

Survival of the Harmonious: Toward a Harmony-Oriented Ecological Civilization—A Second Enlightenment Perspective

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Abstract: If modern industrial civilization is competition-oriented, ecological civilization is harmony-oriented. Grounded in a mechanical worldview, atomistic individualism, and the competitive values of the First Enlightenment, industrial civilization follows the logic of “survival of the fittest,” or even “survival of the strongest.” Although it has generated unprecedented material wealth, it has also produced ecological crisis, social conflict, and spiritual disorientation. In response, the Second Enlightenment calls for a transition toward ecological civilization, whose guiding principle is “survival of the harmonious.” The sustainable flourishing of species, societies, and humanity depends not only on competitive capacity, but also on the ability to foster harmonious coexistence, collaborative development, and shared flourishing within the community of life. Philosophically, this paradigm draws on process-relational mutual immanence, Chinese yin-yang thinking, and the equality and interconnectedness of all beings. Ecological civilization therefore seeks to overcome modern dualisms and rebuild harmonious relations between humanity and nature, among persons, between individuals and society, and between body and mind. As both a major achievement of the Second Enlightenment and a creative transformation of China’s traditional culture, it signals a historic transition from “survival of the fittest” to “survival of the harmonious,” and from competition-oriented to harmony-oriented civilization.

Keywords: *constructive postmodernism; harmony-oriented civilization; second enlightenment; survival of the harmonious; ecological civilization*

Why Is a Second Enlightenment Needed?

Since the Enlightenment, modern civilization, with reason, science, and freedom at its core, has profoundly transformed human society. It promoted the Scientific Revolution and established a modern scientific system based on experimentation and evidence, greatly enhancing humanity's capacity to understand and transform the world. It gave rise to the Industrial Revolution, enabling unprecedented growth in productive forces and creating abundant material wealth. It spread the ideals of democracy, liberty, human rights, and equality, advancing modern political institutions and enhancing individual dignity and rights. It also established the market economy and global trade networks, fostering innovation, prosperity, and exchanges among civilizations. Scientific progress, industrial development, democratic institutions, and the modern economic system together constitute the most important achievements of modern civilization, ushering humanity into an era of unparalleled development.

While creating prosperity and progress, modern civilization has also generated profound crises. The long-term pursuit of economic growth and resource exploitation has led to global problems such as ecological degradation, environmental pollution, and resource depletion. Dependence on fossil fuels has intensified climate change, resulting in extreme weather events, melting glaciers, and rising sea levels. Biodiversity continues to decline, weakening the stability of the Earth's ecosystems. As some critics have pointed out, "we are currently witnessing the greatest disruption to the earth's nitrogen cycle in 2.5 billion years."¹ It is safe to say that the ecological crisis is the most pressing and severe challenge facing the world today.

At the same time, widening wealth disparities, declining social trust, and intensifying conflicts of interest have contributed to growing social fragmentation. Material abundance has not brought a corresponding increase in happiness. Problems of mental health, including anxiety, loneliness, depression, and the loss of meaning, continue to spread. As Ulrich Beck, the renowned German sociologist and the originator of the "risk society" theory, has pointed out, the crisis confronting humanity today is not the so-called environmental crisis, "but a profound institutional crisis of industrial society itself."² In other words, the ecological crisis is essentially a crisis of human civilization—more

¹ Peter Brannen, "The Anthropocene Is a Joke," *The Atlantic*, August 13, 2019.

² Ulrich Beck, "Risk Society and the Provident State," in *Risk, Environment & Modernity: Towards a New Ecology*, ed. Scott Lash, Bronisław Szerszynski, and Brian Wynne (London: Sage, 1996), 32.

precisely, a crisis of modern industrial civilization. “If an era encounters problems, it is because the philosophy of that era has encountered problems.”³

In our view, the First Enlightenment bears considerable responsibility for the predicament humanity faces today, for it was the First Enlightenment that provided the direct theoretical foundation for modern civilization. By the First Enlightenment, this paper refers primarily to the intellectual movement that arose in Western Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and exalted reason. In China, it refers to the May Fourth New Culture Movement of the 1920s, which called for the embrace of “Mr. Democracy” and “Mr. Science.” There is no doubt that these two enlightenment movements, despite the considerable temporal and spatial distance between them, share an intrinsic connection. Although the May Fourth Movement cannot simply be regarded as a horizontal transplantation of European Enlightenment discourse into China, the continuity of their intellectual lineage and the affinity of their underlying spirit are undeniable. Therefore, this paper collectively refers to them as the “First Enlightenment.”

What, then, are the limitations of the First Enlightenment? Scholars have offered various summaries and interpretations. In *The Second Enlightenment*, we attempted to summarize them in seven points.⁴ However, after years of further reflection, we believe that the following ten interrelated characteristics more adequately capture its limitations: an imperialistic attitude toward nature; a racist stance toward the Other; a nihilistic attitude toward tradition; contempt for rural life and farmers; blind reverence for science; excessive faith in reason; a one-dimensional interpretation of freedom; a homogenizing understanding of democracy; an intense fascination with struggle and competition; and an extreme worship of capital.

It is precisely these limitations of the First Enlightenment—especially its imperialistic attitude toward nature, its intense fascination with struggle, and its profound disdain for harmony—that have “caused enormous suffering for humankind.”⁵ They have pushed humanity toward “the environmental precipice”⁶ and have led to the ecological crisis that now threatens human survival. In the words of David Ray Griffin, this is an “unprecedented crisis.” He warns that “if we allow the ecological crisis to continue

³ Zhihe Wang and Meijun Fan, 第二次启蒙 [*The Second Enlightenment*] (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2011), 13.

⁴ See Zhihe Wang and Meijun Fan, 第二次启蒙 [*The Second Enlightenment*] (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2011), 13.

⁵ Charlene Spretnak, *Relational Reality: New Discoveries of Interrelatedness That Are Transforming the Modern World* (Topsham, ME: Green Horizon Books, 2011), 1–2.

⁶ Spretnak, *Relational Reality*, 1–2.

developing, human civilization will come to an end amid the global pursuit of unrestricted development.”⁷

In 2018, the United Nations warned that humanity had only a limited window of roughly 12–22 years to prevent irreversible climate disruption.⁸ Therefore, if we are to avoid the destruction of both the Earth and humanity, it is necessary to launch a Second Enlightenment on the basis of a critical reflection upon the First Enlightenment.

What, then, are the principal theoretical concerns of the Second Enlightenment? To summarize its theoretical content is by no means an easy task. In this paper, we attempt to characterize it in terms of the following ten interrelated themes: transcending anthropocentrism and promoting ecological consciousness; transcending Western centrism and advocating cultural complementarity; challenging uniformity-oriented thinking and appreciating the beauty of diversity; transcending industrialized agriculture and embracing a rooted postmodern rural civilization; rejecting the notion of “abstract freedom” and moving toward responsible and profound freedom; sublating homogenized democracy and advancing toward ethical democracy; challenging domineering science and promoting humane science; rejecting the worship of struggle and advocating “Survival of the Harmonious;” transcending pure rationality and calling for aesthetic wisdom; and challenging the hegemony of capital in favor of empathism.⁹

The principle of survival endorsed by the Second Enlightenment is Survival of the Harmonious. If the First Enlightenment embraced “the struggle for existence” and “survival of the fittest,” the Second Enlightenment emphasizes a consciousness of harmony and advocates “survival of the harmonious.” This constitutes a major theoretical watershed between the First and Second Enlightenments.

Why, then, are harmonious relationships so important? In the view of Alfred North Whitehead, one of the principal intellectual forerunners of the Second Enlightenment, all things in the universe can exist and develop only within harmonious relationships. In *Science and the Modern World*, Whitehead criticized the worship of competition that permeates modern Western society and illustrated the importance of cooperation through the example of a forest:

⁷ David Ray Griffin, “Ecological Civilization: The Only Way to Save Human Civilization,” trans. Ke Jinhua, *Journal of Shenzhen University (Humanities and Social Sciences Edition)*, no. 6 (2013).

⁸ See Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Global Warming of 1.5°C: An IPCC Special Report on the Impacts of Global Warming of 1.5°C above Pre-industrial Levels and Related Global Greenhouse Gas Emission Pathways*, ed. Valérie Masson-Delmotte et al. (Geneva: Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2018).

⁹ Zhihe Wang, Meijun Fan, and Junfeng Wang, “The Second Enlightenment and the Process Turn in Contemporary Western Thought,” *Shandong Social Sciences*, no. 12 (2021).

A tree by itself is at the mercy of all the adverse chances of an inconstant environment. The wind may blow it down, variations of temperature may check its foliage, rain may wash away the soil, and its leaves may be blown away instead of decaying into humus....Under ordinary circumstances, trees require the companionship of a forest in order to grow well. Each tree may lose something in the perfection of its individual growth, but together they preserve the conditions for growth. The soil is retained and shaded. The microorganisms necessary for the production of humus are not killed by sun, frost, or erosion. A forest is the triumph of the organization of mutually dependent species.¹⁰

This is the triumph of the whole, the triumph of the community, and the triumph of cooperation. In Whitehead's view, crude individualism has no real place in nature. The deeper reality is one of profound interdependence and a genuine sharing of destiny.

If the First Enlightenment was concerned with the question of "how individuals can attain freedom," then the Second Enlightenment is more concerned with "how free individuals can live harmoniously with others, society, and nature." The former emphasizes reason, the individual, competition, and control; the latter emphasizes relationships, community, cooperation, and symbiosis. Behind these two approaches lie two different civilizational orientations: one is a competition-oriented civilization, characterized by competition and separation; the other is a harmony-oriented civilization, characterized by interconnectedness, cooperation, and harmony.

It is in this sense that ecological civilization emerges as one of the most important achievements of the Second Enlightenment. Ecological civilization is not merely a new mode of development; it is a new form of civilization. It advocates harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature, cooperative and mutually beneficial relationships among people, and coordinated development between individuals and society. It replaces "survival of the fittest" with "survival of the harmonious" as its guiding civilizational principle. Fundamentally speaking, ecological civilization is a harmony-oriented civilization. It represents a major historical transition in human civilization—from separation to interconnectedness, from competition to cooperation, and from conquest to symbiosis.

Ecological Civilization is a Harmony-Oriented Civilization

Ecological civilization is not merely a mode of development; it is a new form of civilization. It involves not only adjustments in patterns of economic growth, industrial

¹⁰ Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: Free Press, 1967), 205–6.

structures, and lifestyles, but also a profound transformation of humanity's worldview, values, and understanding of civilization itself. In an important sense, ecological civilization is not a simple modification of industrial civilization; rather, it represents a fundamental transcendence of the developmental logic of industrial civilization and marks a significant transformation in the evolution of human civilization. In the words of Dr. John B. Cobb, Jr., "It demands a fundamental shift in how we perceive our relationship with the Earth and with each other."¹¹ According to the authors of *What is Ecological Civilization?* "An Ecological Civilization is one in which humans are fully aware of themselves as part of the natural world, and aware of their close kinship to the other creatures who constitute that world."¹²

The reason ecological civilization is a harmony-oriented civilization lies not only in its characterization as a "compassionate civilization," in contrast to the industrial civilization which is "an unkind civilization,"¹³ but also in the fact that it takes harmony (*he*) as its most fundamental value orientation and guiding principle. Harmony here does not mean uniformity through the elimination of differences, nor does it imply superficial peace achieved by avoiding conflicts. Rather, it refers to coordinated coexistence and shared development based on the recognition of differences and respect for diversity. What ecological civilization seeks is comprehensive harmony among humanity and nature, among human beings, between individuals and society, among nations, and within the human person.

First, ecological civilization seeks harmony between humanity and nature. It transcends the mentality of conquering nature and emphasizes that human beings and nature belong to the same community of life, striving for symbiosis and shared flourishing.

Second, ecological civilization seeks harmony among human beings. While acknowledging the positive role of competition, it places greater emphasis on cooperation, mutual assistance, and sharing. It stresses the unity of individual development and collective well-being and seeks win-win outcomes through respect for differences.

Third, ecological civilization seeks harmony between individuals and society. It rejects the view that development should be measured solely by economic growth and advocates

¹¹ John B. Cobb Jr., "The Call for an Ecological Civilization," in *Handbook of Ecological Civilization: Concept, Philosophy, and Pedagogy*, ed. Michael A. Peters et al. (Cham: Springer, 2026), 8.

¹² Philip Clayton and Wm. Andrew Schwartz, *What Is Ecological Civilization? Crisis, Hope, and the Future of the Planet* (Anoka, MN: Process Century Press, 2019), 64.

¹³ Zhihe Wang and Junfeng Wang, "Ecological Civilization as a Compassionate Civilization," in *Handbook of Ecological Civilization: Concept, Philosophy, and Pedagogy*, ed. Michael A. Peters et al. (Cham: Springer, 2026), 65–82.

the coordination of economic prosperity, social justice, and ecological protection. It promotes a social order characterized by fairness, justice, and shared responsibility.

At the same time, ecological civilization seeks harmony among nations. In the face of global challenges such as climate change, environmental pollution, and biodiversity loss, no nation can remain unaffected or prosper alone. Ecological civilization advocates the idea of a community with a shared future for humankind, replacing confrontation with cooperation and zero-sum competition with mutual benefit, in order to safeguard global ecological security and the future of humanity.

Finally, ecological civilization seeks harmony within the human person. It is concerned not only with the external environment but also with spiritual growth and the quality of life. It strives to achieve balance and integration between body and mind, matter and spirit, and reason and emotion.

Therefore, ecological civilization is not merely a framework for environmental governance; it is a new civilizational paradigm centered on the value of harmonious coexistence. It encourages humanity to move from control to participation, from conquest to symbiosis, from competition to cooperation, and from fragmentation to harmony. In doing so, it seeks to rebuild the relationships between humanity and nature, between individuals and society, and within human beings themselves. In this sense, ecological civilization is fundamentally a harmony-oriented civilization. It represents a historic transition in human civilization from being competition-centered to being harmony-centered, and points toward a promising direction for the future development of civilization.

The Philosophical Foundations of a Harmony-Oriented Civilization

Survival of the Harmonious is neither an empty moral appeal nor an emotional reaction against modern competitive society. Rather, it is a civilizational vision grounded in profound philosophical foundations. Its theoretical roots derive primarily from two sources: first, the relational worldview articulated by process philosophy, especially in the work of Alfred North Whitehead; and second, the wisdom of harmony embedded in Chinese traditional philosophy, particularly in the *Yijing (Book of Changes)*, Confucianism, and Daoism. Although these two traditions emerged in different cultural contexts, they converge on a common insight: the world is not composed of isolated entities but constitutes an interconnected, interdependent, and co-creative community of life. Accordingly, the fundamental principle of flourishing is not the law of the jungle but harmonious coexistence.

Process Philosophy: From Substance to Relation

One of the major philosophical foundations of modern industrial civilization is the substance philosophy represented by René Descartes. Substance philosophy understands the world as consisting of independent and self-contained entities, thereby giving rise to dualistic modes of thought that separate subject from object, humanity from nature, and self from others.

Whitehead's process philosophy fundamentally overturns this substance-based worldview. In his view, the most basic realities are not substances but continually emerging "actual entities" or "actual occasions." These actual entities do not exist in isolation; rather, they constitute themselves through their relationships with others. As Whitehead writes: "Each actual entity is referent to every other actual entity."¹⁴ Relations, therefore, are not external attributes added to existence; they are constitutive conditions of existence itself.

In *Adventures of Ideas*, Whitehead further develops the concept of "mutual immanence," arguing that all things in the universe are, in some sense, internally present within one another, forming a relational network in which "each is in all, and all are in each."¹⁵ Not only are beings interconnected, but times, spaces, and the relationships between time and space are also mutually implicated.

For this reason, Whitehead gives priority to relatedness over quality. As he makes clear in the Preface to *Process and Reality*, the fundamental character of reality is not static substance but interconnected process.¹⁶ Relation precedes isolation, process precedes substance, and interdependence precedes separation.

The American process thinker Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki further develops this insight through her concept of interdependence. She writes: "Interdependence is universal."¹⁷ She further emphasizes: "We are not accidentally interdependent; we are necessarily interdependent."¹⁸ Indeed, Suchocki observes that: "The well-being of one depends in

¹⁴ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, corrected ed., ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1978), 50.

¹⁵ Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: Macmillan, 1954), 254.

¹⁶ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, xiii.

¹⁷ Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence: Original Sin in Relational Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1999), 72.

¹⁸ Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence*, 69.

some sense on the well-being of all.”¹⁹ For this reason, interdependence may be regarded as “the very stuff of life.”²⁰

From this perspective, the human being is no longer an isolated individual but a node within a web of relationships. Nature is no longer an object to be conquered but an integral part of the community of life. Society is no longer a mere aggregation of atomistic individuals but an organic whole constituted by mutual dependence.

Consequently, process philosophy reveals not the competitive logic of “survival of the fittest” but the relational logic of survival of the harmonious. Sustainable development arises not from exclusion and domination but from cooperation and symbiosis. Genuine flourishing comes not from defeating others but from enabling one another to flourish.

Chinese Traditional Philosophy: From Harmony as the Way of the Cosmos to Survival of the Harmonious

If process philosophy reveals the relational nature of reality from a contemporary philosophical perspective, Chinese traditional philosophy develops a comprehensive philosophy of harmony through several thousand years of civilizational experience. Indeed, one of the most distinctive features of Chinese thought is its persistent pursuit of harmony (*he* 和). In this sense, Chinese culture can be regarded as a “Chinese harmonism.”²¹ As Roger T. Ames observes, the Confucian sage is characterized by an openness to *harmonious engagement*.²² More broadly, the creation of organic harmony has been a recurring aspiration throughout the history of Chinese philosophy. Although Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism differ in emphasis, all regard harmony as an ideal state: Confucianism seeks harmony among human beings, Daoism emphasizes harmony between humanity and nature, and Buddhism pursues harmony between body and mind.

From the perspective of Chinese philosophy, harmony is not merely a moral virtue or a social ideal. It is rooted in a comprehensive vision of reality itself. This vision unfolds through a series of interconnected insights that move from cosmology to ethics and finally

¹⁹ Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence*, 72.

²⁰ Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence*, 69.

²¹ Zhihe Wang, *Process and Pluralism: Chinese Thought on the Harmony of Diversity* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), vi.

²² For Ames’s discussion of Confucianism as a relational tradition in which persons flourish through harmonious participation in cultivated roles and relationships, see Roger T. Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics: A Vocabulary* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2011), and Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, *Thinking Through Confucius* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987).

to civilization. Together they provide a profound philosophical foundation for survival of the harmonious.

***Yin-Yang* Thinking: Difference as the Condition of Life**

The starting point of Chinese philosophy is the recognition that reality is constituted not by isolated substances but by dynamic relationships. This insight finds its most fundamental expression in the theory of *yin* and *yang*.

Yin and *yang* are not mutually exclusive opposites locked in perpetual conflict. Rather, they are complementary forces that mutually depend upon, transform, and complete one another. As Cheng Hao, a Chinese philosopher in the Song dynasty, states: “Neither *yin* alone nor *yang* alone can generate life”²³ (獨陰不生, 獨陽不長). Without *yin* there can be no *yang*; without *yang* there can be no *yin*. Life emerges not through the elimination of difference but through the interaction of differences. Difference is therefore not a problem to be overcome but a condition of creativity itself.

This perspective stands in sharp contrast to the dualistic “either-or” logic that has shaped much of modern Western thought. Chinese philosophy advocates a “both-and” perspective in which apparent opposites coexist, interact, and enrich one another. Diversity is not an obstacle to unity; it is the precondition of unity. Harmony arises not from uniformity but from the creative integration of differences.

Harmony Generates Life: The Creative Principle of the Cosmos

Building upon *yin-yang* thinking, Chinese philosophy develops a deeper understanding of harmony itself. The *Guoyu* (*Discourses of the States*) famously declares: “It is harmony that generates life; sameness having no offspring”²⁴ (和實生物, 同則不繼). This statement may be regarded as one of the most profound formulations in the entire Chinese philosophical tradition.

First, harmony differs fundamentally from sameness because it presupposes difference. Genuine harmony welcomes diversity rather than suppressing it. Second, harmony is creative. New forms of life, culture, and civilization emerge precisely through the interaction of diverse elements. Sameness, by contrast, eventually becomes stagnant and sterile. Third, harmony is rooted in openness. Whereas sameness excludes difference,

²³ Cheng Hao, “Cheng Hao’s Discourse,” in *Selected Works of Chinese Philosophy History* (Beijing: China Bookstore, 1982), 73.

²⁴ *Guoyu*, in *Selected Works in Chinese Aesthetic History*, ed. Philosophy Department, Peking University (Beijing: China Publishing House, 1980), 470.

harmony incorporates difference and transforms it into a source of vitality. Confucius expressed the same insight when he stated: “The noble person seeks harmony but not sameness; the petty person seeks sameness but not harmony.”²⁵ Together these teachings suggest that flourishing emerges not through homogenization but through the creative coordination of diversity. Harmony is therefore not merely a social virtue; it is a generative principle of life itself.

Great Harmony (*Taihe*): The Cosmological Ground of Flourishing

The concept of harmony reaches its highest philosophical expression in the idea of *Taihe* (Great Harmony). Chinese philosophy does not stop at the observation that harmony generates life. It elevates harmony to the level of cosmology and ontology. The *Book of Changes* states: “Preserving and integrating Great Harmony brings prosperity and flourishing.”²⁶ *Taihe* is not simply another word for harmony. Harmony (*he*) refers to the coordinated relationship among different elements. *Taihe* refers to the highest and most comprehensive realization of harmony—the dynamic cosmic order through which all things emerge, interact, nourish one another, and flourish together.

Dong Zhongshu (c. 195–105 BCE), a renowned Confucian scholar and government official of the Han dynasty, explains: “Harmony is that through which Heaven and Earth generate all things.”²⁷ The Northern Song philosopher Zhang Zai develops this insight even further: “Great Harmony is what is called the Dao.”²⁸ For Zhang Zai (Chang Tsai, 1020–1077 CE), *Taihe* is not merely an ideal condition but the very reality of the universe itself. It is the ultimate ontological ground from which all beings arise and within which all beings participate.

The cosmological foundation of *Taihe* lies in the interaction of yin and yang. Yin and yang provide the dynamic mechanism of the cosmos; harmony is the creative process generated by their interaction; *Taihe* is the highest and most comprehensive realization of that process. It represents the universe as an organic, self-generating, and self-harmonizing whole. From this perspective, *Taihe* may be understood as the Chinese philosophical

²⁵ Confucius, *The Analects with Annotations and Translation (Lunyu Yizhu)*, trans. and annot. Yang Bojun (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2006), 142.

²⁶ Zhou Zhenfu, trans. and annot., *Annotated Translation of the Zhouyi* (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2013), 12.

²⁷ Dong Zhongshu, *Luxuriant Gems of the Spring and Autumn Annals (Chunqiu Fanlu)* (Jinan: Shandong Friendship Press, 2001), 643.

²⁸ Zhang Zai, *Collected Works of Zhang Zai (Zhang Zai Ji)* (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1978), 7.

equivalent of a cosmic community of life. Ecological civilization, therefore, can be seen as a contemporary expression of the ancient Chinese pursuit of Great Harmony.

The Unity of All Things: The Ethical Implication of *Taihe*

If *Taihe* is the cosmological foundation of harmony, then the unity of all things is its ethical implication. Because all beings arise from the same cosmic process, Chinese philosophy naturally develops a vision of the interconnectedness and equality of life. Zhuangzi declares: “From the perspective of the Dao, things are neither noble nor base”²⁹ (以道觀之, 物無貴賤). All beings possess intrinsic worth. No entity is absolutely superior to another.

This vision was further developed by Neo-Confucian thinkers. Zhang Zai writes: “All people are my brothers and sisters; all things are my companions”³⁰ (民吾同胞, 物吾與也). Similarly, Cheng Hao states: “The humane person forms one body with Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things” (仁者, 以天地萬物為一體), and “The humane person is one body with all things”³¹ (仁者渾然與萬物同體). These teachings dissolve the rigid separation between humanity and nature. Human beings are not masters standing outside nature but participants within a larger community of life. Heaven, Earth, humanity, and the myriad beings together constitute one living whole.

The well-known Chinese ideal of the unity of Heaven and humanity (*tianren heyi*) is rooted precisely in this vision. Humanity and nature are not external to one another but are mutually embedded within the same process of Great Harmony.

Non-Contention: The Practical Wisdom of Great Harmony

If *Taihe* reveals the nature of reality and the unity of all things reveals the nature of life, then Daoist non-contention reveals how human beings ought to live within such a reality. The *Doctrine of the Mean* teaches: “Different ways proceed together without conflicting with one another” (道並行而不相悖), and “All things grow together without harming one another”³² (萬物並育而不相害). These statements affirm that plurality need not lead to conflict. Difference and coexistence are not mutually exclusive but mutually enriching.

²⁹ Zhuangzi Jin Zhu Jin Yi [Modern Annotation and Translation of the Zhuangzi] (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2018), 575.

³⁰ Zhang Zai, *Collected Works of Zhang Zai*, 62–63.

³¹ Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi, *Collected Works of the Two Chengs (Er Cheng Ji)*, vol. 1 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1981), 15.

³² Wang Guoxuan, trans. and annot., *A Translation and Annotation of The Great Learning and The Doctrine of the Mean* (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2006), 129.

Daoism develops this insight through the principle of *wuzheng* (non-contention). The *Daodejing* states: “The Dao of Heaven benefits all things without harming them; the Dao of the sage acts without contention”³³ (天之道，利而不害；聖人之道，為而不爭). Laozi repeatedly presents water as the model of harmonious existence: “The highest goodness is like water. Water benefits all things and does not contend”³⁴ (上善若水。水善利萬物而不爭). He further writes, “Nothing in the world is softer and weaker than water, yet nothing surpasses it in overcoming the hard and strong”³⁵ (天下莫柔弱於水，而攻堅強者莫之能勝). He also declares, “Because one does not contend, no one in the world can contend with him”³⁶ (夫唯不爭，故天下莫能與之爭). Non-contention does not imply passivity or weakness. Rather, it reflects a deeper wisdom grounded in the recognition of interdependence. It seeks cooperation rather than domination, mutual flourishing rather than victory, and creative transformation rather than destructive conflict.

If Taihe represents the metaphysical foundation of harmony, then non-contention represents its practical expression. Taihe tells us what reality is; non-contention tells us how to live within that reality.

In a word, from the cosmological interaction of yin and yang, through the generative principle that “harmony generates life,” to the ontological vision of Great Harmony, the ethical ideal of the unity of all things, and the Daoist wisdom of non-contention, Chinese philosophy consistently points toward one fundamental insight: life flourishes through harmonious participation rather than competitive domination.

Together with the relational worldview of process philosophy, this tradition provides a profound philosophical foundation for survival of the harmonious. It teaches that the deepest law of life is not conquest but symbiosis, not competition but cooperation, not isolated existence but mutual fulfillment. In this sense, survival of the harmonious is not merely a moral ideal; it is a fundamental principle of life, civilization, and the cosmos itself.

The Contemporary Significance of a Harmony-Oriented Civilization

As a new form of civilization advocated by the Second Enlightenment, a harmony-oriented civilization possesses not only profound theoretical significance but also great practical relevance for addressing the crises of modern civilization and promoting the

³³ Chen Guying, *Laozi: Modern Translation and Commentary* (Beijing: Commercial Press, 2016), 302–3.

³⁴ Chen Guying, *Laozi*, 30.

³⁵ Wing-tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), 177–78.

³⁶ Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, 52.

sustainable development of human society. It offers a new perspective for understanding the relationships between humanity and nature, among human beings, between individuals and society, and within the human person, while pointing toward a more desirable future.

First, a harmony-oriented civilization contributes to rebuilding harmony between humanity and nature. For a long time, modern industrial civilization has been grounded in anthropocentrism, treating nature primarily as an object to be exploited and utilized. The result has been ecological degradation, resource depletion, and an intensifying global climate crisis. A harmony-oriented civilization, by contrast, emphasizes that humanity and nature constitute an indivisible community of life. As John Cobb observes: "We are part of an interconnected web of life."³⁷ Nature possesses not only instrumental value but also intrinsic value. Humanity and nature share a common destiny: when one flourishes, the other flourishes; when one suffers, the other suffers. Only by moving from conquering nature to respecting, following, and protecting nature can humanity achieve genuine sustainability.

Second, a harmony-oriented civilization contributes to rebuilding harmony among human beings. Modern society's excessive emphasis on competition and self-interest has increasingly alienated people from one another. Process philosophy reminds us that every individual exists within a web of relationships. Whitehead writes: "Each actual entity is referent to every other actual entity."³⁸ Human beings do not exist in isolation; rather, they develop through mutual dependence and mutual fulfillment. Accordingly, a harmony-oriented civilization advocates respect for difference, attentiveness to others, and openness to diversity. It seeks to replace confrontation with cooperation and zero-sum competition with mutual benefit, thereby laying the foundation for more harmonious human relationships.

Third, a harmony-oriented civilization contributes to rebuilding harmony between individuals and society. Modern development has often fallen into the trap of prioritizing economic growth above all else, resulting in tensions among social justice, ecological protection, and economic development. A harmony-oriented civilization emphasizes the unity of individual and collective interests and advocates the coordinated development of economic, social, and ecological well-being. It seeks to establish a social order that balances efficiency and justice, freedom and responsibility, and individual autonomy and communal

³⁷ John B. Cobb Jr., *The Earthist Challenge to Economism: A Theological Critique of the World Bank* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 76.

³⁸ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 50.

flourishing, enabling diverse groups to achieve common development through mutual respect and cooperation.

Fourth, a harmony-oriented civilization contributes to restoring harmony between body and mind. The instrumental rationality and efficiency-centered values of modern civilization have contributed to widespread anxiety, loneliness, and a loss of meaning. According to the World Health Organization, approximately one billion people worldwide suffer from mental disorders.³⁹ In response, a harmony-based civilization embraces the principle that *harmony is beauty*. It emphasizes balance between body and mind, reason and emotion, and material and spiritual dimensions of life. The Chinese ideals of *zhonghe* (central harmony) and *taihe* (Great Harmony), together with the holistic vision of process philosophy, offer valuable resources for helping modern individuals recover inner peace, wholeness, and genuine well-being.

Finally, a harmony-oriented civilization contributes to the construction of a cosmic community of shared destiny. The major challenges of the ecological age—climate change, biodiversity loss, environmental degradation, and even the ethical implications of artificial intelligence—transcend national and cultural boundaries. They require humanity to think about its future from a broader planetary and even cosmic perspective. Chinese philosophy emphasizes the unity of Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things, while process philosophy stresses mutual immanence. Ecological civilization extends this consciousness to the entire community of life. As Zhang Zai states in the *Western Inscription*: “All people are my brothers and sisters; all things are my companions”⁴⁰ (民吾同胞，物吾與也).

This vision of cosmic concern, transcending both anthropocentrism and ethnocentrism, provides an important philosophical foundation for building not only a community with a shared future for humankind but also a broader cosmic community of shared destiny.

In short, a harmony-centered civilization is not merely a philosophical ideal; it is a civilizational practice oriented toward the future. By rebuilding harmonious relationships between humanity and nature, among human beings, between individuals and society, and within the human person, it offers new possibilities for overcoming the ecological, social, and spiritual crises of our time. It also provides a solid value foundation for the construction of ecological civilization.

³⁹ World Health Organization, “Mental Disorders,” fact sheet, September 30, 2025.

⁴⁰ Zhang Zai, *Collected Works of Zhang Zai*, 62–63.

Conclusion: From Survival of the Fittest to Survival of the Harmonious

If the First Enlightenment sought to answer the question, “How can human beings attain freedom?”, then the Second Enlightenment seeks to answer a different question: “How can free individuals learn to live in harmonious coexistence with others?”

If the civilizational code of industrial civilization is “survival of the fittest,” then the civilizational code of ecological civilization is survival of the harmonious.

“Survival of the fittest” reveals one dimension of life—the dimension of competition. Survival of the harmonious, however, reveals another dimension—the dimension of creativity, cooperation, and symbiosis. The former explains how life survives; the latter explains how life flourishes.

In the face of ecological crisis, social fragmentation, and spiritual disorientation, humanity’s hope does not lie in who can defeat whom. Rather, it lies in learning how to flourish together with others, with nature, and with the world.

The transition from a competition-oriented civilization to a harmony-oriented civilization, from survival of the fittest to survival of the harmonious, and from anthropocentrism to the consciousness of a community of life constitutes the historical mission of the Second Enlightenment. It is also the choice facing humanity in the age of ecological civilization.

Only through such a transformation can humanity truly realize the ideal of “preserving and integrating Great Harmony”⁴¹ (太和/*taibe*), and create a more beautiful future through harmonious coexistence among humanity, nature, and the myriad beings of the universe.

⁴¹ Zhou Zhenfu, *Annotated Translation of the Zhouyi*, 12.

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