

Harmony, tranquility, affirmation, happiness

Abstract

I will explicate a distinction between internal and external harmony. While internal harmony is concord of our aims, external harmony is concord between our aims and the rest of the world. I will also explore the idea of a harmonious relation with our future and our past. Harmony is crucial for tranquility of mind, and even if sustaining harmony may not always be in our power, practicing virtues such as independence, flexibility, courage and mercy makes us more capable of tranquility. Tranquility through harmony can be considered a kind of happiness because it involves affirming our lives.

Introduction

Maintaining a harmonious mind is an essential concern of a person who values tranquility as a characteristic of a good life. By tranquility I mean absence of strong, throbbing, turbulent emotions and moods, both positive and negative. This was the primary goal of many ancient philosophical currents such as Stoicism and Epicureanism, and “taking things philosophically” is even today associated with calmness and evenness. I will explain what life-philosophical harmony is, and how it upholds and constitutes tranquility. I will also elucidate the connection between harmony and happiness. Harmony and tranquility are happiness because they are a way of affirming ourselves and our world.

The idea and ideal of harmony have a long history in western philosophy. For instance, Plato's *State* studies the structure and the prerequisites of a harmonious soul by describing a justly ordered polity. Stoicism emphasized the importance of a harmonious relationship to the cosmos. Leibniz says that the perfect universe is a combination of the greatest possible variety of phenomena with their greatest possible harmony, and that pleasure is an apprehension of harmony. For both Friedrich Nietzsche and Julius Evola a central problem of modern times is that our volitional, action-guiding natures become disintegrated and incoherent.¹ I do not intend to describe or compare these or related conceptions in detail. It suffices to notice that the notion of harmony belongs to the core traditions of philosophy.

The concept of harmony lets us think of our lives in musical terms. The melodies that life consists of can be more or less attuned. A related theme which I will not discuss in this article is how listening to music can enhance the harmony of our minds. Already Pythagoras - reputedly the inventor of the word 'philosophy' - seems to have believed that music has such powers.

¹ See for instance *Beyond Good and Evil*, chapters 6 and 7; and *Ride the Tiger*, chapters 7 and 10.

1 Internal harmony

Our desires aim at something, and thus give our lives a certain direction. Some of them are directed towards instrumentally valuable states of affairs, but it is hardly imaginable that we would act at all if we did not care about at least one aim in our lives as an end-in-itself, as a final end that we seek for its own sake. Aims direct both our external actions and our thoughts and feelings. For example, we think about the steps that enable us to reach a practical or theoretical goal; and we typically feel pleasure if our aims are fulfilled and pain if our aims and plans are thwarted. Also attention and focus are usually functions of aims.

Internal disharmony, or disharmony of the self, is discord among our aims. The directions of our desires can be incompatible either logically or empirically. For instance, one cannot make up one's mind whether to have children or not; whether to seek the company of a certain lady or remain single; whether to continue deriving pleasure from sweet idleness or start doing something supposedly useful instead; whether to side with one's desire to drink lots of alcohol or the desire to stay healthy. In such situations of ambivalence we are divided and torn within. We do not know how to proceed in our thoughts and actions. There is no clear, determinate, univocal answer to the question of what we want to do, and this confusion is a source of anxiety. Maybe we feel mentally paralyzed and unable to do anything, or then we act more or less chaotically: we start on a course of action, change our minds, and do something that practically contradicts and cancels what we did before.² Just like an uncooperative and quarrelling team of sportsmen cannot achieve their goals, a disharmonious mind will fail and suffer. Vacillation is an essential symptom of internal disharmony. While disharmony disables our self, harmony strengthens it and enables us to engage in long-term unwavering action. Harmony is health of mind.

Sometimes internal conflicts can be resolved and peace restored. Perhaps one is able to abandon one of the discordant forces and commit oneself wholeheartedly to the other one. One overcomes one's doubts and thereby gives one's will a firm direction. The rejected disharmonious voice may not disappear completely, but one succeeds in leaving it aside to a sufficient degree for a settled course of action to be possible. Or maybe the abandoned desire vanishes altogether after we cease to nourish it by our thoughts and actions. For instance, an inclination to smoke cigarettes may weaken if we do not follow it for a time.

In some cases it is feasible to allot separate times of fulfillment to the discordant impulses and tendencies. Being a parent, for example, does not have to be a whole-time preoccupation, and often we can find sufficient time for our solitary pursuits or whatever it is that caused us to hesitate having children. And usually I do not have to choose between skiing and swimming, because I can engage in both.

But suppose that one finds oneself unable to abandon either of the conflicting motives and that the strategy of acting on them at different times cannot be applied. One

² Frankfurt 2004, ch. 3.

is hopelessly divided and discordant. There is unavoidable internal strife instead of unity of will. Seeing good and bad sides in both possibilities, we are unable to decide what the best line of action might be.

Much of the distress caused by an unresolved conflict is due to the fact we continue searching for a uniquely best solution. Perhaps we suspect that this effort is futile, but still go on ruminating. It might be better to give up and assume an indifferent or quiescent attitude towards one's preferences and options. It does not matter what one's choice is. We distance and detach ourselves from the internal conflict and do not take sides. Sometimes we cannot stop our minds from looking for the single best way ahead even if we are aware that we are wasting our time and energy; but indifference becomes easier if we practice it and make a habit out of it.

Internal disharmony does not vanish because of our indifference and equanimity, and it still causes anxiety. Either we feel incapable of action, or find ourselves engaged in activities that oppose each other. But we do create some peace of mind by retreating to a neutral ground and letting the warring parties do what they will. Now that we believe that there probably is no uniquely correct answer to the question of what we should do, we feel our spirits lighten and notice how some of the anxiety leaves our souls. The ancient Skeptic movement incorporated a similar insight: suspending judgment enhances tranquility.

If we act on neither of our conflicting desires, it is possible and even likely that they both weaken. Again, we feed our desires by following them. This way of attaining peace is clearly not possible when one has to fulfill one of the competing desires by the sheer force of logic. For instance, one either begets a child or does not beget one. There is no third alternative.

Perfect, lasting congruence of the directional forces that constitute our self is most likely not possible, because we are dynamic systems that receive novel impulses from the outside. Our selves have to adapt to new circumstances, and the process of adaptation includes some internal disharmony. The existing parts of the self do not receive and accommodate new aims without friction and clashes. It is to be hoped, however, that the system develops to a new state of relatively high degree of unity and concord in order to facilitate purposeful action.

The clash of an external impulse with our present self transforms us into something that we might not have considered desirable or even possible before, and many of these transformations are beneficial to us. We may for example wish that such impulses bring in evaluative attitudes that prove fruitful in our effort to avoid stagnation and boredom. The influxes can increase and broaden our perspectives and thus heighten our capacity to enjoy or at least tolerate our experiences. They can also awaken and vitalize some dormant inner tendency or drive that belongs to our self but might have remained unrecognized and neglected without our openness to new experiences.

Nevertheless, a considerable degree of independence with respect to external influences is advisable from the point of view of harmony. Extreme openness to influences is a vice, because it hinders our autonomous and attuned internal

development. We may receive ideas and especially evaluations that lead our self astray. We start to oscillate and become our own enemies. This dissolution of the self can be compared to the innumerable cases in which a native culture has disintegrated by absorbing alien influences. Our selves are like rivers that do not stand any amount of inflows without risking disturbances and chaos. Some of our drives are undoubtedly inborn, and the innate opportunities we have are finite. Selves have a specific nature already at the beginning of life. Of course, there is no guarantee that this original self is unified; but we can hope that there is a more or less coherent core of the self that needs to be recognized and helped to grow. Peripheral additions can perhaps be neglected if they conflict with that core and distract our attention.

Self-knowledge is essential for our being able to exercise the virtue of independence. We are not necessarily aware of our aims and the directional patterns that they generate; and if we are not conscious of our self, our ability to protect it and to actualize it suffers. Gaining knowledge of our self is not merely a matter of inner reflection: often we have to expose ourselves to situations, experiences and trials in order to find out what we really want. Being able to “be oneself” in the sense of self-realization frequently requires such trials of self-discovery and self-unearthing. These experiments of self-knowledge may lead us to reorganize and prune our self to be more coherent and unified. Evola weaves together the themes of self-realization, experimentation and unity when he says that

the problem of being oneself has a [...] solution in terms of unification. Once one has discovered through experiment which of the manifold tendencies is the central one, one sets about identifying it with one's will, stabilizing it, and organizing all one's secondary or divergent tendencies around it. This is what it means to give oneself a law, one's own law.³

The ability to avoid internal disharmony is most probably partly a matter of genetic and other kinds of luck, and partly a result of effort and practice. Some may be luckier than others. Insofar as philosophy is a steadfast attempt to live well, philosophers should pay special attention to the part of harmony that is within their own power.

2 External harmony

By external world I here mean everything that is external to our self, considered as a set of aims. The external world contains a multitude of living and inanimate beings and processes; but according to this strict definition, external processes need not be external to our minds and bodies. It suffices that they do not belong to our intentional, directional nature.

³ Ibid, p. 61.

External disharmony is discord between our aims and the rest of the world. Some of these discords and frustrations are local and concern only tiny parts of our external lives, but a person can develop a negative attitude towards his whole life. Such an all-encompassing disharmony may result in suicide. Harmony with life, by contrast, is love of life, and it cannot be separated from joy of life.

A fundamental fact of human life is that our powers are limited, and that we cannot therefore always get what we want or avoid what we are averse to in the external world.⁴ Often the uncontrollable events of the external world do not support our wishes and even actively oppose our plans. Uncontrollability sometimes entails inevitability.

In order to be released from the continual sufferings that our lack of omnipotence causes, we need to practice the virtue of flexibility of will. A flexible person goes along with the flow of inescapable worldly events and changes his plans instead of stubbornly asserting his own will.⁵ Not forcing things when there is little hope of succeeding is the way towards harmony.

Unavoidable difficulties and pains of life can be regarded as opportunities for practicing flexibility. We should see these trials as exercises to strengthen our tranquility and not waste them by useless complaints and opposition. Occasionally the current we need to go along with is within our own minds and bodies: we ourselves are the source of the trial of our flexibility. After all, we have thoughts, emotions and sensory experiences that we cannot control, and our bodies do not always function the way we would like them to.

Secondly we have to practice the virtue of patience. A patient person endures silently something that he would like to protest against. He curbs his urge to act and waits in order to maintain harmony with the world. Patience always includes some flexibility.

A third virtue of external harmony is moderation. Immoderately strong desires and a single-minded pursuit of their satisfaction bind us to quite definite states of affairs in the world and make our minds inflexible.

Fourthly, the virtue of justice supports harmony not only in the concrete, everyday sense of harmonious social relationships but also in the specific sense of harmony I am discussing. As Epicurus emphasized, it enables us to live with a peaceful mind, because we do not need to be afraid of being found guilty and punished. A just person will also be more likely aided by others if he ends up in trouble. A related virtue of harmony is gentleness.

A fifth virtue of external harmony is foresight. Predicting the future accurately enables us to circumvent unnecessary hurdles and to use the current of the world to our advantage. The probability of discords decreases.⁶

External harmony and the tranquility it supports are not always in our power; but practicing the virtues of harmony makes us more capable of sustaining tranquility. Our

⁴ Tukiainen 2013.

⁵ Irwin 2012.

⁶ On philosophy as exercise of virtues, see Tukiainen 2010 and 2012.

practice has to be tenacious, and we must not give it up even if we encounter difficulties and setbacks.

3 Temporal harmony

While foresight increases our ability to avoid future disharmonies, courage and mercy enable us to live in peace with our present future and our present past. Disharmony towards the future is often (or even usually) fear. A disharmonious relation to the past gives rise to negative feelings such as regret, resentment and sadness. Courage and mercy enhance our capacity to be in harmony with our temporal nature.

Courage is readiness to confront future pains, dangers and difficulties. We all need courage, because life is not always easy, safe and painless, but often a continuous trial of our endurance and resilience. Courage is strength of mind that enables us to persevere and reach aims that we judge worthwhile. With respect to present sufferings courage blends with resigned openness to the possibility that the frightful thing happens. This is fortitude, and fortitude is a form of harmony. Sometimes merely going on living requires fortitude, and many of us have met so many obstacles and faced so many ordeals and sufferings during the course of our lives that we should congratulate ourselves for still existing. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why we congratulate our friends on their birthdays. But it is not clear that we should judge an easy, painless life preferable to a difficult and even dangerous one. A mountain climber cannot test his courage without difficult routes, and we cannot put our courage on trial without dangers and difficulties of life.

Mercy is backward-glancing willingness to excuse mistakes and to overlook deficiencies both in ourselves and in others. It saves us from regrets, self-accusations, complaints, resentment and vengefulness. Mercy enables us to drop our aversions towards the past and let it be what it is. We grow more merciful by reflecting on the fact that neither we nor others could have known what we know now, and that we all did what we deemed best at that time. It is unreasonable to demand that other people or our former selves should have been able to conform to our present standards of excellence. Our powers were limited, and so it is only just that we assume a merciful stand. Without mercy we feel sad for not having received or achieved what we wanted.

4 Harmony and happiness

Insofar as happiness requires that we get what we want and satisfy our hopes, harmony does not guarantee a happy, flourishing life. It does not make us omnipotent. But internal and external harmony is a precondition of a successful life. We are not able to reach our aims without coherent action, and we cannot realize our aspirations unless we act in tune with our circumstances. Without courage we may not be able to act at all.

Harmony is important not merely because it is a precondition of flourishing, but also because it enables us to affirm ourselves and our lives. The internal aspect of affirmation is that our ability to accept and to love ourselves is a function of how much the aims that constitute our dynamic nature cohere and support each other. Internal opposition and battle signifies that we do not affirm ourselves but negate and deplore what we are. Internal harmony and self-affirmation are one and the same thing. The external aspect of affirmation is that we are able to accept and love our circumstances to the extent that we live in harmony with them instead of opposing them through our inflexible will. External harmony and affirmation of our surroundings are again not two separate things but one and the same phenomenon.

Harmony as affirmation is a kind of happiness in itself. This tranquil happiness is independent of our being able to flourish in the sense of achieving or holding on to something. Independent happiness is not based on anything external to our own selves, and in this sense it is not subject to Lady Fortune: harmony makes us capable of affirming our internal and external world even in inevitable adversity. However, the detachment of tranquil happiness from luck is not complete, because harmony itself may not always be in our power.

References

Evola, J. (2003) *Ride the Tiger*. Inner Traditions, Rochester, VT.

Frankfurt, H. (2004) *The Reasons of Love*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.

Irwin, W. (2012) The current of the universe. *Journal of Philosophy of Life* 2, 2.

Nietzsche, F. (1989) *Beyond Good and Evil*. Vintage, New York, NY.

Tukiainen, A. (2010) Philosophical counselling as a process of fostering wisdom in the form of virtues. *Practical Philosophy* 10, 1.

Tukiainen, A. (2012) Philosophy as practices of virtue. *HASER: International Journal on Philosophical Practice*, 3.

Tukiainen, A. (2013) Release as philosophy. *Philosophical Practice* 8, 2.