

Zhongyong 中庸 as Grand Harmony: An Alternative Reading to Ames and Hall's *Focusing the Familiar*

Chenyang Li*

Roger Ames and David Hall's translation and interpretation of the Confucian classic text *Zhongyong*, *Focusing the Familiar* (Ames & Hall), is the most ambitious, most innovative, and most significant work in the study of the *Zhongyong* in recent years. In this work, Ames and Hall make a processual reading of the *Zhongyong*. Processual readings of Chinese classics can be found in the works of numerous Chinese philosophers in the 20th century (see FANG Dongmei in Li, 2002, Cheng, and Tang). What is most impressive in Ames and Hall's book is their Herculean undertaking of applying their "focus and field" language in the interpretation and translation, the extent of their effort to generate a coherent process account, and their illuminating insights into the nuances of this most philosophical of all Confucian classics. While I am sympathetic to the general non-substantialist and non-essentialist tone of Ames and Hall's work, I disagree with their interpretation of the central theme and central argument of the *Zhongyong*. My thesis is that the *Zhongyong*'s central theme is the ideal of grand harmony in the cosmos and how human beings can participate in and promote such an ideal, and that Ames and Hall have missed this central theme in their reading and have failed to highlight this ideal in their interpretation of the *Zhongyong*.

In the following discussion of the *Zhongyong* text, I will quote Ames and Hall's translations, and sometimes those of other scholars', for the sake of convenience; that does not necessarily imply that I endorse their translations, even though I do like some of them. At times I will keep some key Chinese words untranslated in order to avoid unnecessary disputes in regard to proper

* Professor of Philosophy, Central Washington University, Ellensburg, WA. 98926. E-mail: lic@cwu.edu.

translations that may distract us from the core issue. I will get into the issue of specific renderings of Chinese terms only when they are directly pertinent to my disagreement with Ames and Hall's interpretation of the *Zhongyong*'s central theme.

I

At the outset, let me be clear that I am not saying that Ames and Hall have failed to accurately translate the word *he* 和 (harmony or harmonization) in their text. My claim is that they have failed to understand and to elucidate the central place that *he* occupies in the *Zhongyong*.

Let me quote two passages in their "Introduction" where Ames and Hall explicitly identify the central argument of the text:

[T]he central argument of the *Zhongyong* addresses the issue of the relationships obtaining among human tendencies (*xing*) promoted by *tian* as specified through *ming*, the way of becoming human (*dao*), and the growth and extension of that way through ritual education (*jiao*). (Ames & Hall: 53)¹

and,

The central argument of the *Zhongyong* moves from the functions of ritual activity (*li*) in promoting acts of focusing the familiar, through vigilant attention to one's unique focus, and, finally to the recognition of the circumstantial field so focused. (49)

Ames and Hall understand the central argument to be about "focusing": from the familiar affairs of the day, to one's uniqueness, and finally to the circumstantial field; in such focusing, one brings the ordinary business of the day into focus through ritualized engagements; *zhongyong* not only refers to "focusing the familiar," but also to the necessity of "remaining focused in the familiar affairs of the day" (45). Ames and Hall's summaries of the *Zhongyong*'s central argument fail to identify *he* or harmony as the utmost leading and supreme concept in the text.² The relationships between *xing* 性, *jiao* 教, and *li* 禮 as discussed by Ames and Hall are indeed very important. There is no denying that Ames and Hall's explications of these relationships can be used to illustrate the grand ideal of *he*. However, Ames and Hall did not make such a move, or at least did not make it explicitly. Without being clearly situated in the context of *he*, these relationships lack the ultimate orientation.

¹ Thereafter references to this work will be indicated with page numbers only.

² In their "Glossary," Ames and Hall have noted a connection between *zhongyong* and *he* as they write: "The expression of *zhongyong* suggests that the locus for achieving harmony and equilibrium is *yong*—the ordinary business of the day" (86). However, such a connection is missed not only in their two key passages summarizing the central argument of the text, but also in their main textual elaboration on the *Zhongyong*.

Now, let us compare the formulations of Ames and Hall's interpretation and my own reading of this Confucian classic. Put in a format similar to Ames and Hall's, my own interpretation of the central theme and central argument of the *Zhongyong* reads as follows:

The central theme and argument of the *Zhongyong* address the ideal of the Confucian *Dao* 道 as grand harmony in the cosmos and how human beings participate in and promote harmony through the central way (*zhong* 中). The author of the *Zhongyong* argued that human beings can achieve and promote such an ideal by cultivating the human way (*dao*) through education (*jiao*). The argument is grounded in the premise that such participation and promotion as a moral requirement is rooted in human beings' *xing*, which is endowed by *tian* 天.³

My reading of the text is that the *Zhongyong* lays out the framework of Confucian moral philosophy by maintaining the following: we human beings are born with certain characteristic tendencies (*xing* 性); these tendencies are endowed by *tian* and hence have a binding force on us; realizing these tendencies is the proper way (*dao* 道); the means of this realization is education through *li* 禮; a person who realizes these tendencies is a *junzi* 君子; when the *dao* is prevalent in the world (*da dao* 達道), there is harmony (*he* 和); when the world is harmonized, the myriad things go right and flourish.

I take the central and leading concept in the *Zhongyong* to be harmony or harmonization (*he* 和). In my interpretation, if we are to use only one word to capture the central message of the *Zhongyong*, that word is *he*. This "focus" on harmony is entirely missing in Ames and Hall's formulations of the central argument of the *Zhongyong*. I believe that this difference between Ames and Hall's interpretation on the one hand and mine on the other is significant because, as I have discussed elsewhere (Li 1999: 159-160), *he* is one of the most important values in Chinese culture, and I believe that the *Zhongyong* provides a concentrated and elaborate philosophical exposition of harmony and harmonization for Confucianism. Failure to identify this central notion and ideal in the *Zhongyong* is a major oversight of the text's central message.

II

In order to justify my claim that *he*, harmony and harmonization, is the *Zhongyong*'s central theme and its leading and culminating concept, I will first focus on the opening statement of the text and then turn to passages that highlight this central theme throughout the rest of the text. In my reading, this central theme is laid out in the first 109 words of the opening statement in the text. It reads:

³ I will flesh out my own translation of these key terms as I discuss the related issues below. Whether the *Zhongyong* was the work of one author or many has been a matter of dispute (see Ames and Hall's Appendix). I will not get into this issue here.

天命之謂性，率性之謂道，修道之謂教。道也者，不可須臾離也；可離非道也。是故君子戒慎乎其所不睹，恐懼乎其所不聞。莫見乎隱，莫顯乎微，故君子慎其獨也。喜怒哀樂之未發謂之中。發而皆中節謂之和。中也者，天下之大本也。和也者，天下之達道也。致中和，天地位焉，萬物育焉。⁴

Ames and Hall translate this section as follows:

What *tian* 天 commands (*ming* 命) is called natural tendencies (*xing* 性); drawing out these natural tendencies is called the proper way (*dao* 道); improving upon this way is called education (*jiao* 教). As for this proper way, we cannot quit even for an instant. Were it even possible to quit it, it would not be the proper way. It is for this reason that exemplary persons (*junzi* 君子) are so concerned about what is not seen, and so anxious about what is not heard. There is nothing more present than what is imminent, and nothing more manifest than what is inchoate. Thus, exemplary persons are ever concerned about their uniqueness.

The moment at which joy and anger, grief and pleasure, have yet to arise is called a nascent equilibrium (*zhong* 中); once the emotions have arisen, that they are all brought into proper focus (*zhong*) is called harmony (*he* 和). This notion of equilibrium and focus (*zhong*) is the great root of the world; harmony then is the advancing of the proper way (*dadao* 達道) in the world. When equilibrium and focus are sustained and harmony is fully realized, the heavens and earth maintain their proper places and all things flourish in the world. (89-90)

While we can disagree on the details of the rendering of the sentences,⁵ there should be no doubt that the first half of this section lays out the relations between some key Confucian concepts such as *tian* 天, *ming* 命, *xing* 性, *dao* 道, *jiao* 教, and *junzi* 君子. It asserts that human beings' *xing*⁶ comes from the *ming* of *tian*; if we follow through with our *xing*, we are cultivating the *dao*; and the means of cultivating the *dao* is education. The passage maintains by implication (*shi gu* 是故) that such an educated person is a *junzi*. Then the passage proceeds to address *zhong* 中 and *he* 和.

I should note that the phrase *xi nu ai le* 喜怒哀樂 (joy, anger, grief, pleasure) here points to another important concept in Confucian philosophy, namely *qing* 情 (emotions or the emotive), even though the word itself does not

⁴ In some modern texts of the *Zhongyong*, editors have broken this passage into two sections, as in Ames and Hall. The second section begins with “*xi nu ai le zhi wei fa wei zhi zhong* 喜怒哀樂之未發謂之中.” It should not make any difference to the point I am making here.

⁵ For instance, following their reading of the *Xunzi*, Ames and Hall render “*junzi shen qi du* 君子慎其獨” as “exemplary persons are ever concerned about their uniqueness,” even though the commonly accepted interpretation of “*shen qi du*” is “vigilance in solitude” or “being cautious when alone.”

⁶ Ames and Hall translate *xing* 性 as “natural tendencies” rather than “nature.” This makes sense because for both Mencius and Xunzi a person presumably could lose or change his or her *xing* and continue to exist; “nature” as it is often understood in the West does not have this flexibility. One advantage of rendering it as “natural tendencies” is that it can readily accommodate Xunzi’s understanding of *xing* as bad (*e* 惡). A disadvantage is that it does not carry a sense strong enough to accommodate the Mencian school’s understanding of *xing* as the source of morality, the sense of “oughtness.” In this regard, Kwong-loi Shun’s rendering as “characteristic tendencies” has some advantage over “natural tendencies” (see Shun). Since the *Zhongyong* is a work of the Mencian school, I use “characteristic tendencies.”

appear here. The relation between *qing* and *xing* has been a central issue for Confucianism. In a person, the relation between his or her *qing* and *xing* is of vital moral importance.⁷ Therefore it is logical for the *Zhongyong* to address *qing* following its introduction of the notion of *xing*.

The sentences in the second half of the opening passage state that *zhong* is the foundation of the world,⁸ and *he* is the prevalent *dao* (*dadao* 達道).⁹ *Zhong* 中 and *he* 和 have often been translated as “centrality” and “harmony” respectively. Although *zhong* and *he* have meanings of their own, the two should not be treated as two separate concepts in the *Zhongyong*; they are coupled together to form one inseparable notion in Confucianism.¹⁰ *Zhong* serves as the defining anchor for *he*. It should be noted that *he* is more than a Confucian ideal; it is an ideal for other Chinese traditions as well. In comparison with Daoism, however, the Confucian *he* is restrained by *zhong*. Whereas the Daoist ideal of *he* emphasizes following nature and spontaneity (water-like), the Confucians are more “principled” around *zhong*. For example, the Daoist Zhuangzi’s ideal of human beings “not assisting Heaven (*bu yi ren zhu tian* 不以人助天)” (*Zhuangzi: Greater Master* 28) is in direct contrast to the *Zhongyong*’s ideal of the human Dao of harmony through “assisting in the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth (贊天地之化育).” The *Zhongyong* takes *zhong* or centrality as the foundation (great root) of the world; harmony established on a solid foundation cannot be one without centrality.

The passage culminates in the statement that (when) centrality-harmony is obtained, Heaven and Earth are in their proper places and all things in the world flourish. This is the ideal of grand harmony in Confucianism. The moral thread of this passage appears to be as follows: One should cultivate (*jiao*) oneself in certain ways because they are ways to become a *junzi*; one should become a *junzi* because that is the human way (*dao*); one should walk the human way (*xin dao* 修道) because that is the human *xing*; the human *xing* has a moral binding force because it is endowed by *tian*; centrality (non-extreme) is the foundation of the world; if human beings follow through this central path of cultivation, the world will be harmonized so that

⁷ One of the Guodian 郭店 Documents, *Xing Zi Ming Chu* 性自命出, which scholars generally agree is a Confucian document, has the following statements: “*dao* begins with *qing* (*dao shi yu qing* 道始于情),” “*qing* is generated from *xing* (*qing chu yu xing* 情生于性),” and “*li* is generated from *qing* (*li sheng yu qing* 禮生于情).” They suggest a close connection between *qing*, *xing*, and *li* in Confucianism.

⁸ Literally, “under heaven.” For the sake of convenience, I use the common rendering of “*tian*” as “Heaven.” We should keep in mind that it has nothing or little to do with “Heaven” in Western religious traditions.

⁹ *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* (《說文解字》) (*Xushen's Lexicon*) defines “*da* 達” as “proceeding without obstacles (*xing bu xiang yu yexing* 行不相遇也).” The word has been used to mean *tong* 通 (going through): when the public way is through (*da*), the private (selfish) door is blocked (*gong dao da er si men sai yi* 公道達而私門塞矣)” (*Xunzi* [The Dao of Kings], 317). *Dadao* 達道 can be literally rendered as “the broad through way.”

¹⁰ Confucian scholars have used *zhonghe* as one term. For example, Xunzi 荀子 wrote, “*Zhonghe* is the proper measure of managing public affairs (*zhong he zhe ting zhi sheng ye* 中和者，聽之繩也)” (*Xunzi* [Rulership]: 304).

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.

The Chinese character 和 *he* means “responding vocally” and has to do with the making of music. Presumably when different sounds and instruments are played together in a properly mixed way, there is *he*.¹¹ Therefore *he* is necessarily a dynamic process, rather than an accomplished static state. It should be understood as harmonizing or harmonization.¹² In this respect, Ames and Hall’s processual reading of the text sets the stage perfectly for my reading of *he* as the central theme of the *Zhongyong*.

If we look at the entire opening passage in the *Zhongyong*, we will find that it starts with the *dao* in connection with the human *xing*, and ends with harmony as the prevalence of the *dao*. Harmony is the defining concept of this opening passage. That this passage sets the theme for the entire text can be further supported by the fact that the text then moves on to quote Confucius’ various statements on the concept of *zhongyong* 中庸, which I will argue next is the *junzi*’s way to achieve harmony, to harmonize the world. In my view, it is hardly an exaggeration to say that all other concepts and passages in the *Zhongyong* are footnotes to this theme-setting passage. Thus, in my reading of this Confucian text, the *Zhongyong* not only offers a vision of the world centered on harmony, but also answers the key moral philosophical questions of both the “why” and the “how” for human beings to participate in and co-generate the grand harmony of the world.

III

In this section, I will examine the meaning or meanings of the term *zhongyong* 中庸, probably the most disputed term in the entire text. Such an examination is important because it is directly related to my argument of harmony (*he* 和) as the central theme of the text.

Using the language of “focus and field,” Ames and Hall argue that *zhongyong* 中庸 is best translated as “focusing the familiar,” which means bringing the ordinary and everyday affairs into focus through ritualised activities. Ames and Hall write: “What for ZHENG Xuan is ‘the practical application of centrality’ we would render as ‘focusing.’ What is focused, we would hold, is as ZHU Xi suggests—namely the ordinary and common, or ‘the familiar affairs of the day’” (116).

The above statement is puzzling to me because it suggests that Ames and Hall may have illegitimately double-used the word *yong* 庸 in *zhongyong* in

¹¹ See Lai: 746, and the *Book of Change* (in the *Thirteen Classics*, 71). In the *Zuo Commentary on the Spring and Autumn*, it is stated that *he* is like making soup with various ingredients (see the *Thirteen Classics*, 2093).

¹² For an elaborate discussion of *he*, see my “Toward a Harmonious World: the Confucian Ideal of *He* 和 for a Peaceful Universe,” forthcoming.

their interpretation and translation. In ZHENG Xuan's 鄭玄 (127-200) commentary on the *Zhongyong* chapter of the *Liji* 《禮記》 (the *Book of Rites*), he interpreted *yong* 庸 (with the first tone) as *yong* 用 (with the fourth tone) (*yong yong ye* 庸用也). Here the first *yong* is the latter half of the title *Zhongyong* while the second *yong* means use or application. Therefore, ZHENG Xuan said that the *yong* of the *Zhongyong* means "application." This meaning of *yong* 庸 can be confirmed in *Xusben's Lexicon*, which defines the word in the exact same way as ZHENG Xuan did. Accordingly, *zhongyong* 中庸 means *zhongyong* 中用. In ancient Chinese language, *zhongyong* 中用 can mean *zhong zhi yong* 中之用, namely "the use (or application) of *zhong*." Therefore, what for ZHENG Xuan is "the practical application of centrality" is already *zhongyong* 中庸, already both *zhong* 中 and *yong* 庸. ZHU Xi (1130-1200), the Song Neo-Confucian scholar, interpreted *yong* 庸 as "the ordinary and common" (Zhu: 1). Accordingly, *zhongyong* 中庸 means "the central and common." TU Wei-ming evidently has followed Zhu's interpretation as Tu renders it as "centrality and commonality" (see Tu 1989). Ames and Hall's interpretation of *yong* 庸 as "the familiar" is close to "the ordinary and common," and can be justified. However, if Ames and Hall render what for ZHENG Xuan is "the practical application of centrality" as "focusing," they have already used both *zhong* 中 and *yong* 庸. They can no longer use *yong* 庸 legitimately a second time to mean "the ordinary and common" or "the familiar," as Ames and Hall have done in making the whole phrase "focusing the familiar." If Ames and Hall interpret *yong* 庸 as "the familiar," they cannot use the same word in the same phrase to mean "application (*yong* 用)." They cannot use the word *yong* 庸 with two distinct meanings in the same breath.

Perhaps what Ames and Hall really want to say here is that what for Zheng is "centrality" they render as "focusing." Indeed, in the text of their translation, they often use "focus" in rendering *zhong* 中 (see, for example, 90, 92, 104). I take exception to their rendering *zhong* 中 as "focusing." To my knowledge, in Chinese classical literature there is no evidence showing that *zhong* 中 has ever been used to mean "focusing." When used with the first tone, *zhong* 中 means *nei* 內 or *li* 里 (inside); *ban* 半 (halfway); and *zhongdeng* 中等 (median). None of these meanings is even remotely related to "focusing." When used with the fourth tone, *zhong* 中 means "conforming to" (*fu he* 符合), and by extension, "hitting the target." Perhaps one could argue that, if by extension *zhong* 中 as "conforming to" can mean "hitting the target," then by another round of derivation from "hitting the target," it would mean "focusing"; after all, one would have to focus (the arrow) before hitting the target. While this may seem promising, I do not think it works. For one thing, since *zhong* 中 in the fourth tone already means "hitting the target," it can no longer mean "focusing," or the same word would have to mean both before and after the release of the arrow. From a linguistic point of view, this would be extremely confusing and has to be avoided. Because *zhong* 中 cannot be extended to mean "focusing," *zhongyong* 中庸 cannot be legitimately rendered as "focusing the familiar" as Ames and Hall have done. Furthermore, in the

Zhongyong, *zhong* is paired with *he* and *zhonghe* (centrality-harmony), as presented in the opening passage, constitutes a concept of vital importance; there are compelling reasons to interpret *zhong* along the line of “centrality” as I will argue later.

Now I would like to provide some general observations that I hope are useful in understanding *zhongyong*. First, I give *zhong* a very ordinary reading: it literally means *nei* 內 or *li* 里, namely “inside” or “(in) the middle,” which can also be understood as “center,” or in its adjective form as “central.”¹³ This understanding of the word can help us make sense of the statement “*xi nu ai le zhi wei fa wei zhi zhong* 喜怒哀樂之未發謂之中,” which says that before these emotions (joy, anger, grief, and pleasure) arise (*fa*發), they are in the *nei* 內 or *li* 里, “inside” or “in the center” of the person.¹⁴ By extension, when one acts in a non-leaning and non-biased way, one is *zhong* 中 or central. *Yong* 庸 in ancient times can either mean *yong* 用 (use or application), as defined in *Xushen's Lexicon*, or mean *pingchang* 平常, as adopted by ZHU Xi, which means “ordinary” or “common.” By extension from this second meaning, the word can also mean “constant” or even “persistent.” Evidently, in as early as the Warring States period, *yong* 庸 as being constant or persistent was already regarded as one of the six major virtues. The *Zhou Li* 周禮 (the *Rites of Zhou*) advises to “teach the children of the nation with the virtues of music: centrality, harmony, respect, *yong*, filiality, and friendship (*yi yue de jiao guo zhi; zhong he di yong xiao you* 以樂德教國子: 中和祇庸孝友” (see the *Thirteen Classics*, 787). Here *yong* obviously means neither “use/application” nor “common/ordinary.” It means constant or persistent, as ZHENG Xuan noted in his commentary on *Zhou Li* that “*yong* means having constancy (*yong you chang ye* 庸有常也)” (*Thirteen Classics*, 787). Commenting on the statement “*zhongyong* as a virtue 中庸之为德也” in the *Analects*, the Wei scholar HE Yan 何晏 (?-249) wrote that “*Yong* means constant. Central harmony is the virtue that can be constantly practiced (*yong chang ye zhong he ke chang xing zhi de ye* 庸常也中和可常行之德也)” (*Thirteen Classics*, 2479). It is probably based on this derivative meaning that CHENG Yi 程頤 (1033-1107), interpreting *zhongyong*, stated that “unbiased is called *zhong* and un-changing is called *yong* (*bu pian zhi wei zhong bu yi zhi wei yong* 不偏之謂中不易之謂庸)” (see Zhu 1985: 1). There are good reasons to interpret *yong* as HE Yan did: *zhong-yong* means “centrality-persistence.” This way, *zhong-yong* combined together offers a strong defining note for *he*. *He* defined by *zhong-yong* stands in sharp contrast to the Daoist notion of *he*, which Confucians regard as too unprincipled, too ready to compromise, and too willing to “go with the flow (*liu*流).” Confucians believe in “harmonizing without following the flow (*he er bu liu* 和而不流)” (*Zhongyong* 10).

For the sake of argument, however, I grant that each of these three interpretations of *yong* can work. First, if we interpret *yong* to mean “use” or “application,” then *zhongyong* means “the use or application of centrality.”

¹³ *Xushen's Lexicon* defines *zhong* simply as *nei ye* 內也.

¹⁴ This should not be taken merely spatially.

The connection between harmonization and the application of centrality is straightforward; as I will argue in section 4, centrality is the Confucian way to harmonization. Second, as I have just elaborated, *yong* as constant or persistent also makes sense in connection with harmony as understood by HE Yan. Third, I believe that, even if we interpret *yong* to mean “ordinary” and “common,” such a connection between *yong* and “harmony” can still be made. My understanding is that, from the meaning of the “ordinary” or “common” of *yong* 庸, it can be extended to mean the non-extreme. Hence, the *yong* 庸 in *zhongyong* complements *zhong*, central. One reason for me to think this way is found in the *Zhou Yi* (《周易》). The *Book of Change* quotes Confucius’ comment on the symbol of the dragon: “龍，德而正中者也。庸言之信，庸行之謹，閑邪存其誠，善世而不伐，德博而化” (*Thirteen Classics*, 15). I translate: “The dragon’s virtue is upright (*zheng* 正) and central (*zhong* 中). Through the trustworthiness of one’s ordinary saying and the diligence in one’s ordinary action, abandon obliquity, and preserve integrity (*cheng* 誠), benefit the world and do not aggress, broaden virtue and transform (the world).”¹⁵ *Zheng* 正 can also mean “middle” and “central” as in *zheng-men* 正門 (the door in the middle or the central door). Using *zheng* 正 along with *zhong* 中 enforces the sense of “centrality,” as usually is the case when coupling words in the Chinese language.¹⁶ Here Confucius used *yong* 庸 in explicating *zhong-zheng* 正中 (centrality). He said that it is not anything other than ordinary words and actions that cultivate and form the central virtue; the person of virtue is one who benefits the world but is not aggressive. Aggression implies taking extreme measures, from which the person of “centrality” refrains.

However, we do not have to be stuck with the attempt to figure out the meaning of *zhongyong* solely by analyzing the respective meanings of these two words. As often is the case in the Chinese language, when two words are put together for the first time, a new meaning or a new shade of meaning emerges that cannot be reduced to the simple combination of the two words taken separately. I suggest that the phrase *zhongyong* may well be such a case.

Perhaps the best way to figure out the meaning of *zhongyong* 中庸 is to see how the term is used in the text. I believe that an important clue can be found in the passage that immediately follows the theme-setting section cited in section II. Right after the text presents the ideal of *zhonghe* 中和 (centrality-harmony or central harmony), it quotes Confucius:

君子中庸，小人反中庸。君子之中庸也，君子而時中；小人之中庸也，小人而無

¹⁵ In ancient Chinese *xie* 邪 and *xie* 斜 have the same pronunciation and same meaning. In parallel with their antonym 正 *zheng*, both words mean physical obliquity and, by derivation, moral vice. *Bu fa* 不伐 has also been rendered as “not bragging.” The character 伐 consists of a person with an attacking weapon. Its proper meaning is attacking (another person or state) through military actions. Here I render it as “aggress.” *Yong* 庸 can also be interpreted as “use” in this passage.

¹⁶ The Chinese often team up two words of similar meanings to make up a term with an enforced meaning, such as *pingchang* 平常 (ordinary) and *qingbai* 清白 (innocent).

忌憚也。

I translate:

The *junzi* practices *zhongyong*, the petty person is contrary to *zhongyong*. As for *zhongyong*,¹⁷ the *junzi* being a *junzi* exercises appropriately timed centrality (*shi zhong* 時中); as for *zhongyong*, the petty person being a petty person does not have the requisite caution and concern. (*Zhongyong* 2)

Shi 時 here means *he shi* 合時 or *ying shi* 應時 namely “opportune” or “appropriately timed.” Centrality is not the mean; it is about adjusting one’s action to be appropriate to the specific time and situation. The expression *shi-zhong* 時中 also appears in the *Zhou Yi*. The *Book of Change* states that “there is danger at the foot of the mountain. One stops proceeding due to the danger. This is *meng* 蒙. *Meng* symbolizes going smoothly, [because] it exercises (*xing* 行) well-timed centrality (山下有險險而止蒙蒙亨以亨行時中也)” (*Thirteen Classics*, 20). It suggests that *heng* 亨 or “going smoothly” depends on well-timed centrality. In the above passage in the *Zhongyong*, Confucius said that the *junzi* practices *zhongyong*, and that he exercises well-timed centrality; the petty person is the opposite: he exercises no caution and has no concern for others and for the world; the petty person has no sense of appropriateness in regard to timing and centrality; he is biased toward extremes. The right way is, of course, that of the *junzi*; it is the way of *zhongyong*, the way characterized by timely adjusted centrality. When the *junzi* exercises centrality, which is adjusted to fit the specific time and situation, he is in harmony with the rest of the world. Or better yet, he contributes to, participates in, and co-generates the grand harmony of the cosmos. This, I suggest, is the connection between the central theme of harmony in the text and the title of the *Zhongyong*.¹⁸

IV

The way of *zhongyong* is the way of harmony. In this section I will examine how the central theme of harmony (*he* 和) is expounded throughout the

¹⁷ The *zhi* 之 in ancient Chinese can mean the possessive relation; *junzi zhi zhongyong* 君子之中庸 could mean the *junzi*’s *zhongyong*. However, this way it does not make sense with *xiao ren zhi zhongyong* 小人之中庸, which would have to mean “the petty person’s *zhongyong*,” for Confucius made it clear that the petty person is contrary to *zhongyong*. In their translation, Ames and Hall ignore the parallel between these two sentences in Chinese, without explanation. I suggest that the *zhi* after *junzi* and *xiao ren* (petty person) should read *zhi yu* 之于, to mean “as for” or “as to.” For such ancient use of “*zhi*” see He 1979: 418.

¹⁸ In some way, this connection parallels with that between the Buddhist middle way and the Buddhist ideal of harmony. Even though the Confucian *zhongyong* is not the same as the Buddhist middle way, there is some resemblance, which is more formal (avoiding extremes) than material (the specific contents). For an illuminating discussion of the relation between the Buddhist middle way and the Buddhist ideal of harmony, see NAKAMURA Hajime 1988.

Zhongyong. In the opening passage of the *Zhongyong*, *he* 和 is defined as *zhong jie* 中節. *Zhong* 中 here should be read with the fourth tone to mean *fu he* 符合, to fit, to suit. *Jie* 節 here means “moderate (moderation),” or “regulate” in the sense of adjusting for proper function and putting in good order.¹⁹ The sentence “*fa er jie zhong jie wei zhi he* 發而皆中節謂之和” thus reads “when (the emotions) arise and are all (centrally) moderated, one is in the state of harmony.” Being moderated or regulated is the opposite of the acting pattern of the petty person, whose actions are unmoderated and unregulated, and therefore are extreme. Thus treading the path of *zhongyong* to avoid extremes is essential to harmony.

In section 3 of the text, Confucius complains that people rarely practiced *zhongyong*, and he moves on in section 4 to explain why. He says that he knew the reason that the proper way had not prevailed; it was because smart people overdid things whereas obtuse people fell short. By implication, the proper way is to avoid these two extremes: to tread a central way. One short line later, in section 6, Confucius praises the sage King Shun 舜 for his practice of “seizing the two ends (extremes) and applying the central way to his people (*zhi qi liang duan yong qi zhong yu min* 執其兩端用其中于民).” Here centrality is highlighted again.

However, we should not think that the Confucian way as described in the *Zhongyong* is merely to take the middle road, as the translation of *zhongyong* as “the mean” may imply.²⁰ Confucians want to avoid extremes and promote centrality. However, the goal for Confucians is not holding the mean itself, but harmony. Indeed, a world in which everyone takes the middle road would be a very boring world. *Zhong* in the sense of “the middle” or “the mean” is not a virtue in itself. It becomes a virtue when it contributes to harmony. For this reason, a dualistic interpretation separating *zhong* and *he* as two distinct values in the *Zhongyong* risks taking “the middle” or “the mean” as a virtue in itself. For this reason, *zhong* must be understood in the context of *he*.

The Confucians believe that we should avoid extremes because extreme actions tend to disrupt harmony. Yet sometimes seemingly extreme actions may be needed in order to counterbalance other forces to maintain central harmony. What kind of action is appropriate depends on whether the action, adjusted to its particular time and situation, tends to harmonize the world. There is a dynamic aspect of *zhong*, which requires taking appropriate counterbalancing measures to keep on the central course. This is in line with Shi Bo’s 史伯 earlier definition and understanding of *he* as “using one thing to balance another (*yi ta ping ta wei zhi he* 以他平他謂之和)” (Lai: 746). Confucius did not advocate mere passiveness. Centrality is realized in the larger picture

¹⁹ See the *Analects* 1:12, “*bu yi lijie zhi yi bu ke xing ye* 不以禮節之亦不可行也 (if it is not regulated with *li* it will not work).”

²⁰ The idea of the mean is often attributed to Aristotle. However, students of Aristotle have different interpretations of his doctrine of the mean. According to J.O. Urmson, for example, Aristotle’s mean should not be understood as a “middle of the road” approach to everything; for Aristotle, what is primarily in a mean is a settled state of character (Urmson: 161).

of human affairs rather than in each particular action that is the mean. In section 10 of the *Zhongyong*, his disciple Zilu 子路 asked about strength. Confucius identified two types of strength. One is the strength of the northerners, who will fight unto death for the right cause; the southerners have a different kind of strength: they are tolerant and flexible, and they do not avenge the unjust. Confucius praised both types of strength, including the strength of “central standing without leaning to one side (*zhongli er buyi* 中立而不倚).” This passage suggests that Confucius endorsed an integration of both kinds of strength into a harmonious interplay, rather than simply taking the mean between the two. The strength of the northerners may appear extreme (to fight unto death), but at times it is necessary in order to keep on the central path in the long run and in the large picture of human affairs. Therefore, it should not be ruled out. This is what I take to mean by Confucius’ saying that “the *junzi* harmonizes without following the flow (*junzi he er bu liu* 君子和而不流)” (*Zhongyong* 10). Confucian harmony is not merely to go along with the flow without contention; it is not about unprincipled compromise; it endorses timely and appropriate actions. Again, centrality does not have to be realized in a particular action, but to be realized in the large scale of things. This section indicates a transition from taking harmony as being central and non-extreme to understanding harmony in more specific ways.

Section 15 discusses “the way of the *junzi*.”

The Way of the superior man [*junzi* 君子] may be compared to travelling to a distant place: one must start from the nearest point. It may be compared to ascending a height: one must start from below. The *Book of Odes* says, “Happy union with wife and children is like the music of lutes and harps. When brothers live in concord and at peace, the harmony is sweet and delightful. Let your family live in concord, and enjoy your wife and children.” Confucius said, “How happy will parents be!” (Chan: 102)

In this passage, the way of the *junzi* is described as one of harmony. His loving relationships with his wife and children are like a symphony where different instruments are played in concord. The Chinese word that is translated as “happy” by Wing-tsit Chan and by Ames and Hall is *shun* 順, which means “going along with” or “sailing smoothly.” In his commentary on the *Shijing* 《詩經》 ZHENG Xuan used *he shun* 和順 to interpret *shun* (*Thirteen Classics*, 341). The *Liji* 《禮記》 states that “When the old and the young enjoy music together, there is *he-shun* (*zhang you tong ting zhi ze mo bu he shun* 長幼同聽之則莫不和順)” (*Thirteen Classics*, 1545). *He shun* 和順 means “harmonious and smooth,” indicating the intrinsic connection between *shun* and harmony. When something is *shun* 順, it is in harmony with the world. Therefore the last sentence of Section 15 may also be interpreted as saying that parents will live a harmonious life.

The way of the *junzi* is that of *zhongyong*. Section 27 states: “the *junzi* honors the moral virtue and follows the path of inquiry and learning. He achieves breadth and greatness, and seeks the refined and subtle to the limits.

He strives to reach the greatest height and brilliancy, and treads the way of *zhongyong* (*dao zhongyong* 道中庸)" (see Chan: 110). Being *zhongyong*, the *junzi* harmonizes the world not only through a loving family life but also through developing other moral and intellectual virtues. The Confucian harmonization is based on the *junzi*'s active and positive contribution to the process, not on merely going with the flow without contention. In this process, the *junzi* exercises *zhongyong* by not going to extremes and by maintaining the central course.

Toward the end of the *Zhongyong*, Confucius is described as a great person. I quote Ames and Hall's excellent translation of this passage:

Zhongni (Confucius) revered Yao and Shun as his ancestors and carried on their ways; he emulated and made illustrious the ways of Kings Wen and Wu. He modeled himself above on the rhythm of the turning seasons, and below he was attuned to the patterns of waters and earth. He is comparable to the heavens and the earth, sheltering and supporting everything that is. He is comparable to the progress of the four seasons, and the alternating brightnesses of the sun and the moon.

All things are nurtured together and do not cause injury to one another; the various ways are traveled together and are not conflicted. Their lesser excellences are to be seen as flowing streams; their greater excellences are to be seen as massive transformations. This is why the heavens and the earth are so great. (Ames & Hall: 111-2)

In this passage the ideal of harmony jumps out on the page! Confucius is said to be in tune with the rhythm of the turning seasons. The Chinese words here are *tian shi* 天時, the (appropriate) timing of *tian*. "The progress of the four seasons" is a translation of *si shi zhi cuo xing* 四時之錯行, literally "the alternating movement (course) of the four seasons." The four seasons are quite different from one another, yet they move along without conflict. Thus the alternating movement or proceeding of the four seasons symbolizes a harmonious interplay of different things. The most important sentences that highlight the entire passage, in my opinion, are "All things are nurtured together and yet (*er* 而) do not cause injury to one another; the various ways are traveled together and yet are not conflicted." The ability to generate, nurture, and participate in such a harmonious process is indeed the most important virtue of all. It is the way of the *junzi*, of the *dao*, and of *zhongyong*.

V.

One important contribution of Ames and Hall's book is highlighting the ideal of *cheng* 誠 in the *Zhongyong*. Given the importance of this concept, we cannot adequately elucidate the central theme of harmony (*he*) without examining the relation between *cheng* and *he*. In this section I will look at the relation between them and show how *cheng* is connected to harmony in the *Zhongyong*.

Ames and Hall are definitely correct that *cheng* cannot be adequately

translated into a single term in English.²¹ I also give them credit for their emphasis on the creative aspect of the concept. Such emphasis not only underscores a core idea of the *Zhongyong* but also makes some sentences much more comprehensible. For example, section 25 states that “*Cheng* is through the beginning to the end of things (*wu*物), and without *cheng* there cannot be anything (*cheng zhe wu zhi shi zhong, bu cheng wu wu*誠者物之始終，不誠無物).” Other translations of *cheng* such as “sincerity” or “integrity” simply do not make sense as well as “creativity” does in this context.

It is my claim that, in the *Zhongyong*, *cheng* has a direct connection to harmony. Section 20 states:

誠者天之道也。誠之者人之道也。誠者不勉而中，不思而得，從容中道，聖人也。

I translate:

Cheng is the way of *tian*. To be *cheng* is the human way. The one who is *cheng* hits the target without toil, and comes up with ideas without contemplation. Such a person treads the central way at ease; he is a sage.

Cheng is a pivotal point that connects the way of the *tian* and the human way. The person of *cheng* adopts the central way and is at home in treading such a path. The description of this sage-way is reminiscent of Confucius himself, who was able to do whatever he wished at the age of seventy without transgressing any boundaries: he was entirely at ease walking the human way. Such a state is undoubtedly a state of harmony and *cheng* is the way to achieve such harmony.

Section 25 states that *cheng* is self-consummation. The person of *cheng* not only consummates oneself (*cheng ji* 成己) to become a person of *ren* 仁; such a person also consummates things (*cheng wu* 成物) in the world. *Cheng* 成 means *chengquan* 成全, which connotes “nurture” (help something complete itself). The text continues to state that “The *de* of the *xing* consists in the way (*dao*) of combining the external and the internal. Therefore it is fitting by applying *de* with appropriate timing (*shi*) (*xing zhi de ye, he wai nei zhi dao ye, gu shi cuo zhi yi ye* 性之德也，合外內之道也，故時措之宜也).” The *Zhongyong*’s author did not make the meaning of “the external and the internal” explicit here. I read this passage as saying that it is by the *de* (virtue, excellence, or power) of the *xing* (which is endowed by *tian*) that one can make complete both oneself (the internal 內) and other things (the external 外). The way of a *cheng* person is to strike a balance or equilibrium between the internal and the external. This indicates the ideal of centrality (*zhong* 中). Timely application (*shi cuo* 時措) of this virtue of centrality is fitting in the world. It suggests the ideal of *zhongyong* as *shizhong* 時中 (appropriately timed centrality) as defined in section 2 of the

²¹ For an interpretation of a different aspect of *cheng*, see Li 1999: chapter 2: Confucius and Heidegger.

text, which I have argued indicates harmony.

Section 22 states that only through *cheng* can human beings and things (*wu* 物) realize their *xing* 性, which is endowed by *tian*. Then it states that, when human beings realize their *xing* and other things' *xing*, "they can assist in the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth (*keyi zan tiandi zhi huayu* 可以贊天地之化育)" and "they can thus form a trinity with Heaven and Earth (*keyi yu tiandi can yi* 可以與天地參矣)" (Chan: 108). Here "the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth" and "forming a trinity with Heaven and Earth" echo the opening passage of the *Zhongyong* where it says that "when central harmony is achieved, Heaven and Earth take their appropriate places and everything flourishes (*zhi zhong he, tian di wei yan, wan wu yu yan* 致中和，天地位焉，萬物育焉)." It means that when Heaven and Earth transform and nourish everything, and when humans form a trinity with Heaven and Earth, which presupposes the appropriate places of both, the world is a great harmony. From these analyses, we can see that the understanding and realization of *cheng* is essential to harmonization.

VI

I have argued that the central theme of the *Zhongyong* is grand harmony. I have outlined the relation between harmony on the one hand, and the two other key concepts *zhongyong* and *cheng*, on the other. I present my interpretation here as an alternative to Ames and Hall's interpretation of the central theme of this extremely important Confucian text. My difference with Ames and Hall is by no means a trivial one, because it is my belief that the most significant contribution that Confucianism can offer to world philosophy and world politics today is precisely this ideal of harmony, which is best highlighted in the *Zhongyong*. As I stated at the outset, I am sympathetic to Ames and Hall's non-substantialist and non-essentialist approach to interpreting the *Zhongyong*. I believe that a processual understanding of the *Zhongyong* is instrumental in understanding the central theme of harmonization, for only a dynamic world can be meaningfully harmonized. Therefore, I see my disagreement with Ames and Hall as a "family dispute," to use a very Confucian expression. Hopefully something good will come out of it.²²

²² Earlier versions of this paper were presented at an "Author Meets Critics" session at the American Philosophical Association Eastern Division annual meeting in Philadelphia, December 27-30, 2002, and at the David Hall Memorial Conference at Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas, May 22-24, 2003. I would like to thank Roger Ames, Jane Geaney, and the audience at both occasions for their insightful comments and critiques. I am indebted to my colleague Jeffrey Dippmann, who read an earlier version of the paper and provided valuable suggestions. My deep gratitude also goes to the journal's two anonymous referees for their comments.

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