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THE PLACE OF HARMONY AMONG CONTEMPORARY VALUES
by Alicja Kuczynska

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The purpose of this paper is to attempt to answer the question concerning the place of harmony in the great contemporary global system of the revaluation of traditional values.

Why am I concerned with harmony? The answer lies in what Jaspers described as "existential communication," the co-participation of various persons in certain commensurable space. I am not interested in reasons for the degradation of harmony, since at this point it would be an overly broad topic, but only with the question whether the degradation of harmony is of a total nature. In what sense can harmony still be a value and what sort of a value is it?

One should begin by putting into order and explaining basic terms which shall be used later on. The most general meaning of harmony [Greek: harmonia] signifies a consensus of sounds, shapes, and elements. It is a purposefully ordered unity composed of various components. Harmony has at least three meanings:

1. In the substantial aesthetic sense harmony constitutes the co-appearance of various elements such as colors, solids, shapes, and sounds. In this interpretation, harmony is treated as a sensual, objective phenomenon, identical to an ensemble of variegated qualities whose mutual relation is proportionate. In accordance with the Pythagorean-Platonic tradition (Philebus, Sophistes, Timaeus), harmony constitutes a quality of the entity which it was possible to express numerically (symmetry) and it was considered to be the essence of beauty. The cult of proportion was made indelible by Renaissance art (Alberti, Dürer, Leonardo da Vinci) and by the theory dating from that period (e.g., De divina proportione by P. Pacioli). It recurred in various forms during successive revivals of classicism.

2. The concept of harmony was used in order to describe a certain type of internal and external spheres of the activity of the individual. These are purposeful activities, in accordance with the principles of order, moderation, convergence with nature, and the positive commands of morality. Harmony comprehended as a trait of a certain type of activity was expressed, i.e., in an ideal of life according to the principle of the golden mean, a life of inner

equilibrium as described in "Discorsi della Vita Sobria" by L. Cornaro. The symbol of harmonious activity is its subjection to the ideals of concord, internal and external unity of the individual, and in concert with the environment and society.

3. The third comprehension of harmony is of a philosophical nature and in this meaning it occurred, e.g., in G. W. Leibniz's conception of harmonia praestabilita which presumes that there exists a correspondence between the contents of our intellect and reality. A more rarely recalled but equally excellent example of philosophical harmony is the comprehension of harmony, found in the philosophy of M. Ficino (the theory of love, Commentario di Platonis Convivio).

Do the varieties of harmony understood in this way appear in the ethos of the contemporary person, and if so, then which of them?

A contemporary adherent of the idea of harmony understood as a value finds herself or himself in a theoretically and practically difficult situation, primarily because surrounding reality constitutes a more or less clear negation of harmony. This opinion is confirmed by contemporary art, personal relations, social reality, and the prevalent way in which the world is comprehended.

Of course, in response to the existing situation one can transfer harmony from the world of facts into the region of postulates and even, in conclusion, accept the view that the less harmony we perceive in the real world the more important it becomes as a postulate.

It is obvious that if we were to accept the substantial understanding of harmony as a certain image of the sensual qualities existing independently of us, then it would be easy to perceive that contemporary art has rejected such an image. In the process of the degradation of traditional thinking about art and beauty, rules regarding the faithful reflection of reality and harmony lost their original significance. They have been replaced by unrest, disorder, hostility towards rules, and a disregard for any sort of a universally accepted order. Shock is regarded highly and is emphasized in various definitions (e.g., Tatarkiewicz). In this respect, art has rejected harmony. But has it rejected also other meanings of harmony?

In the second of the above mentioned meanings, harmony occurs rather more frequently as a postulate of shaping human life and activity than as an actual fact. We know very well how little this postulate has in common with the practical lives of many of us. Haste, a rapid tempo, and automation all make it impossible to live in accord with a chosen ethos. Most often the life of an individual does not constitute a larger cohesive structure but disintegrates into parts which exist as if independent of each other and devoid of importance, because often they do not refer to the entity. The quest for the meaning of life, regardless whether the meaning is understood as

the endowment of meaning or the discovery of the already implicit existing meaning, cannot take place without determining the relation of the individual to larger constructed entities regardless of their form (ideology, religion, art, politics). To understand life as meaningful, or simply to understand it, means to refer to a certain order.

The philosophical comprehension of harmony in contemporary philosophy decisively gives way to such categories as struggle, opposition, dialectical contradictions, etc. They retain their meaning primarily in finalistic philosophies and in moralism.

Is the absence of those three interpretations of harmony in the contemporary system of values decisive for its non-existence also in other forms? The answer is: no. I regard the above listed forms of harmony as the by-products of forms and symptoms of a much more extensively understood harmony. This harmony is one of the fundamental old archetypes of values present in various cultures, beginning with the most distant past. The symbols of the inner structure of this archetype are order and balance. The law of order (a concurrence of elements) is always the same, but the content matter can vary.

If we are to accept that every existence which possesses a feature of a relative continuum expresses a certain equilibrium of a part, while a disturbance of this equilibrium signifies the decline and end of that existence, then it is easy to perceive that this more or less permanent ensemble of features which constitutes a broadly understood harmony is a decisive condition for: 1. the identity of a certain being, and 2. its continuity and survival.

I would be therefore inclined to describe the archetype of harmony as ontological. Its opposite is disorder, the absence of rules, chaos, and destruction.

It is true that now we live in a world full of a multitude of different values. Are all of them, however, completely new? No. We are surrounded by well-known old but degenerated archetypes and myths which in the conditions of contemporary civilization have succumbed to mystification and degradation and have gone "underground" in order to ensure a further existence for themselves. The search for traces of the presence of harmony leads to noting its symptoms in an indirect and transformed form, which is difficult to recognize. Today, a pure, lucid, and direct form of harmony occurs very rarely. As a rule, we encounter its equivalents, surrogates, and forms degenerated to such an extent that their original source is undecipherable. In art it sometimes appears in the form of a clearly contrary transformation, e.g., a dangerous and unhealthy degeneration is the tendency to unification (Deschamps). One can also come across forms completely opposite to unification such as drama (e.g., Tadeusz Kantor's theatrical

disintegration of the "I"). A variety closest to its original form occurs in coloristic painting and a certain type of "metaphysical" works.

The most deformed form is adopted by an archetype of harmony known as the harmony of activities. Camouflaged and degenerated structures of behavior and "post-harmonious" activity can be found not only in the behaviors of individuals but also of groups and societies. "Nostalgia" for a harmonious life and at the same time its degenerated symptom is represented by groups of adaptation, arrangements, and compromises. The relics of the archetype take on "everyday, common features" in order to avoid total destruction.

A philosophical understanding of harmony undergoes a specific transformation and a survey of many philosophical systems confirms the absence of the category of harmony. An overall estimation reveals, however, a certain fundamental feature, shared by all the currents--all philosophies contain the conviction that one ought to overcome reality in its present form and that this aim can be attained by various ways and methods. To put it succinctly, they are metaphysics (by means of the symbol), transcendence (by going beyond existing reality in order to achieve another one), and alienation (by rejecting existing reality). These are the paths which, in a more or less clear way, are determined by the disturbance of the balance between reality as it is and reality as it can be. Their goal is the establishment of a substitute relation in place of the concurrence between the part and the entity.