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Harmony & Cancellation Culture

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Recommended Citation

Stonestreet, Erica. "Harmony & Cancellation Culture" *Philosophy Now*. Iss 148. February, 2022.

https://philosophynow.org/issues/148/Harmony_and_Cancellation_Culture

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Philosophy Now

a magazine of ideas

Philosophy Now – Issue 148

https://philosophynow.org/issues/148/Harmony_and_Cancellation_Culture

Harmony & Cancellation Culture

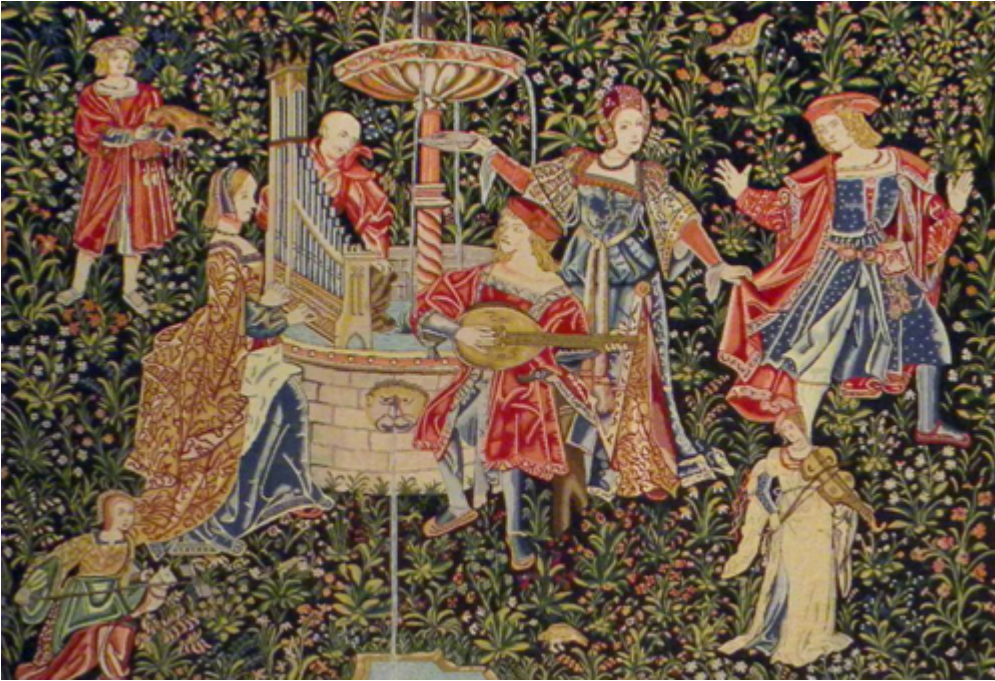
Erica Stonestreet asks, are we too quick these days to break off relationships?

I was recently sent an email calling me out for hurting the sender's feelings. The sender was entirely right to do so; my offense was inadvertent, but it did cause harm. The email ended with, 'No need to respond.' That stopped me short, because of course my first impulse was to apologize. I wasn't sure what to do with 'No need to respond.' If the sender actually wanted me not to respond, they were denying any interest in an apology, cutting off my impulse to try to repair the relationship. If instead the comment was meant to relieve me of guilt, then it failed, since being told I'd hurt someone's feelings naturally called up the minor guilt that comes with such inadvertent blunders; and guilt motivates apologies. It's a handy feeling in that respect, despite – actually, *because of* – our dislike of it. And why else point out the infraction, if not to make an implicit demand for repair?

This was not remotely as strong as the shaming that takes place in a 'cancelling' of someone, but because this was a person with whom I had gotten along well, I felt abruptly cut off, and so the word 'cancelled' came to mind.

'Cancel culture' and 'cancellation' are now widely used, and at this point are heavily politicized, but are very nebulous terms. Cancellation can be about economics and influence, depriving people of the chance to profit from their disrespect and mistreatment of others, for example. It can also be about power on a smaller, more interpersonal scale, as when a teenager 'cancels' another because he sang along with offensive lyrics. What all the different uses seem to have in common is the idea of taking back power: a cancellation is a way of pushing against perceived insult on institutional or personal levels by withdrawing from connection with people who use their platform in what are perceived to be harmful ways. But like many grassroots democratic processes, the term 'cancelled' and the act of cancelling are both used and misused, and the phenomenon is messy and controversial. It's not difficult for a reasonable person to appreciate the general idea in some cases, but still worry about where it leads, as there is often an element of the denial of free speech on the side of cancellers.

Because it was entirely private, and because I do have an ongoing relationship with the sender, my own experience with the email cutoff was probably not a true instance of cancellation. But I *felt* momentarily cancelled, and as I processed the incident, I connected it with a value concept that isn't discussed much in the ongoing conversation about the value and disvalue of cancellation, or even with respect to culture more generally: *harmony*.



Making sweet music together in medieval Belgium

The Value of Harmony

The value of harmony is tricky to pin down, and the desire for harmony can cause us to accept things we shouldn't. In my 'Philosophy of Human Nature' class, I've used a few letters from Theano and Periktione, two Pythagorean women who give domestic advice rooted in the ancient Pythagorean school's central value of *harmonia*, 'fitting together'. Some of it is recognizable even today as good advice: love but don't spoil your children; treat servants well. But one letter from Theano to a woman named Nikostrate advises the latter not to make a fuss over her husband's cheating on her. The reasoning is that the disharmony in his behavior won't be made better by her breaking off the relationship. Theano asserts that what he needs in order to see the error of his ways is Nikostrate demonstrating harmony, in this case, by letting go of her resentment.

To my students, on a first pass this is almost laughable advice. Surely not!

This was my first reaction too. These days, women have more power and can frequently afford not to tolerate infidelity. But in teaching, I always try to present the most charitable reading of the material that I can before turning a critical eye. And in doing so here, I noticed a connection to certain strands of contemporary feminist thought found in care ethics and elsewhere that emphasize the importance and implications of our relationships with others. I haven't seen the term 'harmony' used in this literature, but the concept strikes me as apt. Harmony is primarily about maintaining flourishing relationships in the face of inevitable friction, slip-ups, blunders, and disagreements. Harmony isn't about rolling over to keep the peace. That's likely to make false peace. Someone who gives up their interests for the sake of not making waves isn't getting their voice heard or their needs met, and is allowing others to dominate. The appearance of harmony when we stay silent in the face of a misuse of power is merely superficial. Instead, harmony requires the constant tuning of relationships so that everyone is heard and valued, everyone is held accountable for their actions, and liveable compromises can be forged.

It's worth noting here that harmony isn't just about governing behavior, it's also about governing feelings. And here too we need to walk a delicate line. Harmony isn't about suppressing legitimate feelings, it's about tuning feelings so that they are appropriate to the situation. What that means is, of course, another sticky problem. When are which feelings appropriate? For example, we ought to resent harms to ourselves and those we love; we ought to feel guilty when we have done wrong; we ought to feel pride when we or our loved ones have achieved something good; and so on. As Aristotle says in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, we must do, and feel, the right things at the right times, toward the right objects. In 'Love and Knowledge: Emotions in Feminist Epistemology'

(1989), Alison Jaggar proposes the following test: “I suggest that emotions are appropriate if they are characteristic of a society in which all humans (and perhaps some non-human life too) thrive, or if they are conducive to establishing such a society.” Very often emotions are indicators that things in our relationships are right, or wrong. Jaggar’s overall point is that they are sources of knowledge.

But emotions do require training. I know from experience that part of the work of raising children is to teach them emotional intelligence: to recognize their feelings, and to reflect on them so that they are able to assess whether what they are feeling is proportionate to the situation. It’s not worth throwing a temper tantrum over having to do some school work that, when you sit down to it, will take you less than ten minutes and which is actually well within your ability.

So part of what Theano is advising Nikostrate when she urges the latter to turn down the volume on her righteous jealousy, is not that she must grin and bear it in the sense of hiding her jealousy and putting on a show that things are fine. Rather, where harmony is a primary value, what Nikostrate must do is to respond harmoniously to a disharmonious world. She must find a restorative way to react to the situation. Her resentment is a valid signal that she has been wronged; the next step is not to cling to and act out of jealousy, but to address the problem with an eye to harmony.

Perhaps we modern Westerners still find this advice jarring. After all, if we have been wronged, there should be justice. But the idea would not be surprising in many other cultures. Buddhism, for one, teaches that all emotions – not just the negative ones – cause suffering, because they cause us to cling to the impermanent and so to fight the reality that everything changes. A desire for harmony would not deny the need for justice, but it would have us adjust our understanding of what justice consists in. Rather than a *confrontational* justice that opposes and fights, harmony would have us tune into a *restorative* justice that sees and hears others. This is a justice that begins from the premise that we are all related and should act to preserve relationship. Breaking off the relationship, as cancelling does, would not be a first move, but a last resort.

I think the analogy to music (very Pythagorean) in my use of the term ‘tune into’ is an apt one when talking about harmony. Good music involves carefully arranging consonance and dissonance in expressive ways. Too much dissonance grates on the ear; too much consonance results in uninteresting music. In a recent article titled ‘Soup, Harmony, and Disagreement’ (2020), David Wong, claiming more familiarity with the culinary than the musical arts, makes the analogy to soup: the flavors need to be balanced in order to construct a harmonious whole out of contrasting ingredients. Wong defends an interpretation of harmony that makes room for disagreement against more traditional views that claim that Confucianism requires conformity and the subordination of individual interests to those of a group. Wong’s theory is that harmony can encompass a constructive use of *difference*, as in soup or music; of *shared understanding*, as when disparate interests converge around common values; and of *accommodation*, as when the will to maintain relationships causes apparently disharmonious parties to accommodate sometimes deep disagreement.

It’s this last aspect of harmony that is directly threatened by cancel culture. When accommodation ceases, the possibility of shared understanding is also threatened, and differences become divisive rather than constructive. When people disconnect from one another rather than engage, they stand up for their own values, yes: but they do not stand up for the value of *relationship*. They use the justice that fights rather than the justice that heals (although in ‘In Defense of Cancel Culture’ (2019), Shamira Ibrahim emphasizes that cancellation *can* actually sometimes lead to genuine learning and apology). Ironically, the power of cancelling comes in part from the value of relationship: the reason why a cancellation has power is that it ostracizes someone, and most people feel that sort of cut-off keenly – as I did.

Between Me & Us

Cancelling as it’s practiced now, particularly when it is a first rather than a last resort, is a product of, and is perhaps an inevitable extension of, individualism. Individualism construes self-interest quite narrowly, as limited to the interests of a person taken in isolation. It’s a major operating principle behind capitalism and liberal democracy as we know them. And cancelling has close ties to both: public cancellings may be about preventing

the cancelled from profiting from their views; and the phenomenon has also been described as a democratizing process because it allows ordinary folks to exercise power over the powerful.

Individualism has brought us many blessings, but perhaps we should also be examining its limits. In ‘Ethics: The We and the I’ (2004), Dr Viola F. Cordova – the first North American indigenous woman to earn a Ph.D. in Philosophy – wrote of the contrast between ‘I’ ethics and ‘We’ ethics. In an I-ethic, the ‘primary bargaining unit’ is the individual. Ethics is still about how to get along with one another, but the premise in I-ethics is that the individual’s values and interests are the starting point. Most current Western theories of ethics fall into this category, since they were developed against a background of individualism. In a We-ethic, by contrast, *relationship* is primary. Individuals are valued, of course, but they’re valued as parts of a whole. When disputes arise (though Cordova does not use these words) the focus is on restoring harmony through accommodation: recognizing the value of all members and aiming to accommodate their interests. Cordova points out that a We-ethic includes a radical sort of equality, such that entities discounted in much Western ethics, including children and nature, are considered equal, and given equal consideration when conflicts arise. In Wong’s version of it, accommodation has different facets: epistemic openness, willingness to minimize damage to others when acting out one’s own values, and willingness to compromise.

A We-ethic would not cancel people. When relationship is the uppermost value, engagement is the first approach: calling in instead of calling out. Cancelling is a way of standing up for values, and it’s a powerful expressive act. But it is individualistic in that it puts those values ahead of relationship. A cancelling is precisely a signal that one set of people (perhaps a set of one person) no longer wishes to be in relationship with another. It is as if the carrots decided to leave the soup because they could no longer be complicit with the taste of the onions. But if they do, the whole soup is thrown out of whack – which we can’t allow if we want the physical and spiritual nourishment of a good meal.

So what do we lose when we cancel? One of the objections that critics of cancellation – perhaps most notably Barack Obama – raise, is that it insists on a moral purity that’s impossible to achieve. Most of the well-known figures in history were morally flawed – just as most of the rest of us are, too. To narrow our sights to just a handful of the most famous men in European philosophical history, what do we do with Aristotle, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, or Martin Heidegger? They were all avowedly racist, sexist, or both (and more). Yet they all had important philosophical ideas, out of which has grown much of what is good about our society and institutions. Ignoring these ideas would greatly impoverish philosophy, as well as obscuring the truth of European intellectual history. As Victor Abundez-Guerra (‘How to Deal with Kant’s Racism – In and Out of the Classroom’, 2018), Agnes Callard (‘Should we Cancel Aristotle?’, 2020), and others have argued, we cannot excerpt the good parts and leave the bad parts behind in any principled way. But, they add, we should not cancel them. For better *and* worse, we are in relationship with them.

With the values of relationship and harmony as our background, instead of cancelling, we must strive to restore harmony by making use of the dissonance that moral flaws introduce. We must show how people’s good ideas are entangled with their bad ones, *and* we must think hard about the values we share with them, *and* how to accommodate the differences we have with them – that is, study how to live with people in recognition of our deep disagreements with them. Like it or not, we cannot truly cancel these philosophers anyway: their legacy has made Western society what it is, and it will not be ignored or silenced. So we must face their imperfections and try to make something harmonious out of them, just as in tonal Western music we come back to rest in consonance no matter how dissonant the journey from exposition to coda.

Harmony is not just an ancient value, or only prized in cultures outside the West. Many contemporary feminists, particularly those in care ethics, emphasize the value of relationship. As I said, as far as I know, they don’t generally cite ‘harmony’ as a named value. One of the things that care ethicists insist on, however, is self-care. Care as a value and as a practice insists that *all* people in the situation, *including* ourselves, deserve to be seen and cared for – an insistence that echoes the equality built into Cordova’s We-ethics. So although we are relational creatures first and foremost, and do well to work within that conception of ourselves, when our relationships become truly poisonous, then we must end them. The difficult issue is knowing when that is. When do we give up on a relationship and separate ourselves from what is truly toxic? In other words, when is cancellation the right thing to do?

I don't think I can offer a principled answer to this question. Perhaps no one can. But hopefully we'll know it when we see it. We should accommodate day-to-day hurt feelings and principled disagreement; we should never accommodate hatred or abuse. There is a vast array of situations in-between, however, and like so many things, the line separating what to accommodate and what not to is gray and blurry. Perhaps there is no precise, principled line of demarcation, then, only a gray zone, and we must exercise practical wisdom for each situation.

Today, rather than accepting the things we cannot change, we are in the process of changing the things we cannot accept (to paraphrase Angela Davis playing on Reinhold Niebuhr's words). That is a powerful way to make progress, and it can be done harmoniously or not. The question upon which these turbulent times hinges, I think, is whether individualism will finally stamp out any hope of harmony alongside disagreement, or whether instead we will manage to put the value of relationship ahead of our differences and reframe our disputes, large and political, or small and personal, in terms of shared values and accommodation. Because of its relationship to democracy and power, cancelling is an important tool. But if it becomes one of the primary ways we exercise power, then we are spoiling our cultural soup.

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