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# POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

## Harmony in Africa, East Asia, and South America

*Thaddeus Metz*

### **Comparing Political Philosophies Beyond the West**

It is fairly common these days for a given political perspective from the Global South to be put into comparison with one from the ‘modern’ West. In particular, now it is not hard to find, say, an *ubuntu*-based account of distributive justice or Confucian theory of political power compared with Kantian democratic liberalism.

What is more rare is a direct comparison between accounts from the Global South, without the large mediation of a modern Western variable. This state of affairs is in some ways ironic, given how ‘WEIRD’ Kantian rights, utilitarian cost-benefit analysis, and social contract theory are. This acronym is often used to signify, not only the traits of being Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic, but also ones that are amongst the least representative of the world’s population (eg, Henrich et al). It is unfortunate that global thought about political philosophy is dominated by perspectives that grow out of Euro-American-Australasian cultures, which are in the numerical minority and do not cohere well with the views of many long-standing intellectual traditions, which presumably have some insight into the human condition. What might we learn from South-South dialogues about the proper role of political organization?

If one considers worldviews beyond the modern West, at least as expressed in English-speaking literature (to which this essay is restricted), one encounters philosophies of politics that differ dramatically from salient Western ones. For many indigenous peoples, neither autonomy, utility, nor contract should be deemed foundational to politics, and, instead, ‘harmony is mother of all values’ (Bell and Mo). It is typical for philosophies from the Global South to hold that a political organization at the domestic level should harmonize with its citizens, foster harmonious relationships between them, and also promote such relationships between citizens and certain aspects of nature.

However, harmony is neglected in internationally influential philosophical discussions about rights, power, and other facets of public policy; it is not prominent in articles that appear in widely read journals or books published by presses with a global reach (although there are of course sprinkles, on which I draw here). Of particular interest, political philosophers and policy-makers remain ignorant of the similarities and differences between various harmony-oriented approaches to institutional choice from around the world.

In this chapter, I begin to rectify these deficiencies by critically discussing the way harmony has figured into political philosophies from three major traditions in the Global South, namely, African *ubuntu* (humanness in the Nguni languages there), East Asian Confucianism, and South American *buen vivir* (good living in Spanish). I point out that, although harmony is at the core of all three political philosophies, it is conceived in different ways, entailing incompatible prescriptions about things such as who should make laws and which sorts of beings have rights against the state. Such contrasting views call for rigorous cross-cultural dialogue amongst the theorists of harmony, beyond mounting challenges to more individualist approaches that have been salient in modern Western political thought. While there have been comparisons of *ubuntu* and Confucianism (Bell and Metz; Anedo; Metz 2014, 2020) and *ubuntu* and *buen vivir* (Graness; van Norren), there have not been any of all three, let alone in terms of their conceptions of harmony and their bearing on political philosophy.

Note that, when expounding the conceptions of harmony that have been prominent in the three Global Southern bodies of thought, I downplay appeals to imperceptible agency or a spiritual realm. For instance, I spell out *ubuntu* harmony without reference to ancestors and Confucian harmony without mentioning Heaven. I do this in part because contemporary philosophical exponents writing in English are generally not placing such considerations at the heart of their analyses, and in part because setting aside contested metaphysical claims would make it easier to facilitate cross-cultural debate about moral-political ones.

In the next section ‘Harmony as an Ethical Orientation’, I briefly provide a broad analysis of what a harmony-based moral-political orientation is, contrasting it with those that have been prominent in the West for the past few hundred years. Then I spell out three different conceptions of harmony and their implications for politics from the Global South (Sections ‘African *Ubuntu*’, ‘East Asian Confucianism’, and ‘South American *Buen Vivir*’). Finally, I suggest some ways forward for scholarship in regards to non-Western political philosophies that appeal to harmony, particularly in the light of their differences, after which I briefly summarize (Section ‘Comparing Three Political Philosophies from the Global South’).

### Harmony as an Ethical Orientation

Although I focus on respects in which conceptions of harmony in the Global South differ and have competing implications for politics, it is worth pausing to consider how they are similar. What makes a value system harmony-based? How does such an ethic differ from others that have been prominent in English-speaking political philosophy?

Although the focus of this chapter is on philosophies from the Global South, in this section, I do address salient Western approaches, to illustrate what the former have in common in contrast with the latter. There is a large kernel of truth in the claim that modern Euro-American-Australasian moral-political philosophies are individualist. Too often that has been construed in terms of egoism, self-ownership theory, or some other orientation that does not prescribe weighty duties on a moral agent to help her society. It is true that these ethics are respectable parts of the modern Western philosophical tradition, but are largely anathema to African philosophy. However, even more commonly held than they by philosophers in the West for the past 250 years or so have been utilitarian and Kantian principles, both of which not only ascribe moral status to those besides the agent but also demand much of her in terms of helping others.

I think the relevant respect in which the modern Western tradition counts as individualist is not the presence of egoism and similarly undemanding ethical views, but rather a feature that these views share with utilitarianism, Kantianism, and still other influential theories

such as respect for human life and biocentrism (a point I first made in Metz 2012). What all these theories have in common is a certain understanding of what it is that makes something merit moral treatment. Specifically, they all include the view that there are certain features intrinsic to an individual in virtue of which it is owed duties for its own sake or 'directly'. The following are all individualist features grounding moral status, in the sense that none of them makes essential reference to anyone but the individual with the feature: being an agent, owning oneself, having the ability to feel pleasure/pain or to have preferences dis/satisfied, having the capacity for autonomy or rationality, being a member of *Homo sapiens*, possessing a soul, and being a living organism.

Individualism is what has been salient in the modern Western tradition. Such an account of moral status has grounded conceptions of institutional obligations in which notions of cost-benefit analysis, ownership, contract, self-governance, individual rights, and desert have been prominent. Again, there have obviously been some exceptions, such as Aldo Leopold's land ethic, but my claim is that individualist analyses of how a political organization such as a state ought to be oriented have been the rule for Euro-American-Australasian philosophy for many decades.

Many readers will know that the African tradition has been substantially different, with relationality being salient in accounts of human dignity and moral status. One scholar remarks, 'The dignity of human beings emanates from the network of relationships, from being in community; in an African view, it cannot be reduced to a unique, competitive and free personal ego' (Botman), while another says, '(T)he human person in Africa is from the very beginning in a network of relationships that constitutes his alienable dignity' (Bujo 88), and still another notes, '(T)he dignity and importance of the individual human being can best be understood in terms of relations with other human beings as well as relations with physical nature' (Ramose 312). There have been apparent exceptions, with the appeal to life-force as grounding moral status potentially viewed as a form of individualism (on which see, eg, Magesa). However, many in the African tradition would argue that the nature of a given instance of life-force cannot be comprehended except by its relationships with other life-forces, ie, that it is ultimately a relational feature.

There are different views on precisely which relations matter, but one common view is that a being has in fact engaged in harmonious interactions with a clan or a specific community (eg, Cobbah; Ikuenobè). Another view, which this author has championed, is that it is the capacity to relate to others in harmonious ways, not actual relations with them, that confers moral status (Metz 2012, 2022).

None of these views is individualist, for they all entail that what it is that gives one a moral standing cannot be understood without reference to a positive interaction with someone else. Relational views maintain that some kind of desirable interactive property between oneself and others is what entitles one to moral treatment or to being the object of direct duties. Insofar as the relevant interaction involves harmony, the straightforward view to hold is that a being merits moral consideration insofar as it either is or can be a party to harmonious relationships. That could mean one harmonizing with others or others harmonizing with one (or both).

Since, for many traditions in the Global South, what makes human beings and other parts of nature special is their having related harmoniously or having the capacity to do so, the kinds of institutional obligations that follow tend to differ from the Western ones mentioned above. In contrast to those, prominent have been prescriptions for a political organization to balance, integrate, align, and smooth (Anedo 16). Additional salient obligations, discussed below, involve advancing the common good, caring for people, fostering inclusion and togetherness,

acknowledging interdependence, cooperating to realize shared ends, and interacting in ways that create something new and useful. Consider how different this batch of ethical concepts is from, say, a person's happiness counting for one when maximizing outcomes, rights to own oneself and property, and respect for another's ability to govern her own life.

In the following, I bring out some of what the relational concepts entail for politics in the contexts of three different worldviews from the Global South. While all broadly share the harmony-centric value system sketched in this section, they interestingly have different understandings of how to understand harmony. I first spell them out on their own terms in the next three sections, after which I highlight areas of difference between them that warrant sustained philosophical enquiry.

### African *Ubuntu*

In this section, my aim is to expound a widely held interpretation of *ubuntu*, particularly as it bears on issues in political philosophy. The word '*ubuntu*' literally means humanness in the Nguni languages of southern Africa, but is these days often used to refer to a sub-Saharan ethic (or even broader philosophy) that includes the prescription to develop one's humanness by relating to others in more or less harmonious ways. Despite the linguistic origin of the word, the approach to morality associated with it resonates with many philosophies from other indigenous parts of the continent.

Probably most southern African thinkers hold that certain harmonious or communal ways of relating merit pursuit as ends or for their own sake, a view that is shared by philosophers from other countries, too. However, also common, particularly elsewhere on the continent, is the view that harmonious relationships are essential means by which to promote other, logically distinct ends, such as meeting everyone's needs (eg, Gyekye 35–76) or promoting life-force (eg, Magesa). Regardless, it is standard amongst African philosophers to hold that morality must be informed by relational considerations, and, in the following, I spell out a prominent way to understand them and their implications for political choice.

To begin to say more about what an *ubuntu* approach to moral-political philosophy involves, consider two representative quotations about it. The first is from Desmond Tutu, renowned Chair of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) who appealed to *ubuntu* when considering the TRC's ethical foundations. He remarks about African peoples,

When we want to give high praise to someone we say, '*Yu, u nobuntu*'; 'Hey, he or she has *ubuntu*.' This means they are generous, hospitable, friendly, caring and compassionate....We say, 'a person is a person through other people....I am human because I belong. I participate, I share....Harmony, friendliness, community are great goods. Social harmony is for us the *summum bonum*—the greatest good. Anything that subverts or undermines this sought-after good is to be avoided like the plague.

(Tutu 34–35)

Consider, too, the following characterization of an *ubuntu* morality from Yvonne Mokgoro, a former Justice of South Africa's Constitutional Court who had invoked in her judicial reasoning:

(H)armony is achieved through close and sympathetic social relations within the group - thus the notion *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (a person is a person through other

persons—ed.)...which also implies that during one's life-time, one is constantly challenged by others, practically, to achieve self-fulfilment through a set of collective social ideals....a morality of co-operation, compassion, communalism.

(Mokgoro 17)

Notice that, for both thinkers, one is to become a genuine human being or realize oneself and to do that by prizing harmonious relationships with other persons. Those who fail to do so are routinely called 'non-persons' or even 'animals' in extreme cases (see, eg, Nkulu-N'Sengha 143–144).

These views are in the first instance accounts of how to become a good person, and not so much about which public policy would be just. However, it is not a stretch to interpret them in ways that are relevant, say, as holding that just institutions are those that promote harmony or that treat people as special because of their capacity to be a party to harmonious relationships.

As Tutu and Mokgoro implicitly suggest, harmonious relationships are not merely those of any stable, peaceful group. For instance, a dictator whose subjects do not rebel because they are afraid does not have a harmonious relationship with them in the relevant, morally attractive sense. The harmony to prize is instead a way of relating in which people 'participate' and are 'close', on the one hand, and 'share' and are 'sympathetic', on the other, a characterization echoed by other African thinkers (on which see the quotations in Metz 2022: 92–93). The former is a matter of cooperative engagements or joint projects, while the latter consists of aiding others for their own sake, which in the African tradition is centrally to meet their needs, including the need to exhibit humanness. These ways of interacting are often thought required to respect the dignity of human persons, and note how they are characteristic of an (extended) family, with a common thought being that politics and society ought to be modelled on appealing familial relationships (eg, Nyerere 12; Oruka 148–150). A dictator hardly cooperates with his subjects, and nor does he reliably do what is expected to be good for each of them.

Instead, the default position amongst African philosophers is that political power must be allocated democratically and, more specifically, according to a consensual agreement. While details naturally vary amongst thinkers, a prominent view is that, although there should be elected representatives (say, because they are likely to be more experienced or because direct democracy is impractical in a mass society), Parliamentarians should have to come to a unanimous agreement in order for a statute to be valid (eg, Wiredu). It is thought that requiring consensus amongst legislative representatives would make it most likely that the good of all citizens would be sufficiently advanced and would constitute the most intense form of cooperation possible at the political level. Settling for majority rule is thought to degrade those in the minority, as a failure to harmonize adequately.

Turn from the question of how power should be allocated to how it should be used. That is, let us consider which laws a state should enforce, given a prescription to respect people's dignity by relating to them harmoniously, roughly with cooperation and aid.

On the one hand, many African philosophers believe that such an orientation requires enforcing human rights, with violations of them consisting of degrading treatment in the forms of killing, subordination, or harm. Unlike the philosophical liberalism of John Rawls, Robert Nozick, and Ronald Dworkin, for the African tradition, the state should not be neutral with regards to conceptions of the good life. For it, human rights violations are commonly conceived at least partially in terms of actions that severely reduce the quality of people's lives (and not merely remove primary goods or freedoms), and, furthermore, the

state is routinely thought to have an obligation to meet people's needs, including their social or moral need to relate harmoniously.

On the other hand, it is also a salient feature of the African tradition to deny that human rights are the be-and end-all of the function of a political organization. Some suggest that duties are prior to rights in some way, say, in that it would be preferable for people's needs to be voluntarily met by others, without them having to invoke rights-claims against anyone (eg, Molefe). Others maintain that in addition to individual rights, there are group rights, where *relationships* of cooperation and aid amongst a clan or nation must be protected beyond the interests of the individuals who are party to them. Something like that approach is enshrined in the African ('Banjul') Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights adopted by the member states of the Organization of African Unity. Some rights of a people include the entitlements not to be dominated and to resist domination (Article 20), while others involve claims to natural resources, socio-economic development, and an environment necessary for the latter (Articles 21, 22, 24).

### East Asian Confucianism

Confucianism is another long-standing and influential philosophy in which harmony plays a central role. It goes back more than 2500 years to the time of Confucius (551–479 BC), and it has been not merely the dominant philosophical orientation of the large population of China, but also quite influential in neighbouring countries that include Korea, Taiwan, and Japan. There have naturally been a variety of interpretations of Confucianism over the millennia. To obtain focus, I concentrate on the ethical ideas of its two most influential exponents, namely, Confucius as his ideas were compiled in *The Analects* and Mencius (372–289 BC) as per the book titled *The Mencius*, particularly as interpreted by contemporary East Asian philosophers. Upon doing so, one sees that talk of 'harmony' is salient, but understood differently from the way it is construed in the African tradition.

It is literally just in the past decade or so that philosophers have become aware of some striking similarities between *ubuntu* and Confucian thought (with early texts being Bell and Metz; and Anedo). Like the *ubuntu* tradition, the Confucian one tends to distinguish between a lower, animal nature that we have and a higher, human one that we should instead strive to develop. For instance, one scholar remarks in a text introducing Confucianism that

the potentiality within individuals that enables them to be finally differentiated from birds and beasts is yet to be developed and cultivated as actual qualities of their character... (The goal of self-cultivation) is to fully develop original moral senses, is to become fully human, while to abandon or neglect it is to have a deficient character which is not far from that of an animal.

(Yao 154; see also Li 2008: 428)

Another similarity between indigenous African and Chinese thought is the centrality of harmony as the key way to develop humanness or develop a moral character. Harmony (*he*) has been variously labelled as 'the highest virtue' for Confucians (Yao 172), 'the most cherished ideal in Chinese culture' (Li 2006: 583), and the Confucian 'grand ideal' (Chan 2). As the influential scholar Wei-Ming Tu remarks, 'If someone is able to uphold the harmony in family relations, neighborly relations and in the relations between the upper and the lower ranks...then we can call him a Confucian' (254).



Confucian thinkers are often at pains to make it clear that harmony for them is neither mere peace, ~~nor~~ sameness, nor agreement. Although Confucian harmony often includes peace, it is not reducible to it and includes more integration than mere détente. It is also by definition; not sameness, as it necessarily (or at the very least ideally) includes differential elements; indeed, one of the most commonly quoted sayings of Confucius is: ‘The gentleman seeks harmony not sameness, the petty person seeks sameness not harmony’ (translation from Chan 91). Harmony is also not simply agreement, for those who have contrary opinions and perspectives can harmonize in the relevant way.

Instead, Confucian harmony is characteristically (perhaps essentially) a matter of different elements coming together, where differences are not merely respected, but also integrated in such a way that the best of them is brought out or something new is created. According to Chenyang Li, the scholar who has studied it the most in recent Confucian scholarship:

(H)armony is sustained by energy generated through the interaction of different elements in creative tension....Through mutual adjustment and mutual accommodation we reshape the situation into a harmonious one.

*(Li 2006: 589, 600)*

Harmony is an active process in which heterogeneous elements are brought into a mutually balancing, cooperatively enhancing, and often commonly benefiting relationship.

*(Li 2014: 1)*

Aesthetic analogies are often used to illustrate this concept of creative tension or mutual benefit between disparate properties; think of instruments that make music together or ingredients that constitute a tasty soup. Human beings are meant to integrate ~~into~~ analogous ways, where differences amongst them come together to complement each other and form a productive unity.

One key kind of difference amongst people for the Confucian tradition is the position in a hierarchy, to which Tu alludes in the quotation above. That is, a desirable kind of harmony comes in the form of there being superiors who are educated and virtuous and who guide the lives of inferiors who are not to the same degree. Here, harmony is to be realized within, and by means of, such hierarchical roles between rulers (the ‘upper ranks’) and citizens (the ‘lower ranks’), parents and children, ~~and~~ older people and younger people. Harmony arises when those in the lower position are respectful and deferential towards those in the higher one *and* when those in the higher position work for the benefit of those in the lower one. Then, differences are brought together such that a productive relationship is realized.

This conception of harmony has probably been largely responsible for the absence of a tradition of democratic governance in China. It is well known that prior to Communism in the twentieth century, a characteristically Confucian approach to politics, of seeking rulers qualified by their literate education and moral character, had supported a highly skilled public service for literally thousands of years. Confucian philosophers in the twenty-first century continue to be sceptical of sharing power equally, and instead; tend to favour an arrangement in which those with the most qualifications hold the most power (Bell and Li; Chan; Bai). Benevolent dictatorship or autocratic meritocracy are the watchwords in regards to the question of who should rule the state; popular voting is unwelcome or at least should be of secondary influence on the allocation of power, given Confucian harmony as an ideal.

Notice, though, that appeal to benevolence or meritocracy means that the elites who have secured political power are not meant to use it for selfish purposes; instead, the point of decision-making being done by the most qualified is so that they will exercise it in a way that is expected to promote the well-being, and especially virtue, of citizens. Conceiving of harmony in terms of participation in a productive hierarchical role further entails that paternalism is often viewed as an acceptable means by which to realize the end of fostering the good of citizens, particularly their relational excellence. Although it would be sensible for those in charge to consult with those they are seeking to help, ultimately it is their decision to make, with coercion and deception being deemed acceptable tools to use. 'Confucian values have nothing to do with personal and economic freedoms, per se....The moral goal according to Confucianism is to develop our humanity, and that entails our learning to fulfill the responsibilities that we have to others' (Bockover 160), where this goal might be advanced by, say, restricting people's access to the internet (see also Wong).

### South American *Buen Vivir*

Let us now turn away from what is East of Africa to what is in the opposite direction, albeit in the Global South. South America includes yet another long-standing tradition in which harmony features prominently and foundationally. Common English descriptors of this strain of moral-political thought are 'good living' or 'plentiful life', variously called '*buen vivir*' in Spanish or '*sumak kawsay*' in Quechua, an indigenous language spoken mainly in Peru but also in some neighbouring countries such as Ecuador and Bolivia.

There is debate about how talk of *buen vivir* and *sumak kawsay* relate to each other (Waldmüller), and both phrases have been used in various ways, including as picking out indigenous values, contemporary 'post-development' or leftist philosophies, as well as laws and policies that have been adopted by certain states (Waldmüller and Rodríguez 236). In the following, I focus on works in English, which happen to have been composed mainly by those who speak Spanish (and other European languages) as opposed to Quechua, and hence I consider mainly what has been put under the heading of '*buen vivir*'. Furthermore, I consider English works addressing *buen vivir* in the light of what they might offer to political philosophical reflection, and not so much intellectual history or some other empirical enquiry. With this approach, therefore, I am not trying to represent beliefs that have been widely held amongst indigenous peoples in South America or track the ways the phrase '*buen vivir*' has been used; instead, my goal is to expound some prima facie attractive ideas inspired by beliefs associated with the phrase that are relevant to contemporary political philosophy.

Consider the following summarizing statements of *buen vivir* that have been advanced in academic forums:

As an alternative to the neoliberal growth model, *Buen Vivir* seeks to establish a harmonious relationship between mankind and nature and a social equilibrium within societies....It requires acting in concert with others in a community with reciprocity as key element and the aim of living well, but not necessarily living better than others. Hence, it demands that human well-being should not be grounded in the exploitation of others nor should it destroy our natural environment.

(Agostino and Dübgen 6)

(*Buen vivir* is) a way of living the present in harmony, that is, assuming and respecting differences and complementarities (among humans and between humans and non-humans)

from an ecological perspective that could be described as holistic and mutualistic. Hence *Buen vivir* breaks away from the reductionist Cartesian worldview to adopt a systemic perspective encompassing the entire ecosphere (including abiotic components). It also breaks away from the idea of cultural and social homogeneity...and posits instead a path of harmony and 'unity in diversity'.

(Vanhulst and Beling 56)

Like many other characterizations of the core of *buen vivir*, one finds explicit mention of harmony in the above.

What is notable about the above articulations of *buen vivir* is that two distinct forms of harmony are mentioned and given what appear to be comparable standing. On the one hand, there is the idea of relating to other people in mutually supportive ways to achieve an objectively decent quality of life. Instead of encouraging gross inequalities of wealth, self-interested trading, consumerist goods, and a focus on subjective well-being, *buen vivir* prescribes sharing resources, cooperating, meeting needs, and a focus on culture and relationality. 'In opposition to Western concepts of exclusivity, categorization, competition, subjectification, etc., *Buen Vivir* puts emphasis on key values such as solidarity, generosity, reciprocity and complementarity' (Waldmüller 21).

On the other hand, there is the idea of people relating to nature in ways that 'enable the natural environment to regenerate itself' (Agostino and Dübgen 6) and that treat it 'as having inherent, and thus never merely instrumental, value for humans' (Waldmüller and Rodríguez 240). Notice that we are to harmonize not merely with certain parts of nature, such as animals, but rather with nature as a whole, including 'abiotic components', ie, non-living parts that nonetheless might be understood to be part of a grand process.

The principal way that scholars have invoked *buen vivir* when thinking prescriptively about politics has been to cast doubt on dominant ways of conceiving economic progress. As mentioned above, the 'neoliberal growth model', whereby governments aim to expand gross domestic product (GDP) indefinitely, is invariably rejected as incompatible with both sorts of harmony. That approach not merely separates people from each other and from nature, but also involves relations of domination and destruction that are anathema to *buen vivir*.

However, many scholars have also invoked *buen vivir* as an alternative to a development model of economic progress. Although most interpretations of sustainable development these days focus on a metric that, unlike GDP, is plausibly understood to focus on human well-being and to require some consideration of nature, many friends of *buen vivir* criticize it for being technocratic, individualist, and anthropocentric. Instead, for one striking contrast, *buen vivir* is often taken to require seeking out 'harmony with Mother Earth', where 'Mother Earth is a sacred, living being' (Plurinational State of Bolivia 22, 12) towards which we have direct duties. *Buen vivir* grounded a Bolivian law prescribing the right of the Earth 'to support the restoration and regeneration capabilities of all its components that enables the continuity of life cycles' (Plurinational State of Bolivia 29), a non-anthropocentric approach to economic production and consumption that far transcends sustainability for long-term human use.

When it comes to political power, *buen vivir* clearly favours democracy, but one of a sort that is more participatory than what one typically finds in Parliamentary states. For example, key *buen vivir* concepts include decentralization, ie, giving power to local communities, and inclusiveness, engaging with civil society and citizens and not leaving governance up to (national) elites (Friant and Langmore 65; Meyberg 5–6, 8; van Norren 443–446). Another salient theme is appeal to 'radical pluralism', 'pluriculturality', or 'plurinationality', the thought being that, taking advantage of 'indigenous self-government' (van Norren 444),

we should welcome a variety of forms of life in a certain territory that co-exist without conflict and, indeed, instead with mutual support (Walsh; Friant and Langmore 64; and van Norren 444, 446, 452).

### Comparing Three Political Philosophies from the Global South

Having spelled out key elements of the political philosophies of *ubuntu*, Confucianism, and *buen vivir* individually, it is time to consider them in relation to each other. I begin by pointing out some salient differences between them, noting debates that should take place internal to the Global South amongst theorists of harmony there (Section ‘Differences’). I then step back and conclude by noting some respects in which the three political philosophies are similar and should collectively ground challenges to views salient in the modern West or Global North (Section ‘Similarities’), after which I briefly sum up the project undertaken here (Section ‘Summarizing Conclusion’).

#### Differences

Despite *ubuntu*, Confucianism, and *buen vivir* all appealing to harmony as a basic (or at least central) value, the conceptions of harmony fascinatingly differ amongst all three. Here I consider some of the more prominent divergences and their implications for political philosophy. One difference that is more purely ethical, with less obvious ramifications for governance, concerns the role of self-realization in regards to harmony. The ideal of moving away from an animal self towards a human self, and doing so by relating harmoniously and particularly within the family, is prominent in both *ubuntu* and Confucianism (on which see, eg, Metz 2020: 183–184), whereas it does not appear that the good life is essentially a more human one for *buen vivir*.

One major difference in respect to politics concerns environmental matters, with *buen vivir* on one side and Confucianism and *ubuntu* on the other. Although all three approaches prescribe harmony with aspects of nature, *buen vivir* stands out for deeming that sort of harmony to be of comparable moral importance to interpersonal harmony. For it, the latter must never be undertaken in a way that would undermine the former, and instead is circumscribed by and even informed by it. In contrast, contemporary expositions of an *ubuntu* ethic usually invoke the maxim, ‘A person is a person through other persons’, meaning that one can become a genuine person by prizing harmonious relations with other persons. Harmonious relations with nature are either ultimately anthropocentric, such that destroying nature is understood to be stealing what the clan owns or disrupting places where ancestors reside, or, if not anthropocentric, then of secondary importance. Similarly, although Confucian harmony does allow for integration between persons and non-persons, it is almost never given as much prominence. Instead, for Confucian thought, ‘The family was not seen as a necessary condition for the good life, it was the good life’ (Bell 145; see also Li 2008: 429–430; Fan).

The three approaches differ in terms of not only the importance of harmony between humans and nature relative to that between humans alone, but also the aspects of nature with which we should harmonize. As indicated above, for adherents to *buen vivir*, the Earth or nature as a whole has moral rights, a perspective enshrined in the Bolivian Constitution and also the Ecuadoran (Republic of Ecuador Articles 71–73). In contrast, normally for contemporary exponents of *ubuntu* and Confucianism, there are only certain parts of the natural world with which we ought to harmonize, at least for their own sake. For instance, some Confucian scholars have pointed out that we are to develop our human nature by being

humane and empathizing with others, orientations that are naturally extended to animals (Nuyen), but not, say, to plants or ecosystems. Similarly, according to some interpretations of *ubuntu*, we should positively orient ourselves towards values such as ‘life, vitality, sentience, and well-being’ (Chemhuru 43) and recognize that ‘community comprises of both the human and biotic community’ with the aim to prize ‘wellness and the wellbeing of all’ (Lenkabula 385, 386); these prescriptions naturally suggest relating harmoniously with animals and plants. For neither view is it normal to suggest that the Earth *qua* Earth merits a harmonious relationship (though there are exceptions, including other passages in Lenkabula). Insofar as we should treat the Earth well, the standard approach of Confucianism and *ubuntu* is more instrumental, prescribing protection of ecological systems in order to sustain individuals (whether human, animals, or plants) or to respect people’s property (whether of ancestors, the clan, or God) (eg, Li 2008: 434; Ramose 308–309, 312–313). In contrast, it appears much more common for proponents of *buen vivir* to hold that the Earth or natural world has value in itself, apart from its bearing on persons or even individuals more broadly.

Hence, philosophers in the Global South need to find ways to debate with each other about what it means to harmonize with nature in morally relevant ways and how weighty a consideration that is compared to interpersonal harmony. Upon reflection, is there reason to view the Earth as a whole as having merely instrumental value for the sustenance of the individuals residing on it? Should we want an account of harmony with nature that fits neatly with interpersonal harmony, where ways of relating such as supporting individuals’ goals, welfare, and excellence could apply to both? Or, in contrast, should we find, say, the complexity of the Earth’s ecosystem to ground moral status and invite a type of harmonization different from what would be apt for individuals? And, then, however harmony with nature is best understood, is it so important as to warrant legal enforcement, which presumably would take some resources away from the protection and flourishing of human persons?

Focusing strictly on interpersonal harmony in the rest of this section, consider some contrasts between the three conceptions of it spelled out above. One has to do with the role of differences and whether they are expected for harmonization. Confucian harmony is normally understood as requiring different elements that are brought together into a unity; as Confucius suggests above, where there is sameness there is no harmony. In addition, *buen vivir* is often interpreted as, if not requiring differences, then at least working with a conception of harmony that is enhanced when they are present and brought into a mutually supportive relationship.

In contrast, adherents to *ubuntu* harmony are more welcoming of a culture of sameness. Cooperative engagements that are expected to meet people’s needs could (even if they need not) involve people having adopted the same ends and more generally living in the same ways. Salient forms of cooperation in the African philosophical tradition are residing with a family and engaging in the rituals and customs of one’s society, which hardly seem essentially to include people adopting divergent lifestyles. As Kwame Gyekye says of the African tradition,

Communitarian moral and political theory, which considers the community as a fundamental human good, advocates a life lived in harmony and cooperation with others, a life of mutual consideration and aid and of interdependence, a life in which one shares in the fate of the other.

(75–76)

From this perspective, it could be appropriate for a state to protect a culture in which people live in quite similar ways.

Furthermore, amongst Confucianism and *buen vivir*, there is disagreement about how best to understand what counts as a relevant kind of difference that is to be integrated. For Confucianism, an essential difference concerns place in a hierarchical role, with the central sort of harmony consisting of the more qualified influencing the lives of the less qualified in productive and beneficial ways. That conception is quite out of place in *buen vivir*, which is much more egalitarian in regards to the allocation of power. *Buen vivir* instead finds the relevant sort of difference to be between ways of life, particularly amongst various communities that need to engage with one another in a common territory. Relatedly, recall that most political philosophers who adhere to *ubuntu* favour consensual democracy and hence an equal distribution of political power; the suggestion that a single person, party, or other group ought to have all the power is not salient in contemporary African philosophy.

So, here is another cluster of issues that merit debate amongst philosophers in the Global South. Is there something undesirable about a kind of interpersonal harmony in which people's ways of life are similar, or could that rather be a welcome, and even intense, sort where people have chosen to come together in that way meriting support from the state? In Confucian terms, should the field perhaps not be more acknowledging of the potential desirability of *tong* (often rendered as 'sameness') as opposed to *he* (harmony)? Another key issue that needs to be addressed is the role of hierarchy and how to organize politics and society when there are some who have markedly greater education and virtue than others.

Perhaps both issues would be best considered in the context of an extended family or small-scale community, as all three traditions can be viewed as providing accounts of what makes them attractive. Harmony-based ethics characteristically take familial relationship as an ideal to extend to the rest of society, and so it is worth considering what precisely makes it valuable and the implications of that for our best understanding of harmony and politics.

### Similarities

If I am correct about the state of the literature, this discussion has been the first to consider contrasts between conceptions of harmony prominent in three major intellectual traditions in the Global South and to recommend some ways forward for debate amongst them. The time is ripe for cross-cultural argumentation amongst African, East Asian, and South American philosophers without the mediation of a modern Western (or Global Northern) variable. However, another project that these thinkers should consider undertaking is looking for common ground and giving their individualist interlocutors in the West (Global North) pause about how to do political philosophy. In support of that project, I note that mainstream adherents to *ubuntu*, Confucianism, and *buen vivir* would all readily accept the following prescriptions for institutional choice.

Political leaders ought to seek out win/win solutions to conflict, in which all parties come away with enough to be satisfied. Such an approach contrasts with resting content with helping the majority or doing the most that one can for one's side (let alone dominating others for the sake of one's own profit or power).

Neither government nor business should pursue economic growth as an end or use it as a marker of progress. GDP, roughly the amount of goods and services that have been sold, does not reliably track harmony in whichever way harmony is plausibly construed by the three Global South perspectives.



The state should enforce fairly radical redistributions of wealth. It is unjust both within a country and between countries for some to have enormous amounts of wealth on the order of billions of US dollars when others cannot meet their needs. All the views of harmony here would count this state of affairs as its discordant opposite.

A given Constitution should feature socio-economic rights, and they should be deemed of comparable importance to rights to civil liberty. For example, the state and other agents in society should be considered to have a duty to ensure that each citizen has access to food, water, education, housing, healthcare, and the like.

Beyond meeting the biological and psychological needs of citizens, a state has good reason to foster various ways of relating in society, whether that is engaging in community service, volunteering at a charity, developing a sense of national unity, improving relationships between romantic partners and between them and their children, or reintegrating offenders into society. Note how these ends differ from satisfying people's various preferences or self-chosen ends, particularly in a market.

It is imperative for the state to fight global warming and more generally environmental degradation such as acidified oceans, depletion of the ozone layer, reduction of species diversity, and destruction of natural beauty. Regardless of whether one conceives of harmony strictly in terms of relations with individuals or also with the Earth as a whole, it requires confronting the environmental crisis and furthermore doing so in ways that involve the participation of all countries, particularly those most responsible for it.

If I am correct that the above prescriptions constitute overlap amongst the three harmony-based approaches to political philosophy explored here, then Global South adherents ought to strive together to see such approaches taken seriously. They must harmonize in their efforts to contest alternative approaches, which is true when it comes to not merely globally influential theoretical analyses of values, policy, and law, but also international practice.

### ***Summarizing Conclusion***

The main aim of this chapter has been to advance cross-cultural reflection amongst those working within political philosophical traditions in the Global South. I have contended that large swathes of indigenous moral-political thought in Africa, East Asia, and South America are plausibly understood as relational in nature and specifically as grounded on an ideal of harmony. This shared value of harmony is usefully invoked to structure debate amongst adherents to *ubuntu*, Confucianism, and *buen vivir*. On the one hand, there are important differences between the ways these thinkers tend to interpret the nature of harmony. I identified some of the differences in this chapter and drew out implications for various aspects of politics, ranging from how power should be distributed to which sorts of things have rights against the state to which kind of culture the state should support. On the other hand, despite the differences in the ways adherents to *ubuntu*, Confucianism, and *buen vivir* understand what counts as harmony, there is substantial common ground amongst them that should be identified. I noted that a harmony framework in general is quite distinct from more individualist values such as autonomy or preference satisfaction, and also identified several respects in which the three different interpretations of harmony nonetheless prescribe similar approaches to politics, ones that provide reason to question a number of dominant practices and influential Western principles.

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