

THE HARMONY DEBATES

Exploring a practical philosophy for a sustainable future

Edited by Nicholas Champion



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FOREWORD

HRH The Prince of Wales

From a speech to the Harmony in Food and Farming Conference, Llandoverly College, 10 July 2017.

I FEEL TREMENDOUSLY HUMBLED by your creating an entire conference out of a desire to understand what I have been trying to point out for so long. For what has seemed rather an eternity, I found people have tended to think – or have been encouraged to think – that I was just concerned to pursue some sort of pet, ‘New Age’, niche farming project for food fads in this country, or just concerned about efforts to preserve the heritage of the past for some sort of ridiculous nostalgic reason, or that I wanted to see a kind of housing development that harked back to some long lost, golden age of building with everything covered in classical columns. What never seemed to be reported was that my concern has always been focused not on the past, but on the future and how best to address the critical environmental, economic and social issues of our day. In the end, I felt I simply had to produce a book that explained my proposition in a bit more detail, and that book was of course *Harmony*.¹ And it was my attempt to set out how we might approach the way we do things by looking at how nature herself operates, and it endeavoured to explain the simple tenets of the ancient philosophical standpoint that lay behind all of my efforts to put its tireless, perennial wisdom into action, not least when it comes to food and farming.

Now I must say it is particularly appropriate that here in Wales (which, of course, is renowned as the land of song), you should be exploring why I chose that important word as the title of my book. What you may not know is that the concept of harmony also lies at the very heart of traditional Welsh poetry. Some years ago, I had the pleasure of meeting the poet and former Archdruid of Wales, Dic Jones, who, as well as being a farmer in Ceredigion, was a master of *cynghanedd*, which is the ancient system of poetic meters in Welsh poetry. Dic’s poetry followed the same system – with its meters, precise syllable counts and rhymes – so brilliantly that his work was compared with that of Dafydd ap Gwilym who was a contemporary of Chaucer and one of the chief glories of Welsh literature. The system is actually far older than Chaucer’s day. It goes back over a thousand years and, thankfully, is still thriving today.

Crucially, the word *cynghanedd* may be translated as ‘harmony’ and embodies an approach that seeks to embody the principles of symmetry, proportion and beauty, not just in every poem, but, literally, within every line. Dic Jones actually wrote one of his *englynys* about *cynghanedd* itself:

Yn enaid yr awenydd – ei geiriau
 Fel dau gariad newydd
 Drwy ei sain a’u hystyr sydd
 Yn galw ar ei gilydd.

In the soul of the author – harmony’s words,²
 like lover and lover,
 through music and meaning are
 calling to one another.

As I say, Dic was a farmer as well as a poet, and that is a rare combination, so I am very pleased to see that the arts also have a place at your conference. It is more commonly the view that things like beauty and harmony, a reverence for the sacred, putting nature at the heart of our thinking and so on, have no place at all in agricultural matters, in the design process, the way we do business, our approach to engineering and, certainly, to the way we might gear our entire economy. It is argued that in a world where resources are scarce, where populations are ballooning, where all that matters is the bottom line and where computers and digital technology can supposedly do the job much more efficiently and dispassionately, to consider a notion like beauty or harmony is to divert attention away from what matters most. Well, I would just say, be very careful. It is worth taking a step back and considering the consequences; what happens when we separate what we *are* from what we do.

That is what I believe has happened. We are struggling with the deep-rooted consequences of an immense separation. As I try to explain in the book, it has a long history that goes back beyond the dawning of the Scientific Revolution in the seventeenth century.

The first hint of a shift occurs during the course of the twelfth century when the very notion of the divine started to change. For all sorts of reasons, ‘God’ began to be seen as a separate entity – ‘out there,’ beyond creation, separate from nature. And with that came the idea that nature was an unpredictable force without inherent order. Humanity was seen as the instrument of the

will of God, rather than a ‘participant’ in creation. And so, as God became separate from His Creation, so humanity became separate from nature, and thus, what I might call ‘the organic unity of reality’ began to fragment. It put paid to thousands of years of understanding of our place in the world and so put the teachings of all the great sacred traditions at odds with the way Western thinking was starting to go.

Now it is important to note that the ancient, but perennial philosophical principles lay at the root of every one of the world’s great traditions, including the Western tradition founded by the ancient Greeks. To put Plato very simply – it was the philosophy of wholeness. It was a perception of the world that lasted right up to the thirteenth century in Christian philosophy too, and it taught that everything is interconnected and therefore interdependent, so that we inhabit a world where no one part of the whole can grow well or true without it serving the well being of the whole. What is more, there is an underlying geometry at work, a constantly moving pattern of life that is proportioned and remarkably balanced.

Sadly, as I charted in the book, that idea of humanity existing within ‘a living whole’ was abandoned by those who led the mechanistic revolution that found its feet in the seventeenth century. We kept the words but tended to forget their meaning. What has happened is that the sense of an animate nature in which we live and move and have our being has been replaced more or less wholesale by a rather more artificial idea that nature is some kind of autonomous machine with no purpose and no self-organising principles. And for me, that is a very damaging consequence of separating what we *are* from what we do. You only have to look at the precise and detailed scientific observations we now have to realise how uncomfortably close to the brink it has taken us, particularly when it comes to the appalling risks we are running with climate change.

Nowhere is this separation more starkly apparent than in agriculture. Food production in its rich variety of forms effectively covers some seventy per cent of the land in the United Kingdom, yet in my lifetime I have watched the industrialisation of food production turn the living organism of an individual farm into little more than a factory, where finite raw materials are fed in at one end, and food of varying quality comes out the other.

My great hope is that your conference might strengthen the common understanding of why this approach has to change – why we have to find ways of bringing about a widespread transition to farming, where farms become more balanced and harmonious entities – within nature, within their communities, and certainly within the capacity of the planet.

If you think about it, there is no technical reason why farms cannot become more diverse, nor why they cannot care more for the soil they depend upon; nor why farm animals can't be treated more humanely. Restoring harmony to farming means having to put back as much as you take out and thus working with the grain of nature – there is no reason why food cannot be produced in ways that enhance biodiversity rather than destroy it, and why, ultimately, the vital connection between the food producer and the food consumer can't also be restored. Re-forging that critical relationship would, I suspect, improve the chances of us making progress in all these other areas I've just mentioned.

What is encouraging, though, is that attitudes do seem to be changing. When once there would have been a discordant chorus of outraged abuse for talking about there being a comprehensive systemic relationship between all things, now eminent bodies in science and learning acknowledge there is truth in this. In many scientific fields, for instance, there is a growing realisation that we are, indeed, utterly embedded within nature's self-organising living web. To the extent that we are not simply a part of that web; we *are* the web ourselves. We *are* nature – *her* patterns are *our* patterns. We live and move and have our being within Nature's benevolent complexity and it is this living system that makes us – and which, incidentally, we are doing out utmost to test to destruction.

This is why, ladies and gentlemen, I find it so unbelievable when people ask why should we bother with the conservation and protection of the Earth's dwindling biodiversity, or why we should strive to make the terrifying environmental issues we now face such a priority. It is, of course, the diversity of life on Earth which actually enables us 'to have our being'. Deplete it, reduce it, erode and destroy it and we will succeed in causing such disorder that we risk de-railing humanity's place on Earth for good.

This is why I have been trying to say for so long that we have to look urgently at what will restore nature's balance before it is finally too late – and that moment, I hate to say, is upon us. We have to restore that perception of the world as a joined up, integrated unity. We have to reconcile the voices of both sides of our being, the intuitive and the rational; between, if you like, the East and the West in our consciousness.

So I am immensely encouraged by what is going on here in Wales, particularly at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David. And I cannot thank enough the Venerable Master Chin Kung for his decision to invest so much of his time and resources in supporting the university's Harmony Programme which is striving to teach the importance and process of interfaith dialogue and peace, but moreover

– and this, for me, is immensely significant – to explore ways in which Harmony itself can be developed as a proper discipline; one which takes a much more integrative view of things, in that farming is as related to the way we build things, as are the ways we approach, say, healthcare or business.

Work is already being done, on the ground, in education, and I gather you will be hearing in a little while how this all works from a head teacher, Richard Dunne who, for some unaccountable reason, as he's explained, was seemingly inspired by my explanation of the principles of harmony and went on to apply them in the classrooms of his own state primary school in Surrey. Now, as you will hear, enquiries of learning are carried out across the entire curriculum from the viewpoint of the principles of harmony. Which is to say that, rather than separating out the different subjects, as others have preferred, individually studying maths or chemistry, geography or economics, a subject like climate change becomes the subject of an enquiry of learning, which involves the application of all of those key disciplines, and others too.

This then is one very good example of how we might change our view of the world. And perhaps it might be a good start to this conference as you take a look at what can be gained from a study of the systemic web of life we call nature and how so many processes and patterns work so coherently to keep the whole of nature going. If we can apply ourselves to this, my hope is that we might begin to mimic that approach in so many fields of our endeavour. This leads me to my final point, which is to put this question to you – how might these patterns of behaviour, this 'grammar of harmony', better serve a more sustainable approach to food production and farming? And to that end, what can we learn from things like traditional architecture, traditional crafts, music, education and engineering, that might enable us to establish a much more sure-footed response to the enormous problems we face by forging a more circular form of economy, as Dame Ellen MacArthur has articulated so brilliantly.

Ladies and gentlemen, I began my own efforts to understand such questions with self-doubt. Now I have no doubt. We simply cannot solve the problems we have caused by responding with a 'business as usual' approach, trying to bounce back from every knock we take using the conventional approach, which only compounds the problem. What we have to do is bounce forward by learning from the past. We have to look again very seriously at the philosophy of wholeness that held sway for so long in all of the world's great sacred traditions. The clues are to be found in the arts of the past, in the music of the past, in the methods and approach of the traditional crafts, in the way we once revered the Earth and

spoke openly of our inherent sense of the sacred, but above all in the inherent genius of nature herself. There lie the seeds of the answers, I promise you. This is not backward-looking and anti-science; it is reinstating the discarded baby that was rashly removed with the bathwater. So, the fact that you are about to do just that over these next two very full days is more encouraging to me than you can ever imagine and I much look forward to hearing if you can resuscitate the baby – harmoniously!

NOTES

1. HRH The Prince of Wales, Tony Juniper and Ian Skelly, *Harmony: A New Way of Looking at our World* (London: Harper Collins, 2010).
2. Literally ‘its words’.