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ROYAL SOCIETY OF ARTS

The music of the one and the many. Conceptualising 'diversity' in the context of harmony

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"Signs of harmony" – harmony being a major motif in philosophy that we as early as the 6th Century BC. Famously, Pythagorus, having heard the pleasing sounds of chiming metal hammers one day when he was walking past a blacksmith's, devised a theory of harmony that accounted not only for music but the very order of the cosmos; in Plato's *Timaeus*, the universe itself is likened to a grand ensemble of elements arranged in proportions, creating what in the

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Renaissance became popularised as the 'Musica Universalis' or universal music. Harmony is a law that holds everything together, as evoked by William Blake in his poem *Love and Harmony*:

> Love and harmony combine,
> And round our souls entwine
> While thy branches mix with mine,
> And our roots together join.

As per the Neoplatonic ideal of a correspondence between the macrocosm and the microcosm, the greater harmony of the universe ought to be mirrored in our societies and the environment. That we have failed to do so accounts for the crises we now face in both spheres which, as Pope Francis in *Laudato si'* says, are really part of the same systemic crisis. I want to go deeper into the nature of our current disharmony, thinking specially about one aspect of it that I believe is pertinent to our current times; our troubled relationship with the concept of *diversity*. Diversity is essential to the production of harmony – for harmony can only arise from the union of many distinct parts into one composite whole. As such, it necessitates some degree of dierentiation. But today, many fail to appreciate the potential of diversity to bring about any kind of unity – instead, they idolise a profane, hollowed-out form of it, or reject it altogether.

Modern progressives, certainly, have become obsessed with 'diversity'. But for them, this term denotes each individual's right to an identity based on race, gender or sexual orientation; identities that are ultimately solipsistic, and removed from any vision of humanity as a whole. Beyond shallow, post-Christian ideas of 'empathy' or 'being kind', they are not oriented towards a positive, shared conception of the good. This is because they are, in postmodern fashion, incredulous towards grand narratives and truth claims, including the very idea of the good itself. To suggest that there is some universal standard of ourishing, they would say, is to be 'essentialising' and 'exclusionary'. The modern left's view of diversity, then, is inseparable from its relativism, according to which each individual should be left to play along to its own self-determined score. The end result is really a kind of anarchy or, in musical terms, a cacophony.

Meanwhile, and seemingly in reaction to this, parts of the right have become allergic to the idea of diversity altogether. 'Diversity', they claim,

is a novel idea invented by the multicultural ideologues of the late 20th and 21st centuries, that poses a threat to social cohesion and the future of the West. They favour instead a homogeneity of culture or even race, tending to wholly neglect the contributions of other civilizations and traditions – for example, Islam – and their potential to participate in shared truth. Their ideal society is one of exclusivism, in which deference is kept to a minimum – such a society is, in musical terms, a monotony.

Neither the contemporary left or right, then, aspire towards harmony in the classical sense of creating unity out of a multiplicity. This is because both, being products of secular modernity, have lost sight of the pre-modern vision of truth as something which is universal and yet realised through particular means. In this understanding, it is possible to uphold a sense of the absolute whilst also valuing dilerence and diversity – and, so, to move beyond both relativism and exclusivism. It is in the metaphysics of harmony, I believe, that we can and this middle way.

To understand this, we ought to revisit what our traditions teach about the nature of truth itself, and the relationship between the universal and the particular. In the Platonic and Christian view, truth is transcendent; it comes from a source that is beyond our minds. That knowledge is a kind of illumination from the outside is lucidly conveyed by Saint Augustine, who wrote; 'if we both see that what you say is true, and we both see that what I say is true, then where do we see that? Not I in you, nor you in me, but both of us in that unalterable truth that is above our minds'.[2] As such, when we realise truth, we are really glimpsing a light that exists externally to our particular, embodied beings.

However, because we remain particular, embodied beings, how we interpret that truth is bound to be determined in some way by our subjective conditions. As such, it is always partial; the light is always altered. In this life we see, as Saint Paul teaches, 'through a glass darkly', our perception having been dimmed by the Fall which compromised our ability to perceive the real directly. This gives rise to a sense, present in both Platonism and Christianity, of epistemic humility; although there is ultimately one truth emanating from the light above, we cannot yet comprehend it in its dazzling totality.

2 Saint Augustine, *The confessions*, XII. xxv. 35.

For Nicholas of Cusa, it is corollary of our fallen, partial perception that we ought to value the diverse viewpoints of others. Since we are all ignorant when it comes to the divine – this being the basis of his *docta ignorantia* – our understandings are only approximations. Nonetheless, since there is only one truth, dilerent approximations necessarily share the same object. It follows, for Cusa, that dilerent religions are approximations of the one true faith. He presents this theory of pluralism in his 1453 treatise *De Pace Fidei* or 'The Peaceful Unity of Faith', a dialogue in which representatives of over a dozen dilerent nations – including a Turk, a Jew, a Bohemian and a Tartar, among others – discuss the nature of that faith with the Word and Saint Peter as interlocutors. They come to the conclusion that, although some beliefs are more erroneous than others – and none as close to truth as Christianity – all of them are still seeking the same hidden God, as all wise men seek the same wisdom; though they may appear in a plurality of forms, faith and wisdom are ultimately singular. 'Since truth is one', he says, 'and since it cannot fail to be grasped by every free intellect, all diverse religions will be led unto one orthodox faith'.[3]

It should be emphasised that Nicholas of Cusa is not advocating relativism here; rather, his approach has been described by the contemporary scholars Scott F. Aikin & Jason Aleksander as 'meta-exclusivism': it holds that there is only one truth, but that it can take on a variety of dilerent expressions. It follows, then, that dilerent sects can all share in the same faith and wisdom whilst retaining their outward dilerences (though, it should be pointed out, this does not preclude trying to persuade others against erroneous doctrines). Harmony, Cusa says, arises when we embrace this. He remarks, also in *De Pace Fidei*, that

> the few wise men who are rich in the experiential knowledge of all such dilerences as are observed throughout the world in the [dilerent] religions can and a single, readily-available harmony; and through this harmony there can be constituted, by a suitable and true means, perpetual peace.[4]

This understanding of harmony ourished in the Renaissance, especially after the Reformation when sectarian conand violence ravaged through Europe.

3 Nicola of Cusa, *De Pace Fidei,* 3.8, trans. Jasper Hopkins in *Nicholas of Cusa's De Pace Fidei and CribratioAlkorani: Translation and Analysis*, A. J. Banning Press, 1994.

4 Ibid, 1.1.

Against this backdrop, the French political philosopher Jean Bodin – who lived through the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre of 1572 – argued that we must accept a plurality of beliefs and seek to orchestrate a harmony between them; not only in the interests of social stability but because, he believed, the universe itself is comprised of such harmony, being a grand ensemble of many distinct parts working together within a uniaed whole. Just as multiple notes can combine to form a single chord, dilerent sects can unite in their reverence for God.

Bodin presented this view in a fascinating work of his called the Colloquium of the Seven about Secrets of the Sublime. Likely written around the 1580's, the work takes the form of a dialogue between seven interlocutors – a Catholic, a Lutheran, a Calvinist, a Jew, a Muslim, a Deist and a Sceptic – in which they discuss all aspects of religion, from sacraments and icons to salvation and the Trinity. On these doctrinal issues they often agree to disagree, but maintain that they all (save the Sceptic) seek to worship the Creator and cultivate the same virtues. Once again, we and here the Neoplatonic notion that truth is singular but perceived in a plurality of ways, with this being explained by Bodin through the Galenic theory that dilerent regions have dilerent climates causing their inhabitants to have unique temperaments and so dilerent modes of worship.

Despite there being ultimately one truth, Bodin suggests that human diversity is necessary because it mirrors that of the world itself. If you try to force everybody to conform, you are left with monotony; and nature, he says – taking the earth's vastly variegated fauna as proof – abhors monotony. However, if we give up on the search for truth and uproot the traditions which enable it, we are left with cacophony. He argues that both states ultimately lead to atheism, and goes so far as to deem all disharmony as qualitatively demonic. For Bodin, then, when it comes to diversity we should avoid both relativism and exclusivism, and instead seek this harmonic middle way. He concludes by observing, notably through the Catholic interlocutor:

> How good and pleasing it is for brothers to live in unity, arranged not in common diatonics or chromatics,but in enharmonics with a certain, more divine modulation.[5]

5 Jean Bodin, *Colloquium of the Seven about Secrets of the Sublime*, trans. Marion Leathers Kuntz, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 358.

A notable (to say the least) modern proponent of this Neoplatonic understanding of diversity is, I believe, His Majesty King Charles III. The United Kingdom's new sovereign was crowned earlier this year, and has provoked some controversy because of his generous attitude towards other religions. At his coronation, representatives of Britain's Jewish, Muslim, Sikh and Hindu communities were given the role of presenting him with the royal regalia; a bold inter-faith statement to which many British conservatives negatively reacted, believing it to be an empty gesture of secular 'diversity' and 'inclusion'. However, I do not believe that such a reaction is justiaed, for as we have seen, pluralism is not necessarily tantamount to relativism. Especially when we consider that the King himself iswell-versed in Platonic thought, having long been a sponsor of the Temenos Academy—a school for the study of perennial philosophy, with a focus on Plato and the wisdom traditions of East and West—it becomes plausible that he is sympathetic to the pre-modern, harmonic paradigm of diversity.

In fact, when he was the Prince of Wales, His Majesty wrote a book with co-authors Tony Juniper and Ian Skelly entitled *Harmony: A new way of looking at our world*. This book introduces harmony as a universal artistic, mathematical and ecological principle, citing Pythagorus, Plato, Ficino and Blake among others as proponents of it. All of these thinkers, he says, 'were very clear that there is a harmony to the world that must be maintained.'[6] This vision of a unity comprised of multiplicity may well be what informs His Majesty's approach towards other faiths, and most certainly informs another aspect of the which he famously cares about: the environment.

Famously, His Majesty has long been a supporter of environmentalism. In the book, he explains that industrial modernity in harm upon nature precisely because it imposes a monotony on the natural world and so threatens the biodiversity that is necessary to the ourishing of life. As such, it offsets the harmonious balance of nature that was ordained by the Creator, and so tends towards destruction. He writes:

> Nature embraces diversity. The health of each element is enhanced by there being great diversity or, as is now commonly called today, 'biological diversity'

6 HRH The Prince of Wales, Tony Juniper & Ian Skelly, *Harmony: A New Way of Looking at Our World*, United Kingdom: Blue Door 2010.

> or 'biodiversity' for short. The result is a complex web made up of many forms of life. For this web to work best there is a tendency towards variety and away from uniformity and, crucially, no one element can survive for long in isolation. There is a deep mutual interdependence within the system which is active at all levels, sustaining the individual components so that the great diversity of life can flourish within the controlling limits of the whole. In this way, Nature is rooted in wholeness.[7]

In this passage from His Majesty—in language that evokes the Platonic view of the world as set out in the *Timaeus*—we are reminded of the necessity of diversity for ourishing. 'Diversity' not as a platitude of liberal individualism, but a recognition of the relationship between multiplicity and unity, be it within our societies or the natural world. It is this conception of diversity, rooted in faith and tradition, I believe, that we ought to pursue and celebrate.

7 Ibid.