

PHILOSOPHY AS A WAY OF LIFE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE CONFUCIAN NOTION OF HARMONY, HÉ (和)

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ABSTRACT: Confucian philosophy has recently attracted growing interest from academics, because this model of thought can make valuable contributions to the articulation of our present world. Nevertheless, most of this research has described Confucius as a moral philosopher and has addressed the potential of this tradition exclusively from a distinctively ethical approach. The aim of this article is to show that Confucius' thought is a philosophy of life that can offer a valuable contribution to human culture. That is, Confucius does not present his thought as a potted ideology or a static doctrine, but above all as an "art of living". In order to reconstruct the complexity of this philosophy, these pages analyze the notion of harmony (*hé*) from a comparative approach that blends Confucius' thought and Dewey's philosophy. Both of these traditions emphasize the importance of cultivating a harmonious and creative relationship with one's surroundings, and the dialogue can offer benefits to present-day reflection.

Keywords: harmony, aesthetic experience, balance, creativity

Introduction

In his famous essay *Confucian Ethics of the Axial Age: A Reconstruction Under the Aspect of the Breakthrough Toward Postconventional Thinking*, Heiner Roetz criticizes how pragmatic approaches to China's classical philosophy have failed to overcome a general normative criterion. What is more, according to Roetz, this "devotedness to context and tradition, regardless of what the intentions of the various authors may be, is conspicuously blind to the experiences of history" (1993, 3). He believes that this contextualist approach, developed by authors such as Roger Ames and David Hall, cannot do justice to Confucian thought and offers a mistaken image of this tradition.

Nevertheless, we can find the first comparison between pragmatism and Confucianism in Chinese territory a century ago. On John Dewey's sixtieth birthday, during the banquet, the Chancellor of Beijing University, Cai Yuanpei, portrayed Dewey as a modern-day Confucius. He highlighted how both authors were educators of the common people and insisted on the unity of thought

and action. As Jessica Wang has remarked (2007, 14–15), this description is "risky", and Dewey did not enjoy the honorary appellation of "the Second Confucius". However, this event shows that putting Dewey and Confucius into dialogue is not a naïve endeavor.

More recently, American philosophers have not been the only scholars who have attempted to relate Deweyan pragmatism to Chinese Confucianism. Sor-hoon Tan (2004, 2007, 2012), for example, through a detailed study of relevant concepts and theories in Confucianism and Dewey's pragmatism, proposes the possibility of Confucian democracy as an alternative to Western liberal models. May Sim (2009) has presented Dewey's and Confucius' views regarding moral education as being due to the importance of self-development and social relations.

Nowadays, we find a fruitful dialogue between Confucianism and Deweyan pragmatism taking place in an intercultural context. For instance, the recent anthology, *Confucianism and Deweyan Pragmatism*, edited by Roger Ames, Chen Yajun and Peter D. Hershock (2021), aims to promote new ethical approaches that blend these two traditions. However, as Heiner Roetz has pointed out (1993), we cannot see Confucius as a moral philosopher who has the recipes to improve our present world. Such approaches anticipate a kind of "Confucian democracy", which I take to devalue the richness of his thought.

By contrast, these pages employ a pragmatic approach to analyzing Confucius' thought as a philosophy of life. My view is based on those previous studies of comparative philosophy that have asserted that pragmatism seems to share with Confucius a central philosophical concern with "the way". In contrast to Western philosophy, which has speculated about "What is the truth?" "What kind of things are there?" and "What is this?", pragmatism and Chinese wisdom ask "how" questions (Hall and Ames 1998, 103-104). That is, they inquire into how to live meaningfully in one's world. They do not seek universal principles or theories, but rather a way of acting that promotes a harmonious existence.

This paper relates Confucius' thought and Dewey's philosophy, through the analysis of the Confucian term of harmony, *hé* (和), and the Deweyan notion of aesthetic experience. The goal of this comparison is to provide a new approach to the field of comparative philosophy, and particularly to the philosophy of Confucius' *Analects*. First, I consider the resonances between Dewey's *emergentism* and what Roger Ames and David Hall call the Confucian ontology of events (1987, 5). Secondly, I define the Confucian concept of harmony and the Deweyan notion of aesthetic experience. Then I establish a comparison between these two notions, showing how Deweyan pragmatism facilitates a more effective understanding of Confucian thought.

A Contextualist Philosophy: The Confucian Ontology of Events and Dewey's Emergentism

To begin, I would like to introduce a common background of Dewey's and Confucius philosophy. Both authors seem to share the central philosophical concern about "What is the way?" In other words, they do not seek universal principles or theories, but rather the way of acting that promotes harmonious existence. According to Confucius and Dewey, we live in an immanent world, which does not have an established order, but needs to be constantly achieved by creating new modes of interaction. That is, they do not employ transcendent modes of thought to explain the universe, but categories and principles that are created by human beings.

Thus, these distinct approaches, Ames and Hall explain, have resulted in two different understandings of order (1987, 16; 1998, 111). Western philosophy seeks a logical or rational order, which may be realized by imposing principles derived from transcendental laws, categories, impositions or substances. Confucius' thought, on the other hand, presents an aesthetic order that can be achieved by creating new patterns. Thus, aesthetic order involves a contribution to a given context and is concerned about the activities of specific people in particular situations.

Confucius does not develop a philosophy of qualities, attributes or characteristics, but rather "an explication of the activities of specific people in particular contexts" (Hall and Ames 1987, 15). In this sense, Confucian philosophy can be denominated a contextualistic philosophy. This point has been harshly criticized by Roetz, who believes that Confucian philosophy does not leave the final say to the "ontology of events". Roetz rightly argues that Confucius philosophy cannot be understood following our innate standards of laws or morality. By contrast, he maintains that the Golden Rule of the *Lunyu* no longer pertains to traditional thinking, but rather paves the way for a timeless paradigm related to general human needs and aspirations (1993, 193).

Roetz defends Chinese axial age ethics as the ethics of an epoch of enlightenment. Confucianism is an awareness of the problems of the epoch to which an answer had to be found. According to him, "the challenge faced by the Zhou philosophers which stirred up philosophical thought as a systematical questioning in the first place is the crisis of the established conventional morality" (1993, 43).

Thus, he points out that Confucianism is a moral system which offers deliberations that can be re-appropriated by any human being who is ready to learn. Nevertheless, this approach focuses on the ethical philosophy for a particular crisis, and it seems to forget the human quality of creativity. This is especially relevant if we consider the question that Roetz sets out in his essay: "Was Confucius any better than a mere authority for a system which secured harmony at the expense of freedom?" (1993, 9). In order to offer an answer to this question, I will introduce some parallels between the philosophy of Dewey and Confucius, as a means of enriching our understanding from an aesthetic perspective.

Although Roetz criticizes contextualism, this approach can help us to understand Confucius' philosophy as an art of living. But what is contextualism? In his fruitful dialogue between East and West, Lewis E. Hahn introduces the term "contextualism" to explain a philosophy of change: a kind of pragmatic naturalism that is espoused in varying ways and degrees by C. S. Peirce and Dewey, among others. Hahn explains how, according to contextualists, the single most distinctive mark of the real is change; and, in the same way, the *Analects* makes clear that change is great and comprehensive of all. As Thomé Fang has pointed out, "to respond to change the Confucian sage must exalt his life of virtue and widen his field of accomplishment, for the perpetual continuance of fulfilled nature in life is the gate of the Tao and righteousness" (Fang 1981, 111).

Contextualism is a philosophy of change that deals with happenings or occurrences, viewed not as something past and done with, but rather as dynamic, living presences, affording an important way of making comprehensive sense of our world (Hahn 1998, 74). Likewise, Confucius characterizes people in terms of events, rejecting the consideration of agency or isolated actions. "The agent is as much a consequence of his act as its cause" (Hall and Ames 1987, 15).

Similarly, Dewey, rejecting realism, presents a project based on the continuity of living creatures and surroundings in the immediacy of situations. His new ontology, which has been called emergentism, presents nature in continuous change, a place where new forms emerge. Following Darwin, as Eames says, "for Dewey, new forms or species emerge out of old ones. Where nature is ongoing, that is, where new forms have survival value and do not pass into extinction, these new forms make new demands upon other parts of nature" (2003, 25).

That is, the process of life implies a series of events in which organisms continuously interact with their surroundings. Living creatures try to restore the harmony of these interactions be-

cause of the necessity of equilibrium (2008c, 34). Dewey does not attribute this characteristic exclusively to human beings, but to all living beings:

Capacity for maintenance of a constant form of interaction between organism and environment is not confined to the individual organism. It is manifested also, in the reproduction of similar organisms ... As long as life continues, its processes are such as continuously to maintain and restore the enduring relationship which is characteristic of the life-activities of a given organism. (2008c, 33)

Through this kind of philosophy the immanent cosmos is emphasized, as human beings interact with their surroundings. What is more, Ames and Hall stress two significant implications of this ontology: the idea of order and creativity in an immanent universe (1987, 16-17). Acquiring an order does not imply a logical or rational order, but an aesthetic. In contrast to the Judeo-Christian notion of *creatio ex nihilo*, Confucian terms allude to creative actions within the world of natural events. Therefore, in the Appendix III, section I of *Yi Jing*, we can read:

It is heaven and earth that furnish models and patterns. It is Time that changes and evolves. It is the sun and moon that are the most bright. It is wealth and nobility that are the most exalted. It is the sages that prepare things for practical use, and invent instruments for the benefit of the world.

They (the sages) all understand the ways of nature and know the needs of man. They thus made the skillful things for the use of the people. (quoted by Fung 1923, 124)

For Dewey, human beings' participation in natural rhythms induces them to introduce order where none existed; and this is the "aesthetic activity in germ" (2008b, 153). In his words:

The man was not satisfied with adapting to natural changes, but he used them to give harmony and order to that world, to celebrate its relationship with nature: Then the apprehended rhythms of nature were employed to introduce evident order into some phase of the confused observations and images of mankind. Man no longer satisfied his activities of necessity to the rhythmic changes of nature's cycles, but used those which necessity twisted upon him to celebrate his relations from him to nature as if she had conferred upon him the freedom of her realm. (2008b, 153)

The succession of activities in life is teleological: the order implies series, although this continuous interaction is marked by rhythms with disequilibria. For Dewey, every living creature has the necessity to restore equilibrium, and the higher the organism, the more elevated will be

the disruptions and the more energy will be required to achieve this harmony.

Similarly to Dewey, Confucius asserts the necessity of restoring equilibrium through the notion of harmony (和), which involves the existence of multiple and diverse possible relationships. As Chenyang Li (2006, 589) has asserted, the Confucian vision of the world does not portray it as an isolated element, but rather as a myriad of interacting things. Thus, personal growth is a fundamental aspect of human lives, characterized by its creativity; that is, "realizing oneself as a person is an art" (Hall and Ames 1987, 66).

Dewey shares with Confucian thought a belief in the continuity of beings, as a key element of his ontology, but also as an essential element of his aesthetic. As Roger Ames and David Hall assert with reference to Confucian thought, "*aisthesis* as praxis requires a world composed of the termini of aesthetic acts. Praxis as *aisthesis* is fundamentally to be understood in terms of processes of self-creativity grounded in perspectives defining the forms of preoccupation with the world" (1987, 133). Moreover, some scholars have also emphasized how Chinese philosophers do not have a myth of a created and fixed world, but instead have a belief in becoming. Thus, F. W. Mote says:

The basic point which outsiders have found so hard to detect is that the Chinese, among all peoples ancient and recent, primitive and modern, are apparently unique in having no creation myth; that is, they have regarded the world and man as uncreated, as constituting the central features of a spontaneously self-generating cosmos having no creator, god, ultimate cause, or will external to itself. (1971, 17-18)

In this way, pragmatist philosophy permits "responsible access to Confucius' thought", because it rejects an idealist and realistic ontology, as well as a representational understanding of knowing, and substitutes static terms. And this kind of philosophy should be understood not as a mere response to a conflict, but as an aesthetic and meaningful way of life, which attempts to promote a harmonious interaction between human beings and their environment.

Defining Our Terms: The Confucian Notion of Harmony, Hé (和), and the Deweyan Concept of Aesthetic Experience

The Confucian notion of harmony is a central theme in Chinese philosophy that has attracted increasing interest

in the recent decades. Many authors (Ames 2014; D'Am-brosio 2019; Fan 2021; Li 2014; Li, Kwok and Düring 2021; Rosker 2013; Wang 2012; Yao 2011) have developed an approach that addresses the importance of this notion for understanding Confucian philosophy. Chenyang Li has defined it as a creative tension that can emerge at various levels (2006, 588). First, it can take place in the individual sphere, that is, between the different elements that constitute human beings (body, mind, heart and the different activities that unfold in its organic occurrence). Second, harmony can happen between individuals (within the family, within the community, within the nation or within the world). Third, harmony can exist between human beings and the natural universe.

Similarly, Dewey defines aesthetic experience as the harmonious interaction of the living creature at these three levels and locates it as a phase prior to knowledge, in the realm of the immediacy of situations. Human beings are constantly widening their horizons of meaning, and Dewey introduces the aesthetic quality to mark those experiences, opening up meaningful endings and accomplished actions.

Aesthetic experience is thus more complete and more inclusive than other experiences because it involves a process of growth in which human beings create new interactions and achieve a new equilibrium with their environment. For Dewey, as for Confucius, the world does not have an established order, but must be continuously restored. Therefore, despite their undeniable differences, both notions can be defined as that generative and aesthetic process in which the diverse and heterogeneous elements of the cosmos are engaged in harmonious relationships.

This section analyzes both notions and their features, pointing out that Deweyan aesthetic experience and Confucian harmony are integrated into philosophical projects whose aim is to improve people's lives. That is, both concepts can be described as creative processes that emerge in situations of tension in which human beings are immersed, and imply a continuous reinvention of people's interactions and relations with their environment.

Confucian Harmony as a Creative Process

There are several problems with translating the Chinese character *hé* (和) as "harmony". As Chenyang Li has as-

serted (2014, 7) the term "harmony" in English is defined as mere agreement; hence the character *hé* is often treated as something ingenuous. That is, under the influence of a Western reading of Confucianism, this notion has been misunderstood as a fixed scheme of things that reduces diversity to a fixed order. The Confucian notion of harmony is not mere conformity or concert, but a dynamic process that seeks to balance conflicts through a creative response. It concerns a continuous renewal of human beings' interactions and relations with their environment. In Roger Ames' words:

The Confucian notion of harmony is conceived of as a generative, creative, and (dare we say) 'aesthetic' process in which the heterogeneous and diverse elements of the cosmos including the human worlds—what are often referred to as 'the myriad things' (*wanwu*)—are orchestrated into deep, harmonious relations that resonate with each other and entail productive tensions and resistance as well as agreement. (2014, xi)

Thus, Confucius rejects the idea of a fixed order, and instead emphasizes that the world, as well as our interactions, are constantly changing. This point is particularly important because harmony characterizes the relation between humans and nature, in contrast with Roetz, for whom harmony is only related to individuals and society. According to the latter, "nature for most Chinese was primarily an economic resource", and he alleges that the idea that nature is an important aspect of Confucian philosophy is "one of the many myths about the East" (1993, 109).

Nonetheless, as Chenyang Li has asserted, the Confucian proposal does not treat the world as a single element to exploit and utilize for human interests, but rather takes it to be made up of an infinity of elements in continuous interaction (Li 2006, 589). The Confucian form of harmony implies different levels of human engagement with their social and natural environment. Thus, we can understand harmony as a notion that alludes to an incessant assignment that never ends for human beings and nature.

In particular, the Chinese concept of harmony (和) is not an invention of Confucius, but rather a traditional notion that we can find in bronze inscriptions. In fact, Confucius primarily used this concept in relation to music. As Yao has asserted (2000, 171) the character *hé* is defined as "harmonising multi-tones", and he alludes to the

creative response that touches human hearts and adjusts their conducts. In other words, harmony in music is understood as a new unity, which comes into being from different elements.

In Confucian thought, harmony is related not only to music, but also to human character. The cultivation of one's own character is described as harmony in the first passage of the *Doctrine of the Mean* (中庸 *Zhongyong*):

The moment at which joy and anger, grief and pleasure, have yet to arise is called a nascent equilibrium (*zhong*); once the emotions have arisen, that they are all brought into proper focus (*zhong*) is called harmony (*he*). This notion of equilibrium and focus (*zhong*) is the great root of the world; harmony then is the advancing of the proper way (*dadao* 道) in the world.

Pleasure and anger, sorrow and joy: before they emerge they are called centered; emerging by the proper rhythms they are called harmony. Centered: this is the great root of the world. Harmonious: this is the ultimate *Dao* of the world. Reaching centered harmony, heaven and earth take their proper places and the things of the world are nurtured.¹ (Hall and Ames 2000, 86)

By analyzing this passage, we can highlight several key aspects. First, harmony is a human state in which emotions follow the mean (*zhong* 中). Everyone has feelings, but not all of us can express them properly. When these feelings emerge, and each of them attains due measure and degree, we restore harmony. Thus, we need to cultivate our human nature to achieve harmonization: a dynamic balance with our environment.

This leads us to the second key aspect: harmony is the primary goal of moral training. For Confucius, virtue is based on the inner realization of the state of *zhong* and *hé*. The cultivating people must realize these two states: first performing the state of *zhong*, characterized as stillness and concentration; and then realizing harmony in the everyday world. Thus, harmony derives from the original stillness, and vice versa; stillness can only be achieved by maintaining the harmony of life and the universe.

Thirdly, harmony is also addressed in the context of the relationship between nature and human beings. This can be defined as the underlying principle of all relationships, the balanced interaction between humans and nature, between beings (the living) and things (the existent), between the social and the natural. In other words, despite living in a world of conflict and tensions, human beings and nature have an inclination

to correct disorder and chaos in order to attain peace and harmony. As Chenyang Li has asserted:

[...] if human beings follow through this central path of cultivation, the world will be harmonized so that the *dao* will become prevalent; the prevalence of the *dao* should be achieved and the foundation of the world should be maintained because in such a state of grand harmony everything falls into its proper place and thrives. (2004, 177–178)

Therefore, *Zhongyong* offers a vision of the world centered on harmony, and answers the questions about why and how human beings should participate in the world and contribute to restoring harmony. As Filippo Costantini has pointed out (2016), we can find two different but interconnected levels, the individual human world and the cosmic world. In the first, harmony is related to the balance of feelings, the inner state of equilibrium. The second level shows the harmony in the natural world as the natural pattern of the cosmos, which tends toward restoring equilibrium. Without the as this sentence would be incomplete.

This inclination to restore harmony implies creating novel patterns and is the *modus operandi* of human beings and the cosmos. As Fung Youlan says, “when the one equalizes the other there comes what is called harmony, so that then there can be a growth in which new things are produced” (1952, 34). Creativity is placed in a situated process, which will be continually modified by the effects of actions. And these new patterns involve a process of improving our lives. That is, we cannot understand the character *hé* as simply a product, harmony; just as we should not translate the character *xing* (性) as simply “nature” because, unless we take into account the conception of philosophers like Dewey or Whitehead, we may lose the processual cosmology of China.

For Confucius, individuals are agents who are mutually implicated in the changing process of life. In this sense, they are human beings, but also human becomings (Ames 2021), as creative creatures in this continuous becoming. Therefore, the Confucian concept of harmony entails a sense of creativity that can be described, as Roger Ames puts it, in terms of “particularity, temporality, collateral relationality and productive indeterminacy” (2014, 453). This definition emphasizes how harmony involves an enhanced significance that human beings create in a particular context. Because we are engaged in a social environment these situations are not limited to isolated moments. As Herber Fingarette has said, “for Confucius, unless there are at least two human beings, there can be no human beings” (1983, 339).

Harmony, therefore, is a creative process that emerges in situations of tension in which human

¹ 喜怒哀乐之未发,谓之中;发而皆中节,谓之和中也者,天下之大本也;和也者,天下之达道也。致中和,天地位焉,万物育焉。

beings are immersed. Thus, the importance of ritual relies not on repeating a habit, but rather on a creative dimension. The Master said, "Achieving harmony is the most valuable function of observing ritual propriety" (1:12).² This process entails two key aspects: *creativity*, that is, the spontaneous emergence of novelty in a continuing present; and *growth*, whereby new relationships entail meaningful relationships that improve our interaction with our environment.

Aesthetic Experience as a Form of Creation

Dewey distinguishes experience that occurs continuously in the life process from aesthetic experience or "an experience". Current researchers have addressed this notion in respect to the third chapter of *Art as Experience* (1934), entitled "Having an experience". Nonetheless, it is necessary to consider it within Dewey's emergentism. For him, experience is not a mere perception of nature, but a mutual interaction as human beings participate in nature, and nature is modified by human beings. These interactions constitute the vital process and are not necessarily cognitive. People are constantly expanding their horizons of meaning, and Dewey introduces the quality *aesthetic* to point out those experiences that open towards significant endings and completed actions. Aesthetic experience is thus more complete and more inclusive than other experiences, because it involves a process of growth in which human beings create new meanings and reach a new harmony with their environment. According to Dewey, aesthetic is no intruder in experience from without, whether by way of idle luxury or transcendent ideality, but that it is the clarified and intensified development of traits that belong to every normally complete experience. This fact he takes to be the only secure basis upon which aesthetic theory can build. (AE: 52-53) Therefore, the aesthetic quality does not imply transcendental luxury or ideality, but is rooted in life and will be an essential quality of our daily process. Every experience is poten-

tially aesthetic: as Thomas Leddy underlines, aesthetic experience could be situated in one's daily displacement to work, in the workplace, in the shopping center, in places of entertainment, and so on (2005, 3).

For Dewey, human beings overcome factors of opposition and conflict in the continuous process of life, and these creative responses lead to a more meaningful life. In this way, he is not reducing the aesthetic quality to a mere organic struggle, but rather identifying our organic background as the roots of aesthetics. Thus he says: "The biological common places are something more than that; they reach to the roots of the aesthetic in experience" (2008b, 20). Nevertheless, we find distraction and dispersion in our daily life, hence we only have an aesthetic experience when the process comes to an end. In Dewey's words: "In contrast with such experience, we have an experience when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment" (2008b, 42).

Aesthetic experience is a complete act, what happens in our lives when we are more alive and focused on our engagement with the environment. This kind of process reveals the meaning of the human encounter with the world: an interaction that implies a creative response to our surroundings. According to Dewey, life involves energy and attention, but also pulses or stimulus; life is a process of interacting and interchanging, through which the human being dynamically organizes his environment.

Accordingly, the American philosopher gives the same value to change and order; in fact, if there is greater change or variation, there will be a more interesting aesthetic response. Dewey shows how living creatures restore harmony to their environment and adopt a meaning, and this is possible because our environment is in flux. As Thomas Alexander said, "meaning is only possible in a world which can be disrupted, in which ambiguity, change, and destruction play a role" (1987, 176-177). Our lives are developed in variable and disruptive situations and places that need sense; hence human beings signify different phases of their lives at every moment.

Aesthetic experience is a full act of perceiving what happens in our lives when we are both most alive and most concentrated on our engagement with the environment. At every single moment, every living creature experiences the world and organizes their energies, which involves past experiences and creating new meanings. This configuration is the aesthetic cause of its creative feature, but also it is vital and functional: it is how people develop their lives, the way whereby human beings could experience a fulfilled life. This process does not cease; being alive implies creat-

² 有子曰：禮之用，和為貴。先王之道斯為美，小大由之。有所不行，知和而和，不以禮節之，亦不可行也。

ing new relationships in different contexts with different consequences. Dewey emphasizes the process, not the result.

According to Dewey, our surroundings are not immutable and eternal, but rather a changing environment where problematic situations arise, contributing to a reconstruction of meanings. Thus, on numerous occasions, he expresses his firm belief that the human condition can be improved, and that aesthetic experience has a vital role in attaining that goal because it promotes a harmonious way of life. That is, he underlines the direction and orientation through which we constantly reinterpret our interactions in the immediacy of situations.

Our everyday lives entail different experiential qualities, depending on our orientation toward the activity or event in question. This kind of orientation fits with the important term “meliorism”. This pragmatist notion alludes to that particular interaction that attempts to improve our lived experience, and which, as Scott Stroud has said (2011), has an essential role in aesthetic experiences.

In this way, Dewey’s notion of aesthetic experience can be understood as a *modus vivendi*: a creative and engaged interaction with our surroundings. This contextualist approach feeds into a philosophy of life that takes events and situations as its key factors, viewing them as dynamic presences.

Points of Comparison: Towards a New *Modus Vivendi*

As pointed out above, Confucius and Dewey both see philosophy not just as a body of doctrines, but above all as an “art of living”. They are not searching for some essential reality, but instead seek to cultivate harmonious relationships with one’s surroundings. Both philosophers focus on people as living creatures adjusting to their changing environment through a creative process, named as *hé* and as “aesthetic experience”. In this section, I analyze the five basic features that Chenyang Li has outlined in his work on the Confucian notion of harmony (2014, 2021) in relation to the qualities of the Deweyan notion of aesthetic experience, as a way of enriching both proposals without underestimating their differences.

(a) The first quality of harmony is heterogeneity. That is, the coexistence of different elements

within the same process: the unity of its various parts. Chenyang Li illustrates this by drawing on a culinary example from a pre-Confucian minister (2006, 585). A soup is made from different ingredients with its own properties and characteristics, which form a unit. As Fung Youlan explains, harmony is achieved by mixing up different ingredients and flavors according to certain measures:

Yen Tzu said: They are. Harmony may be illustrated by soup. You have water and fire, vinegar, pickle, salt and plums, with which to cook fish. It is made to boil by the firewood, and then the cook mixes the ingredients, harmoniously equalizing the several flavors, so as supply whatever is deficient and carry off whatever is in excess. (Fung 1952: 36)

For Confucius, harmony cannot be achieved without unity. Nevertheless, as Fung (1952), Chenyang Li (2006, 2014) and Yao (2000) have pointed out, this unity should not be understood as equality. The Confucian notion of harmony is difficult to understand due to its assimilation with the mere notion of conformity or equality. The Chinese word for the latter (*tong*, 同) can mean identical existence, but also agreement in action. Therefore, its negation (*bu tong*, 不同) not only implies difference, but also divergence in action. However, as Confucius himself explains in the *Analects*: “Exemplary persons seek harmony not sameness; petty persons, then, are the opposite” (13:23).³

This does not mean that Confucius rejects any type of equality, but only the excess of equality or conformity, and the confusion between unity and uniformity. Excessive sameness is opposed to harmony. Li borrows a Chinese expression “a pool of dead water” (一潭死水) to show how this perpetual uniformity implies the absence of life. The process, despite presenting unity, will be dynamic. Thus, Confucius consciously differentiates harmony (*hé*) from identity (*tong*) because *tong* simply implies replication, whereas harmony involves creating something new. As Yao asserts (2000, 171), to be harmonious is to produce (*sheng*), to transform (*hua*) and to enlarge (*da*).

In the same way, Dewey defines aesthetic experience as a process that comes together in a single and self-sufficient whole, despite the different phases and stages of the process. That is, “[...] we

³ 君子和而不同，小人同而不和。

have an experience when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment” (2008b, 42). Hence aesthetic experience cannot be reduced to an isolated event, but rather emerges in our daily lives, when that unity and closure of the process occurs.

It is important to note in this regard that Dewey introduces unity as a quality that permeates all the parts of experience despite the variations between them. Therefore aesthetic experiences have pauses or silences, but not breaks or gaps. “The existence of this unity”, Dewey says, “is constituted by a single quality that pervades the entire experience in spite of the variation of its constituent parts” (2008b, 43).

Aesthetic experience, characterized by the indeterminacy of its analysis, reaches its consummation when it is experienced as a whole, when it flows from one point to another; that is, it is a process with different parts, through which the living creature unfolds its potential to signify its immediate existence. Thus Dewey says: “Because of continuous merging, there are no holes, mechanical junctions, and dead centers when we have an experience. There are pauses, places of rest, but they punctuate and define the quality of movement. They sum up what has been undergone and prevent its dissipation and idle evaporation” (2008b, 46).

(b) This leads us to the second key aspect, tension. Harmony implies unity in difference, in tension and conflict. Chenyang Li points out that there are these three different levels of relationship between things, and harmony can be achieved when equilibrium is restored (2014, 12). This point is especially significant because the emphasis on the notion of harmony must not lead us to underestimate the importance of difference, tension and conflict.

For Confucius, as well as for Dewey, harmony requires difference, but also tension, struggle and imbalance that generate a conflict between the parties and encourage the creation of new relationships. That is, such relationships are necessary to introduce the creative orientation: the aesthetic quality. As Roger Ames and David Hall have shown (1987, 36), the aesthetic order begins with the singularity or the particularity of an aspect in tension, in which the parts are interrelated.

For this reason, plurality and tension must be considered prior and necessary aspects of this unity. Similarly, for Dewey, the life process is characterized by activities that, even with greater or lesser success, depend on this incessant interaction with the environment, in which the creature seeks to recover its balance in moments of tension. Although ruptures can happen in this interaction, the living creature has a need to restore this balance:

The higher the organism, the more serious become the disturbances and the more energetic (and often more prolonged) are the efforts necessary for its reestablishment. The state of disturbed equilibration constitutes need. The movement toward its restoration is search and exploration. The recovery is fulfillment or satisfaction. (2008c, 34)

This tension should be considered not as problematic, but as the stimulus that allows us to unfold our creative potential. At every single moment, every living creature experiences the world, and human beings create novel patterns when they experience tension and problematic situations. As Hall and Ames explain (1987, 172), the harmony achievable in human society is not reducible to “universally acceptable ethical principles”. By contrast, human beings, like nature, must constantly create new forms of interaction to accommodate the emergence of problematic circumstances. Thus, for Confucius, “reviewing the old as a means of realizing the new—such a person can be considered a teacher” (2:11).⁴

In the same way, Fung Youlan has pointed out that Confucianism takes from the *Book of Changes (Yi Jing)* the notion of change as an essential quality of life:

The method of Qian is to change and transform, so that everything obtains its correct nature as appointed (by the mind of Heaven); and (thereafter the conditions of) great harmony are preserved in union. The result is what is advantageous, and correct and firm. (The sage) appears aloft, high above all things, and the myriad states all enjoy repose.⁵ (*Yijing* 1:1)

Therefore, life is a process of interacting and interchanging, and people try to restore unity and equilibrium in situations marked by tension and conflict. Confucius, like Dewey, proposes an interaction with our environment that is characterized by creativity.

(c) However, achieving harmony with one’s natural or social environment, as well as with oneself, is not an easy path. Rather, it requires the complete involve-

⁴ 溫故而知新，可以為師矣。

⁵ [...] 乾道變化，各正性命，保合大和，乃利貞。首出庶物，萬國咸寧。

ment of all parties; it implies coordination and cooperation. In this way, for Confucius and for Dewey, conflicted situations demand the complete involvement and coordination of the person to provide a new equilibrium. To illustrate the coordination and cooperation involved in the process of harmonization, we can consider one of the key aspects of Confucian thought: the rectification of names (正名 *zhengming*). According to this notion, if a name designates an object that does not correspond to it, confusion and disharmony emerge. Thus, the sage must rectify the name:

“Were the Lord of Wey to turn the administration of his state over to you, what would be your first priority?” asked Zilu.

“Without question it would be to insure that names are used properly (*zhengming*)” replied the Master.

“Would you be as impractical as that?” responded Zilu. “What is it for names to be used properly anyway?”

“How can you be so dense!” replied Confucius. “An exemplary person (*junzi*) defers on matters he does not understand. When names are not used properly, language will not be used effectively; when language is not used effectively, matters will not be taken care of; when matters are not taken care of, the observance of ritual propriety (*li*) and the playing of music (*yue*) will not flourish; when the observance of ritual propriety and the playing of music do not flourish, the application of laws and punishments will not be on the mark; when the application of laws and punishment is not on the mark, the people will not know what to do with themselves. Thus, when the exemplary person puts a name to something, it can certainly be spoken, and when spoken it can certainly be acted upon. There is nothing careless in the attitude of the exemplary person toward what is said.” (13.3)⁶

This text shows how unity occurs in a dialectical process in which the parties, which are in tension and conflict, will finally converge towards a realization and renewal of the situation. This confluence will only be possible through a cooperative and coordinated interaction of individuals

with their environment. Obviously, Dewey does not talk about the rectification of names, but he proposes the notion of form as a coordinated organization of energies and new meanings. It is defined as “the operation of forces that carry the experience of an event, object, scene, and situation to its own integral fulfillment” (2008b, 142).

For Dewey, form is a dynamic configuration human beings develop in problematic situations. According to him, we experience tensions requiring us to make new configurations. This kind of organization involves us coordinating the different parts in a balanced way. So, form is not a mechanical conjunction of different elements, but a coordinated pattern created by human beings.

(d) The fourth characteristic is transformation and growth; that is, coordination entails changes and modifications, which will propitiate the transformation of tension into a harmonious relationship. Confucius analyzes and promotes the creative interactions that a person displays, in which one extends and deepens one’s relationship with one’s environment. Personal growth is fundamentally creative and results in the constant emergence of situations.

As pointed out above, for Confucius, human beings have a need to restore balance with their environment through creative answers, thus treating the process of becoming a person as an art. In this sense, we read in the *Book of Changes*: “the ‘greatness’ and ‘originating’ represented by *Qian* (creativity) refer to it as (the symbol of) what gives their beginning (to all things), and (also) secures their growth and development” (*Yijing* 1:1).⁷

Similarly, for Dewey, one’s relationship with the world is not characterized as a struggle. What is external to the subject is presented not in opposition to him, but rather as an infinite field of possibilities in which a human being can develop his widest potentialities.

The reality is the growth-process itself; childhood and adulthood are phases of a continuity, in which just because it is a history, the later cannot exist until the earlier exists (‘mechanistic materialism’ in germ); and in which the later makes use of the registered and cumulative outcome of the earlier—or, more strictly, is its utilization (‘spiritualistic teleology’ in germ). (2008b, 210)

Experience is an explorer of the world, a transformer, and when aesthetic experience occurs, the most perfect harmony with the environment is achieved in that situation. Thus, despite distant cultural contexts in time and space, both authors believe that humans are in continuous interac-

⁶ 子路曰：「衛君待子而為政，子將奚先？」子曰：「必也正名乎！」子路曰：「有是哉，子之迂也！奚其正？」子曰：「野哉由也！君子於其所不知，蓋闕如也。名不正，則言不順；言不順，則事不成；事不成，則禮樂不興；禮樂不興，則刑罰不中；刑罰不中，則民無所措手足。故君子名之必可言也，言之必可行也。君子於其言，無所苟而已矣。」

⁷ 《乾》元者，始而亨者也。利貞者，性情也。

tion with their environment through a process that implies growth, which will unfold in the context of situations.

(e) The fifth characteristic is renewal; that is, harmony is not reached as a final state, but as a state of a continuous process. For Confucius, the cultivated person has the capacity to organize and create new relationships with their environment; and this is a process that never ends. Confucian philosophy emphasizes tension and human beings' ability to restore balance, to promote an interaction based on the continuous organization of energies and meanings, according to new circumstances.

Reality is immanent, relative and contingent; for this reason, Confucius' philosophy is not characterized by a search for truth as correspondence, but rather by a constant search for the harmonious mode of interaction with one's environment. According to Confucius, the process of existence is characterized by the changing events and situations that determine the human vital process. Accordingly, we can read in the *Analects*:

The Master said: "You can study with some, and yet not necessarily walk the same path (*dao* 道); you can walk the same path as some, and yet not necessarily take your stand with them; you can take your stand with them, and yet not necessarily weigh things up in the same way." (9:30)

That is, harmony is not a static identity or a stable state, but a result of constant changes. As Yao has said, "it is the Confucian view that opposition arising from the fundamental forces of the cosmos will necessarily lead to harmony" (2000, 178). Confucius' way of harmony implies a continuous adjustment, because people need to overcome the new conflicts and tensions which emerge in life.

Similarly, for Dewey, human interaction with one's environment is not "a matter of perception", knowledge, or domination. Aesthetic experience is presented as a reconstructive activity that is not imposed as a definitive structure of action, but is defined by its contingent nature. In other words, aesthetic experience must be understood as a process that does not end. The organization of energies, then, is not imposed as a definitive structure, rather, it should be understood as an endless process. In Dewey's words:

Only that is carried on which is led up to; otherwise there is arrest and a break. For this reason consummation is relative; instead of occurring once for all at a given point, it is recurrent. The final end is anticipated by rhythmic pauses, while that end is final only in an external way. (2008b, 142)

Conclusion

In these pages, I have explored the benefits of understanding Confucius' philosophy from an aesthetic perspective. Confucius is well known as a moral philosopher, but this kind of view has generated a lively debate about Western approaches to this philosophy. By studying the *Analects*, as well as *Zhongyong* and *Yijing*, I have attempted to highlight how his philosophy is not a mere album of snapshots depicting an exemplary life, but a way of developing a meaningful life.

In this way, I have argued that the aesthetic interpretation of Confucius can be enriched by connecting it to Deweyan philosophy. However, it was not my intention to develop a hybrid Confucian-Pragmatist theory, but rather to pay attention to the resonance between Dewey and Confucius. I think that these pages have shown the real value of a potential conversation between these two authors, not only because of the similarities in their positions, but also because they are mutually illuminating and reinforcing.

The Confucian tradition is a long-established historical system of thought, which has extended through time and space and includes different features and versions. My main suggestion has been to extend the traditional ethical interpretation of this kind of philosophy and promote a view that emphasizes his philosophy as an art of living.

Drawing on the comparison made here, I have shown how both authors propose an ontology of events or situations, which does not require recourse to "substances", "qualities", or "attributes". Thus, instead of searching for some essential nature, Dewey and Confucius are more concerned with the interaction of specific people in particular contexts. Human beings, like our surroundings, are not a fixed entity, but rather involved with their continuous processes of becoming. Accordingly, Confucius' works are about the mode of action, i.e. "the path". In this sense, both authors present their philosophical project as an art of living, "an art of contextualizing" (*ars contextualis*), which seeks harmonious interaction with the universe through active and creative participation.

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