “It is not worth the trouble to talk to a man who has no respect for himself, and it is not worth the trouble to make a common effort with a man who has no confidence.”⁵³

3. *The Middle Way: The Means and the End*

There is potentially a conflict between “seeking harmony” and “being not identical,” the former requiring flexibility while the latter self-assertion. Therefore, the way of harmony calls for a proper method or criterion to balance these two aspects and molds them into the Middle Way. While Confucius and Mencius were impatient with other teachings that were believed to have blocked the Way, they also demonstrated a kind of flexibility in judging different ideas and behaviors. Confucius rejected the arbitrary judging of right and wrong by stubbornly sticking to one view and refused to be inflexible. He was known for his undogmatic flexibility, completely free from four things: arbitrariness of opinion, dogmatism, inflexibility, and egoism.⁵⁴ He took a negative view toward inflexibility (*gu* 固), and believed that through engaging the study of classics one would be “unlikely to be

inflexible (*bugu* 不固).⁵⁵ Influenced by such an attitude, Confucius judged things or behavior not by a fixed yardstick but by its appropriateness to specific circumstances. For a morally mature person, nothing was what he must oppose and nothing was what he must adopt; he chose the right to follow because, and only because, it was right: “In his dealing with the world the gentleman (*junzi*) is not inevitably for or against anything. He follows whatever is right (*yi* 義).”⁵⁶

Mencius further expanded this idea and developed a flexible attitude in making moral judgments by promoting the tool of “*quan* 權.” *Quan* originally means “to weigh,”⁵⁷ and when extended, means “discretion,” “being flexible,” or “making a decision appropriate to the circumstances.” The *Book of Mencius* provides us with an excellent example about how Mencius employed this tool to deny the stubbornly fixed attitude. According to the rites of that time, man and woman were forbidden to touch each other, and as the defender of the tradition, Mencius insisted on this code of conduct, too. Somebody therefore ridiculed Mencius, pushing this to an extreme case and asking, “When one’s sister-in-law is drowning, must one not stretch out a hand to save her?” At what was implied behind the query Mencius was indignant, stressing that “Not to help a sister-in-law who is drowning is to be a brute. It is prescribed by the rites that, in giving and receiving, man and woman should not touch each other, but in stretching out a helping hand to the drowning sister-in-law, one uses one’s discretion [*quan*].”⁵⁸

What the Confucian flexibility achieves is the Middle Way or the Mean (*zhongyong* 中庸, *zhongdao* 中道). *Zhong* 中, the middle of the space, is a relative measure that can be applied to judgment, and is in opposition to the two extremes that go to the two sides. In the *Analects* we read a quotation from the *Book of History* (*Shu* 《書》) pointing out that legendary Emperor Yao 堯 taught his successor, Shun 舜, to hold to the “Middle” because this was the only path to fulfill his responsibility to heaven.⁵⁹ Confucius regarded the *zhongyong* as the ultimate virtue, and deplored that it had not been practiced for a long time: “Supreme indeed is the Mean as a moral virtue. It has been rare among the common people for quite a long time.”⁶⁰ The Middle Way thinking later penetrated all schools of thought in China and played an important part in forming philosophical pluralism, allowing doctrinal diversity. Each teaching was judged not only by its theoretic depth and extensiveness, but also by whether or not it held to the middle ground while shunning extremism.

By definition the Middle Way is opposed to extremism, and is therefore in agreement with flexibility by which the good or bad of a thing is judged in accordance to its appropriateness. This is the criterion employed by Mencius in his criticism of the three “extreme

doctrines” respectively advocated by Yang Zhu, Mo Di, and Zi Mo 子墨. For Mencius the wrongness of Yang Zhu and Mo Di was not in their promoting different theories, but in their holding to one extreme. Another target in this criticism, Zi Mo, was said to choose the middle between the two extremes. However, for Mencius, what Zi Mo chose was the “absolute middle,” without proper measure (to the specific situation), and was therefore not different from holding to one extreme. Mencius concludes that “The reason for disliking those who hold to one extreme is that they cripple the Way. One thing is singled out to the neglect of a hundred others.”⁶¹

IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Harmony is an essential part of the Confucian tradition, and carries with it both conceptual and practical significance for philosophy, religion, ethics, and politics. Based on self-cultivation and extended in the self-other relations, the way of harmony as elaborated in the *Four Books* becomes the center of Confucian teaching and practice. Through more than two thousand years’ indoctrination and propaganda, it has penetrated all aspects of Chinese living, thinking, and acting and has been taken as the guideline for the Chinese in dealing with inter-personal, inter-doctrinal, and inter-state relations. It promotes the culture of reconciliation while moderating extremism and dogmatism. In practical terms, the way of harmony is often applied in prescribing what is right and what is wrong, how others should be treated, and how this attitude can be extended to different philosophical and religious doctrines. How much one must be harmonious and to what degree one should not be identical with others are to be measured not by a pre-determined principle or a fixed yardstick, but by their appropriateness, appropriate to the then environment, to the condition and to the consequence. In this sense, the way of harmony overlaps the Middle Way; in other words, it points to the Middle Way in which a proper balance between diversity and unity is achieved and through which new dynamic relations of “inclusive opposites” are generated.

RENMIN UNIVERSITY OF CHINA
Beijing, China
KING’S COLLEGE LONDON
London, United Kingdom

ENDNOTES

This article was presented at the International Symposium on the *Four Books* (*Sishu Guoji Yantaohui* 四書國際研討會) held at Renmin University, Beijing, April 28–29, 2012, under the auspices of the *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* and the School of Classical

Chinese Learning of Renmin University of China. The author wishes to thank Professor Chung-ying Cheng and Professor Liang Tao 梁濤 for their invitation and for the discussion of the article by the conference participants, and to thank Dr. Shirley Chan, the organizer of this special issue, as well as anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

1. When using “Confucius” in this article I mean the embodiment of the collective sayings as recorded in the extant versions of the *Analects*, as well as in the passages of other early texts that are traditionally attributed to him.
2. *Analects*, 7: 32.
3. *He* 和 “*xiang ying ye* 相應也。” (“the mutual responsiveness [of sounds].”) Xu Shen 徐慎, *Shuowenjiezi* 《說文解字》, in Zang Kehe 臧可和 and Wang Ping 王平: *Shuowenjiezi xin ding* 《說文解字新訂》 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2002), 78. For a comprehensive study of *he* in early texts, see Chengyang Li, “The Confucian Ideal of Harmony,” *Philosophy East and West* 56, no. 4 (2006): 583–603.
4. *Lunyu* 《論語》, 13: 23. For a different translation, see Wm. Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, eds., *Sources of Chinese Tradition: From Earliest to 1600*, 2nd ed., Vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 57.
5. Chung-ying Cheng argues that “harmony is absence of conflict, but not absence of difference, whereas identity is not only absence of strife and conflict but absence of difference.” Chung-ying Cheng, “On Harmony as Transformation: Paradigms from the *Yijing* 《易經》,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 36, no. 1 (2009): 15.
6. *Ibid.*, 17.
7. *Lunyu*, 16: 1, in D. C. Lau, trans., *Confucius—The Analects* (London: Penguin, 1979), 139. Unless otherwise stated, all quotations from the *Analects of Confucius* in this article are derived or adapted from this translation.
8. *Lunyu*, 1: 12, in *ibid.*, 61.
9. The sage or sageliness is understood in Confucius differently from that in later Confucian texts. For Confucius, the sage is more than a virtuous exemplar; the sage had both the position and the ability (*neng*) to transform the world. However, after Confucius the sage image was greatly colored by his virtues and words; by the way he did things, rather than the things he completed. For the image of the sage in early texts, see Ning Chen, “The Etymology of Sheng (Sage) and Its Confucian Conception in Early China,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 27, no. 4 (2000): 409–27.
10. “The Master said, ‘I have no hope of meeting a sage. I would be content if I met someone who is a gentleman.’” Lau, *Confucius—The Analects*, 89.
11. *Mengzi* 《孟子》, 5B: 1. See D. C. Lau, trans., *Mencius* (London: Penguin, 1970), 150, with modifications.
12. “Heaven’s favourable weather is less important than Earth’s advantageous terrain, and Earth’s advantageous terrain is less important than human unity [*ren he* 人和].” *Mencius*, 2B: 1, in *ibid.*, 85.
13. de Bary and Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Traditions*, 334.
14. It has been recognized that Leibniz absorbed useful elements from Neo-Confucian philosophy. The question, then, for Needham, is not whether Chinese thought influenced Leibniz, but how much it did; his conclusion, though qualified, is that Leibniz “derived a great deal more than simply a conviction of [his system’s] congruency with Chinese philosophy.” Needham reckoned that “The hierarchy of monads and their ‘pre-established harmony’ resembled the innumerable individual manifestations of the Neo-Confucian *Li* in every pattern and organism. Each monad mirrored the universe like the nodes in Indra’s net” (quoted in Daniel J. Cook and Henry Rosemont Jr., “The Pre-Established Harmony between Leibniz and Chinese Thought,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 42, no. 2 [1981]: 255). We must add here that if it was true that the Chinese understanding of harmony influenced Leibniz’s theory of pre-established harmony, this influence came from Neo-Confucianism, not directly from the *Four Books*.
15. For example, we read in the *Xunzi* 荀子 that “the Yin and Yang enlarge and transform; and the wind and rain spread out everywhere. Each of the myriad things must be in a harmonious relation with Nature in order to grow, and each must obtain from Nature the proper nurture in order to become complete.” *Xunzi*, trans. John

- Knoblock (Changsha: Hunan Renmin Chubanshe; Beijing: Waiwen Chubanshe, 1999), 535.
16. “[S]ince all the clocks keep time with each other without any casual interaction, there must have been a single outside Cause that regulated all of them.” Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1961), 569.
 17. Yu-lan Fung, *A History of Chinese Philosophy, Vol. I: The Period of the Philosophers (From the Beginning to circa 100 B.C.)*, trans. Derk Bodde (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), 34. Although this saying is recorded in the *Guoyu* or the *Sayings of the States*, under a section referring to Duke Huan of Zheng (806–771 BCE), it resembles what Confucius said and can be safely taken as an illustration of how Confucian harmony works.
 18. de Bary and Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Traditions*, 322.
 19. *Ibid.*, 36.
 20. *Lunyu*, 1: 10, in Lau, *Confucius—The Analects*, 60.
 21. *Lunyu*, 7: 20, 9: 8, 9: 6, 7: 2, in *ibid.*, 979, 88, 97, 97, 86.
 22. *Lunyu*, 16: 8, 7: 34, in *ibid.*, 140, 90.
 23. *Lunyu*, 12: 19, in *ibid.*, 115.
 24. *Lunyu*, 19: 22, 3: 25, in *ibid.*, 156, 71.
 25. “If the Way should fail to prevail, I were to put to sea on a raft.” *Lunyu*, 5: 7, in *ibid.*, 76.
 26. *Lunyu*, 3: 7, in *ibid.*, 68.
 27. *Lunyu*, 3: 1, in *ibid.*, 67.
 28. *Lunyu*, 11: 17, in *ibid.*, 108.
 29. *Lunyu*, 15: 40, in *ibid.*, 40.
 30. *Lunyu*, 18: 6, in *ibid.*, 150.
 31. *Mengzi*, 6A: 7, in Lau, *Mencius*, 164. What Mencius wants to say here is clearly about the universality of sagehood—all humans have the potential to be a sage. However, by using “I,” the sentence also implies the self-confidence of Mencius. When compared with Confucius who dared not to claim anything close to the sage, Mencius puts himself in the same category of the sages which strengthens his position in fighting against his rivals.
 32. *Mengzi*, 2A: 2, 3B: 9, in *ibid.*, 78, 115.
 33. *Mengzi*, 2A: 2, in *ibid.*, 79.
 34. *Mengzi*, 3B: 9, in *ibid.*, 114. Also see *Mengzi*, 2A: 2, in *ibid.*, 78.
 35. The “state of nature” is “a war of all against all” which makes human life “nasty, brutish, and short.” Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, 535.
 36. Wing-tsit Chan, trans. and comp., *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 87.
 37. *Lunyu*, 14: 42, in Lau, *Confucius—The Analects*, 131. One of Confucius’s disciples, Zengzi, claimed to examine himself three times a day: “When dealing on behalf of others, have I been trustworthy? In intercourse with my friends, have I been faithful? Have I practiced what I was taught?” *Lunyu*, 1: 4, in *The Analects of Confucius*, trans. Simon Leys (New York: Norton, 1997), 3–4.
 38. *Lunyu*, 13: 6, in Lau, *Confucius—The Analects*, 119.
 39. *Lunyu*, 1: 16, in *ibid.*, 62.
 40. *Mengzi*, 4A: 4, in Lau, *Mencius*, 119.
 41. *Mengzi*, 4A: 5, in de Bary and Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Traditions*, 138.
 42. *Mengzi*, 2A: 7, in Lau, *Mencius*, 83.
 43. *Lunyu*, 12: 2, in Lau, *Confucius—The Analects*, 112.
 44. *Lunyu*, 6: 30, in Leys, *The Analects of Confucius*, 28.
 45. *Mengzi*, 1A: 7, in Lau, *Mencius*, 56.
 46. *Mengzi*, 7A: 1, in *ibid.*, 182.
 47. *Mengzi*, 1A: 7, in *ibid.*, 12.
 48. This family perspective was later employed as a tool against dogmatism, which culminated in Neo-Confucian master Zhang Zai’s vision of a universal family in which all existences and beings are locked in family bonds: “Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother. . . . Therefore that which extends throughout the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe as my nature. All people are my brothers

- and sisters, and all things are my companions.” Zhang Zai, *Xi Ming* 《西銘》 (The Western Inscription). See de Bary and Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Traditions*, 683.
49. *Zhongyong*, 10, in “The superior man maintains harmony [in his nature and conduct] and does not waver,” in Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*, 100.
 50. “A man good enough as a partner in one’s studies need not be good as a partner in the pursuit of the Way; a man good enough as a partner in the pursuit of the Way need not be good enough as a partner in a common stand; a man good enough as a partner in a common stand need not be good enough as a partner in the exercise of moral discretion” (*Lunyu*, 9: 30, in Lau, *Confucius—The Analects*, 100). The importance of this saying for enabling inter-religious dialogue can be seen from the fact that nearly a thousand years later, it was quoted by Buddhists to justify their preaching of different teachings. John P. Keenan, *How Master Mou Removes Our Doubts: A Reader-response Study and Translation of the Mou-tzu Li-huolun* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), 84.
 51. *Mengzi*, 4B: 28, in Lau, *Mencius*, 134.
 52. *Mengzi*, 4B: 19, in *ibid.*, 131.
 53. *Mengzi*, 4A: 10, in *ibid.*, 122.
 54. *Lunyu*, 9: 4, in Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*, 35.
 55. *Lunyu*, 14: 32, 1: 8, in Lau, *Confucius—The Analects*, 60, 129.
 56. *Lunyu*, 4: 10, in *ibid.*, 73, with modifications.
 57. As we can see from *Mencius*, “It is by weighing a thing that its weight can be known and by measuring it that its length can be ascertained” (1A: 7, in Lau, *Mencius*, 57).
 58. *Mengzi*, 4A: 17, in *ibid.*, 124.
 59. *Lunyu*, 20: 1, in Lau, *Confucius—The Analects*, 158.
 60. *Lunyu*, 6: 29, in *ibid.*, 85.
 61. *Mengzi*, 7A: 26, in Lau, *Mencius*, 187–8.