The Daoist Notion of Harmony

Throughout world history, the constant alternation of war and peace has shaped human life. Despite humankind’s shared longing for peace, the fires of war continue to burn. The view of Heraclitus is representative of a Western philosophical perspective on strife and harmony, where “opposites combine into one and different tones produce a most beautiful harmony; everything is generated from strife” (Fragment B 8). Heraclitus acknowledged the unity of difference and examined the conflict between opposites. According to Heraclitus, opposite powers create harmony, but more importantly “war is common” (Fragment B 80), “all things are produced by strife and necessity” (Fragment B 80), and “war is father of all” (Fragment B 53). In comparison, Laozi, the father of Chinese philosophy, looked at the world’s strife from a different perspective. While he was well aware of the permanent opposition and conflict between things, he focused much more on the interdependencies in their relation: “The ten thousand things: Carrying Yin, embracing Yang—blending Qi to create harmony” (Chapter 42). All things emerge out of harmony; and thus harmony is the most basic principle and constitutes the most general rule in the world and for human life.

At the beginning of his book New Hopes for a Changing World, Bertrand Russell remarks that humankind faces three kinds of conflict: the conflict between humans and nature, the conflict between humans and other humans, and the conflict humans experience within themselves. Daoists also recognized the conflicts involved in each of these relations, but focused more on their harmonious aspects. In the words of Zhuangzi, the three kinds of harmony characterizing these three relations are natural harmony (tian he 天和), human harmony (ren he 人和), and the harmony of the heart-mind (xin he 心和). The dimension of harmony between humankind and nature found in the Zhuangzi is the most refined formulation reached in a Chinese philosophy of life. At this level, human harmony and the harmony of the heart-mind necessarily achieve their fullest degree of mutual integration.

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1 London: George Allen & Unwin, 1951.
The era of disputes between the various philosophical schools in Pre-Qin times is the richest period in the history of Chinese philosophy. Notwithstanding their different views, all of the various philosophers strongly promoted harmony. Given the dissimilarities in their thinking, however, their perspectives and approaches toward the goal of establishing and preserving harmony were not the same. Confucians discussed harmony within the framework of the norms of ritual propriety; Mohists addressed harmony when attempting to advance a cooperative spirit of “encompassing affection” (jian ai 兼愛); and for the Legalists, harmony was mainly a matter of enforcing compliance with laws and regulations. Philosophically, the Confucians, Mohists, and Legalists were all concerned with answering the socio-political question of how to achieve harmonious coexistence among people; in other words, they all focused on harmony in terms of human harmony. The Daoists, however, were not only concerned with this type of harmony, but with natural harmony in its broader sense. For them, human harmony was to be derived from natural harmony, just as social order was to be derived from natural order, and therefore the former types of harmony and order were essentially founded on the latter.

Human harmony was not merely a socio-political issue for the Daoists; they rather embedded it within a philosophy of nature and prescriptions for the spiritual life of the individual. Thus, in Daoism the three kinds of harmony (natural harmony, human harmony, and the harmony of the heart-mind) constitute a primary field of philosophical inquiry in their own right.

Harmony and the Philosophical Schools of Ancient China

As we saw in Chapter 1, the Pre-Qin philosophers lived through a period of extreme political turmoil and social conflict. Consequently, the quest for harmony was of paramount concern for them, and their legacy provides us with a heritage of rich experience and subtle reflection on this issue. The topic of human harmony reminds us of Confucius’ proclamation that “harmony is (the) most valuable function of observing ritual propriety” (he wei gui 和為貴) and represents a basic principle for resolving conflict. The actual context of the maxim as it is found in the Lunyu (論語 Analects):

Master You said: “Achieving harmony is the most valuable function of observing ritual propriety. In the ways of the Former Kings, this achievement of harmony made them elegant, and was a guiding standard in all things large and small. But when things are not going well, to realize